

How to Choose a Martial Arts School

Martial arts are one of the fastest growing sports activities in the world. Fascination stems from the latest trend of martial arts on television and on the big screen. From Jackie Chan, Jet Li, and Angelina Jolie to the Ninja Turtles and the Power Rangers, more and more men, women, and children have become inspired by the skills and abilities acquired through the martial arts. The result is an industry that has taken the world by storm with millions of participants that have credited their success, growth and development to their martial arts training.

Why martial arts?

A good martial arts program will target development physically, intellectually, emotionally, and socially. Unlike most other sports activities, martial arts are an individual activity within a support circle of a group environment. Participants enjoy the physical benefits such as balance, coordination, fitness, and flexibility while learning traditional martial arts skills that improve discipline, memory and focus. Emotional skills grow immediately as martial arts teach individuals how to have courage, perseverance, and control. To make martial arts even more enticing, the social interaction amongst students, families, and staff members is a benefit often overlooked but enjoyed the most as the martial arts lifestyle takes its course.

Quick tip:

Are you ready to take the step that you have been contemplating for some time? If so, remember this very important tip: people choose a martial arts school for one of three main reasons: convenience, value and/ or atmosphere.

Let's break down each reason so that you are more prepared to ask specific questions:

Convenience

Some families enjoy the convenience of having the ability to train with each other. This includes moms, dads, children, and even grandparents! Some people also prefer to have options in training that include a flexible schedule so that they can fit in other demands. The downfall to family classes is that you will not get the same value that age-specific training provides. These are the same reasons why you cannot teach a comprehensive math class to a group of students ranging from the ages of 3 to 93. This would make it impossible to target each student's stage of development. With that said, the downfall to flexible scheduling is the opportunity to put off training for a more convenient time later in the week and lack of habitual training that structured schedules provide. If you are willing to trade the value of age-appropriate training for convenience, then look for a school that has family classes and flexible schedules. Of course, these schools should have competitive prices compared to other schools with the same options.

Value

There is a huge demand for quality martial arts training. This includes age-specific training, comprehensive curriculums, and programs that are structured in a manner that

generate the best possible results. The downfall to a martial arts school that targets these values usually indicates that their scheduling may not be as convenient. However, the results that each student can obtain during training are measurable to a point that makes it worth the sacrifice. Expect to pay more for training that encompasses value in the business model, but also expect the investment to be worth it.

Atmosphere

In some cases, a person may choose a school based on the overall atmosphere. If the school is clean, the staff is social, and the look of the school including the uniforms, training deck, and school logo are cutting-edge, then most people will find these benefits attractive and enticing. After all, you are going to be training at this school for years to come, so why not choose a school that has a vibe that you enjoy. The downfall to a school with a great atmosphere is whether or not that school falls into the convenient or value category. In many cases, it is virtually impossible to manage a school that provides convenience and the best value (compared to age-appropriate schools). However, it is possible for a school to be convenient with a great atmosphere, or a school that has extremely high value with a great atmosphere. With that said, make your final decision based on what is more important for you: convenience or value.

Step-by-step tips on discovering the perfect martial arts school for you and/ or your family:

Now that you are more educated about the many benefits of the martial arts, it is now time to choose the school that best fits your needs. Follow these step-by-step details below to help make the best choice possible.

Step 1: Research schools in your area

You can locate a martial arts school through the yellow pages or internet. It is a good idea to begin with schools that have a website. Schools that have a website can provide you with some initial details about their business including program details, instructor history, and class schedules. Look for testimonials, photo galleries, and upcoming events and activities in order to get a great visual of what to expect before you even pick up the phone. You can easily determine if the school is convenient, value-oriented, and you can also catch a glimpse of the atmosphere through research on the internet.

Step 2: Call and set an appointment to visit the desired schools

Once you narrow down your options, the next step is to schedule an appointment to speak with a school representative. Although many schools allow you to come in at your own convenience, it is recommended that you have an appointment to reserve some time to cover key questions and tour the school. It is also recommended that you receive an initial private lesson or pre-evaluation on your first visit. In some cases, however, the owner or program director may be a part time employee and their schedule does not provide sufficient time slots for individual attention. In these situations don't make your decision based on the fact that they do not offer initial private lessons, they may have daytime jobs that limit their availability.

