

# The Family that Trains Together Stays Together:

## Karate Training as a Pathway Toward Family Unity



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Ueshiro Shorin-Ryu Karate U.S.A. is an international federation of 20 karate schools that was founded in 1962 by Grand Master Ansei Ueshiro. <http://www.shorinryu.com/> Students practice Matsubayashi Shorin-Ryu, a traditional Okinawan style of karate.

## Introduction

Americans are increasingly caught in a “time squeeze.” Compared to our counterparts in many other countries, we are working longer hours, taking less vacation time, spending less leisure time with family members, and, as our population ages, dealing with increased family caregiving responsibilities. In study after study, many families are finding it increasingly difficult to balance the many demands of work and family.

So, where do we find family time? One place to search is the time carved out for recreation. With a bit of creativity and perseverance, families can find activities that all members enjoy and can do together often. Some families are even going to the karate “dojo” (Japanese word for training hall) as a place to meet up and spend quality time together.

To explore how family members derive meaning and significance from training with one another, we reached out to members of Shorin-Ryu Karate U.S.A., an international federation of Shorin-Ryu karate schools,<sup>1</sup> and asked one simple question, “*How do you feel about training in karate as a family?*”

Twenty-five karate students, ranging in age from seven to 68, responded to our informal survey. They represent 13 families and they train in five different karate schools.



These Japanese characters refer to “family bonding,” more specifically to the “kizuna” of family. “Kizuna” in this sense means the knot that creates the inseparable bond between humans.

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<sup>1</sup>Consistent with the values established over the course of the several hundred year history of karate, whereby the art form was passed on from parent to child or by a teacher to a select one or two student, the karate schools in this organization have established family-friendly policies, including special membership plans for entire families. In marketing materials, emphasis is placed on bringing families together in a fun, rewarding physical activity fostering both individual skills and community spirit.

## The Karate Family Training Experience

In this section, we use the words of those who responded to our informal survey to illustrate the breadth and depth of how family members value their shared training experiences. The picture that emerges is one of a rich experience, with unique family strengthening properties.

### Time Together

“My wife and I have four children, and all six of us participate in karate. In this age of Little League and Youth Sports I think karate may be one of the few sports where parents can actually join in and participate along with their children.”

- *Father, 43-year old, who trains with his wife, two daughters and two sons; 8 years of training.*



“I feel really good about training with a family member because you get to have family time while taking class.”

- *10-year old boy who trains with his father; 2 years of training.*

“In this world of busy schedules, family time gets more and more limited. Training together allows for one more time that we can be together as a family, not only on the deck, but even just the car ride to and from the dojo.”

- *Mother, 40-year old, who trains with her husband and four children; 1½ years of training.*

“Considering our demanding schedules (the contemporary norm), we find that karate training is one of the few opportunities in the week that we get to spend quality time together, not just during workouts, but also driving to and from our dojo and dinners ‘out’ afterward.”

- *Mother, 40-year old, who trains with her son, daughter, and husband; 5 years of training.*

“I like the fact that this is an activity that we can do together, rather than just watching each other on the sidelines.”

- *Father, 37-year old, who trains with his 2 sons; 2½ years of training.*

### Sense of Family Unity—Working as a Team

“I think it is fun and makes your family a team more than it is. It helps us have more to do and more to talk about. Also, I like how it is a challenge to get to the next belt with your family. Lastly, our new motto is from the Special Ops – *No one is left behind.*”

- *12-year old boy who trains with his mother, father, and younger sister; 2 months of training.*

“It is a fun family sport that everyone should enjoy. I like to be able to do workouts with my Dad and my little brother. The thing I like best about karate is that we are all in one dojo, working together as a team.”

- *10-year old boy who trains with his older brother and father; 2½ years of training.*

## More to Talk About



“We can talk a lot now. It helps us bring back memories. We can be together and have our own little family thing.”

- *8- year old girl who trains with her 12-year old brother and parents; 2 months of training.*

“We have been practicing our moves and karate walk. The class has also added to our family discussions and it’s neat to see how we all like it so much.”

- *Mother, 36-year old, who trains with her 2 children and her husband; 2 months of training.*

“It gives us something to talk about outside of class.”