Step 3: Go through a trial program first

A good school will have a trial program that you can participate in before making a commitment. Avoid the temptation of good sales personnel that try to make an enticing offer if you sign up right away. This can be very dangerous if you haven't had an opportunity to really test-drive the program first. Trial programs vary from one week to six weeks. In many cases, a person can get a decent idea if the school is right for them within the first two weeks of training.

Step 4: Review the school's "extras"

The core training of the students should be weighed heavier in making a decision on a school; however it is the "extras" that many times make a big difference. Some schools are more of a part-time "hobby" for the Instructors, whereas other schools are full-time professional schools. Usually these schools will have lots of events to tie in the whole community of students together. Look to see if these types of events are available for students:

- **Tournaments** to give the students experience with their skills as well as to help them develop good sportsmanship values.
- **Seminars** with outside Instructors to help round off their martial arts skills and bring more excitement to their training.
- **Parties** and/or **sleepovers** (for kids) to help connect not only the students, but the parents as well into one community.
- Events and programs to help recognize the **efforts of the students** (i.e., Graduation ceremonies, Awards banquets, Good Grade incentives, etc.)
- **Fundraisers/charitable events** to help students build a sense of compassion and responsibility.

Step 5: Focus on the commitment and goals that you have set for the martial arts

Once you make a commitment, it is very important to set goals and chart out your new training schedule. Sometimes people will begin their training gung-ho with enthusiasm and effort only to hit a plateau or road bump. Like any job, sport, hobby, or activity obstacles are a common part of the journey. If you or your child are not prepared, or do not fully understand the consequences, then your journey may be prematurely cut short due to lack of preparation. It is extremely retro-active to make a commitment only to break that commitment before it is complete. In this case, you or your child will feel like it is ok to break goals and commitments. Do you want yourself or your child to live with that option? The correct answer should be no, as perseverance is one of the best qualities you can carry throughout your life and an important factor/ quality of martial artists.

Things that should matter in your decision:

1. The quality of customer service. If the staff is friendly, professional, and eager to help then you can guarantee that your experience will be a good one.
2. The quality of the school's appearance. If the school is clean then you know that they take pride in what they do.
3. The knowledge of the instruction staff. If the staff is knowledgeable and works well with the students, then you can rest assured that persevering through obstacles will be easy and rewarding.

Things that should not matter in your decision:

1. A governing organizational affiliation. There are pros and cons to schools that belong to large organizations. Therefore, don't be persuaded into making a decision solely based on whether they are or not.
2. Comparing prices from school to school with very different qualities of service. Price comparison should only matter once you narrow down schools with similar options. For example, if school "a" is more of a convenience with all age classes and flexible schedules, and school "b" is focused on age-specific training with comprehensive program structure then you should expect school "b" to be more expensive. This, however, should not be your deciding factor as both have different values behind their service. It is better to first determine if you want convenience or a more structured training, then compare prices with schools of similar models.
3. The style should not matter if you are not specifically looking for one particular style. Just like organizational affiliation, each martial arts style carries both pros and cons. Therefore, style should not matter unless you are an enthusiast in a specific style.

Common questions and answers:

Below are the most common questions and answers associated with choosing the perfect martial arts school.

Q: Should I avoid schools that charge testing fees?

A: No. Some schools charge a separate fee to keep the tuition rate lower, and at the same time establish value to the testing process. There are pros and cons to testing fees and therefore it should not matter in the decision making process unless you are on a very strict budget.

Q: Should I avoid schools that have long-term contracts?

A: No. Small businesses in today's economy have a hard time staying afloat, therefore long-term contracts help guarantee that the business will not suddenly take a dive during difficult times. There are pros and cons to long-term contracts and therefore it should only be a deciding factor if your gut instincts warn you to be cautious with your choice. Schools should have several options to offer for a variety of comfort levels when it comes to commitment. If there are long-term contracts, avoid them up front so you can find out what the school is all about. After 3-6 months, one can feel more comfortable signing a long-term contract, knowing how the school operates, what the Instructors are like, etc.

Q: Should I avoid schools that have younger or low ranking head instructors?

A: No. Schools that have young instructors tend to have higher energy levels during training. Also, lower ranking students tend to be more innovative and forward-minded where in some cases older instructors can be stuck in traditional ways that don't fit with today's needs. However, older and more experienced instructors have more knowledge and history to offer a student. Again, there are pros and cons to the age and rank of the head instructor, therefore it should not be the exclusive deciding factor unless you have narrowed everything else down and the only comparison comes to this. In that case, you need to determine what is best for you and/ or your family.