- *Father, 39-year old, who trains with his son; 3 years of training.*

## Promoting Understanding and Respect Between Family Members

“We can share in their frustrations and successes right besides them. It gives us parents a far greater sense of empathy and understanding. When my children experience a setback with baseball or football, it is much more difficult for me to recall my own feelings from 30 or 35 years ago to use as a point of reference in attempting to understand what they are feeling. Explaining something with the phrase, ‘what I did when I played...’ does not have nearly the impact as ‘What I do when I execute a downblock...’

- *Father, 43-year old, who trains with his wife, two daughters and two sons; 8 years of training.*

“Karate emphasizes respect and discipline, which provides a great context for learning, as well as a model for family interactions outside of karate.”

- *Father, 43-year old, who trains with his 2 sons; 2½ years of training*

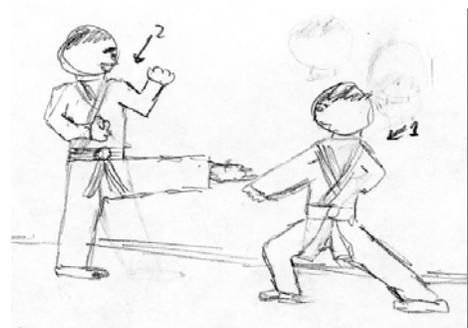
“I particularly enjoyed having my son join me at least once a week for training. It was good bonding to ride in the car together back and fourth from the dojo and discuss life, one on one.”

- *Father, 36-year old, whose son had trained with him years ago; 20+ years of training.*

## Helping One Another

“I think being in a family that trains together in karate is great. It is great because if you don’t get something down in class, one of your family members who is a higher rank than you can teach it to you after class. Also, it is fun to do pre-arranged fighting with a family member. That is why I enjoy practicing karate together as a family.”

- *10-year old boy who trains with his older sister, older brother and mother; 5 years of training.*



“Training in karate as a family is a fun and exciting experience. Having a support person (someone who makes sure you are still training or takes you to karate) is stressed when your family participates in this, you always have someone to go with and work your kata (forms) at home. It also brings my family and me closer together.”

- *12-year old girl who trains with her parents, 2 brothers and sister; 7 years of training.*

“We can show each other our katas (dance-like movements) at home. We can practice together and help each other.”

- *12-year old girl who trains with her three brothers (two younger and one older) and her parents; 2 ½ years of training.*

“The fun thing about having a family is that I can learn more since Dad and (brother) are a higher rank than me. So I can learn much more.”

- *7-year old boy who trains with his older brother and father; 2½ years of training.*

“It is a great confidence builder for young children to see children (with more experience) providing training and assistance to adults (with less experience).”

- *Father, 37-year old, who trains with his 2 sons; 2½ years of training.*



“I feel good because I know if one of them (family members) is in danger, we could help because we both know how to defend ourselves and others.”

- *12-year old boy who trains with his younger brother; 4 years of training.*

### Added Incentive to be Active

“Doing karate with your family makes it much more difficult to find excuses not to train.



There may be occasions when one of us didn't feel like going, but out of a sense of obligation to the others we grudgingly went. Whenever this happens, without fail, by the time the class is over we are always glad we did.”

- *Father, 43-year old, who trains with his wife, two daughters and two sons; 8 years of karate training.*

“I feel like I have to work hard. I have to show up and train hard.”

- *11-year old boy who trains with his 12 year old brother; 4 years of training.*

“Karate gives me a chance to exercise with my son and to learn new katas (dance-like movements) together.”

- *Father, 39-year old, who trains with his son; 3 years of training*

## Increased Comfort Level

“I think its fun to train with your family around. I usually don’t like to be in a place with anyone I don’t know well.”

- *10-year old boy who trains with mother and older brother; 3 years of training.*

“I feel that training in karate as a family makes the experience more comfortable.”

- *10-year old boy who trains with his mother; 2 months of training.*

“It is fun because I like training with not much people. That is how I feel when I train with my family.”

- *7-year old boy who trains with both parents, 2 older brothers and an older sister; 2 years of training.*

## Creating Family Traditions

“We celebrate our ‘success’ after each Sunday night with some store bought egg-rolls. This has now become our Sunday night tradition – Karate & then Egg Rolls. The kids love it.”

- *Mother, 36-year old, who trains with 2 children and her husband; 2 months of training.*

“My four sons have been training karate for 30 years since age five. One thing we did as a family was to do work out at rest stops on long road trips. As I look back at the years of their childhood – the road trips, the quality time in conversations, and training together – these are some of my most precious memories.”

- *Father, 68-year old, who trained with his 4 sons in karate; 40 years of training.*



## Recommendations for Families Seeking a Family Karate Experience

There is no innate reason why family members of different generations cannot take part in karate training. The physical and mental benefits associated with karate training – which includes increased fitness, focus, and self confidence – extend across the lifespan.<sup>2</sup> As evident in the above quotes, there are also family strengthening properties associated with training together as a family. To maximize these benefits, it helps to think of the experience as more than just an opportunity to be together in time and space. It is also a chance to explore and enjoy a shared interest, and in so doing contribute to a sense of closeness within the family.



Here are some tips for making the most of your family karate training experience:

1. Find a good karate school:
  - a. Visit many schools before joining. Observe their classes (at least two for each school) and observe their training methods. See how proficient the students are as well as the teachers. The students should be adept and appear to be enjoying the workout. Ask the instructor about his/her credentials, about the style, and about the roots of the system they practice (e.g., is it traditional or self-made?). If possible, interview some students for their input.
  - b. Think of your decision to join a karate school as a partnership between your family and the school. In this sense, the school's values and goals should be consistent with your family's values and goals.
2. Set aside a time and place (in the home or elsewhere) to bring the entire family together for special family workouts. Talking about karate is fun, but it is less meaningful when there is limited or a lack of active training.
3. Establish family traditions related to your karate training, such as visiting the local library to read about and discuss karate history, going to the latest karate movie, and eating out at a favorite restaurant after class.
4. Encourage family members to help one another as often as possible. Caring for one another on the deck will often generalize to how family members relate off of the deck.
5. Take a long-term view toward your training. Karate is an art form that can be enjoyed over the course of one's life, and it can be readily passed on to future generations of your family.

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<sup>2</sup>If a family member is unable to perform a particular move or technique, then there are options to modify the technique in line with the individual's abilities; the karate instructor will help with this.

## Recommendations For Martial Arts Instructors

1. Consider instituting family-friendly policies:
  - a. Class schedule: For parents and their children to train together, there needs to be some classes offered which they can all attend. For weekdays, this means offering class before and/or after school/work hours.
  - b. Marketing: One “selling point” for full-family involvement is that the children receive added encouragement to continue. See the quotes above for many other selling points. Feel free to use these quotes to support your family recruitment efforts.
  - c. Membership policies: Consider offering discounts for family members who join together. Also, if resources are available, consider offering childcare during classes. Although this is an added expense (perhaps it can be passed on to families), it is consistent with a long-term perspective for building the school’s membership. A toddler who grows up close to the sights and sounds of a karate class is more likely to show interest when reaching the minimum training age.
  
2. Be creative in seeking ways to emphasize, recognize and celebrate family:
  - a. During stretching, basic techniques, prearranged fighting and other parts of class, occasionally group students with their family members.
  - b. Give families the opportunity to do family demonstrations.
  - c. Encourage families to use other medium – for example, drawing, poetry, singing, acting, and playing games (such as family fitness “contests”) – to express what they learn and how they feel about karate.
  
3. Accommodate differences in ability: When working with entire families, there will be times when you need to accommodate differences in ability such as in terms of stretching and in ability to generate speed and power in the techniques. Since children are not necessarily aware of ways in which the body changes over the life course, they may need some help understanding this principle before working with family members who have different abilities than their own.
  
4. Emphasize what all students have in common: Make sure to emphasize training-related concepts and ideas that apply to all students irrespective of age, such as how important it is to have regular physical activity,<sup>3</sup> the value of using a full range of motion when executing techniques, and the importance of using proper body mechanics to execute techniques. By emphasizing such commonalities, it will be clearer to family members how they can share what they learn and develop their skills together.
  
5. Turn learners into teachers: It is particularly valuable for children to have opportunities to help others. This experience contributes to their confidence and their competence on the deck.

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<sup>3</sup>Participation in regular physical activity at a moderate level is associated with increases in muscle and bone mass, decreases in body fat, control of body weight, improved psychological well-being, and reduced symptoms of depression. (For more information on this, see: Healthy People 2010. (n.d.). *Healthy People 2010: Understanding and Improving Health*. Retrieved March 26, 2007, from [http://www.healthypeople.gov/Document/html/uih/uih\\_4.htm#physactiv.](http://www.healthypeople.gov/Document/html/uih/uih_4.htm#physactiv.))

6. Promote question asking, on and off the deck: This is conducive to creating “teachable moments” where students are poised to learn relevant information about techniques, history, etc.

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