Q: How do I know if the Instructor will be a good Instructor?

A: The best way to tell is by having the interested student try the class. Parents will be able to tell if the Instructor is patient and kind, yet structured with discipline. However, here are some other things to think about and to look for:

- ***Does the Instructor lose patience with the students?*** Losing patience is the sign of an inexperienced Instructor. An experienced Instructor will be understanding of a student who does not catch on right away.
- ***Is there a control of the class?*** Martial Arts is about discipline so there should be control within the classroom. There should be set rules of what is "okay" and what is not. Students, especially younger students, will work better when guidelines and expectations are provided ahead of time.
- ***Are the students having fun?*** Although there should be control, students should be having fun. Games are okay as long as there is a purpose for the game to build skills/qualities of a martial artist and of a strong individual.
- ***Do the students fear the Instructor or respect the Instructor?*** Students should look up to their Instructor with respect, not obey their Instructor out of fear.
- ***Is the class "on task" throughout the class period?*** Inexperienced Instructors usually have lots of gaps of time in between exercises as they are thinking of what to do next. An experienced Instructor can flow from one topic to the next through the class time without a lot of "down" time.
- ***Does the Instructor teach more than kicking and punching?*** Students should not only learn about the physical aspects, but a good Instructor will help guide students in becoming stronger individuals from a moral sense as well. Lessons from class are many times tied into life lessons, helping students to connect the two together. This is also essential for students to learn the proper time and place for using their martial arts skills.
- ***Does the Instructor have an Instructor?*** Teachers who stop learning will become set in their ways and rigid. This means they have stopped growing. Not only is this uninspiring to students, but it also means that the students' knowledge will have a "cap" as well.
- ***How long has the Instructor been teaching?*** Instructors that have just begun teaching will obviously have less maturity in how they teach. An experienced Instructor will have a firm grasp of how to convey the information to students. Beware of Instructors who have recently become a Black Belt and have ventured

out on their own to start a school – because one has the skills of a Black Belt does not mean one has the skills of a teacher.

Q: Is there a style that is better suited for me or my family?

A: There are a wide variety of styles in martial arts. Although it would be quite difficult to learn about all of the styles, you should familiarize with some basic names. Karate, Tae Kwon Do and Kung Fu are the most common empty-hand (weaponless) styles originating from Japan/Okinawa, Korea and China, respectively. Each can be very beneficial to train in, which is why it is better to look for a school and Instructor that are comfortable rather than a style that is comfortable.

Beware of cult-like schools. Schools will commonly have traditions, etiquette and even a hierarchy system to be followed as part of the culture in which the art developed, however a red flag should go up if there is any religious involvement, excessive control by seniors over juniors, a high level of fear of the Instructor, undue pressure to participate in activities, etc.

Q: Are there other ways to determine a school’s credibility?

A: A very simple way is to check with the local Better Business Bureau. This is a simple way to tell if a school is established or not. The BBB will give the business rating and let you know of any “issues” from the past to be aware of. Also, there are a lot of “fly-by-night” type of schools that start up, collect lots of tuition up front from students (another red flag to be on the lookout for) and then close their doors, pocketing the money and leaving students and parents with nothing for their money. Checking to make sure a school is established in the area is a very sound way of establishing some credibility. Lastly, when visiting the school, speak with some of the parents to get an idea of how their experience has been. Nothing speaks higher credibility-wise about a school or Instructor than happy clients.

Conclusion

Choosing the perfect martial arts school should be simple with these tips in mind. Avoid common mistakes such as price shopping before you know what type of service the schools offer. In many cases, the cheaper the school, the lesser value you will get for your dollar. It is worth the extra money if the school can generate better results. Also, avoid the temptation of signing up on long-term contracts right away due to high-pressure sales. A good martial arts business will have confidence in their programs, and not solely rely on questionable sales tactics. First, try the school out for a while, then, if there are sound benefits to doing so, a long-term contract can many times reap valuable benefits in the long run. First and foremost, the students should be comfortable with the Instructor and the school environment as a whole. Secondary should be pricing, scheduling, etc. Once a selection is made, you should feel comfortable knowing that you have done your homework and that you or your child will be on your way to a rewarding experience in the martial arts.

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