

Teaching Sparring Skills to Distinct Groups of Potential Students

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Overview

This paper will present a general approach to teaching sparring skills to several distinct student populations. Prior to beginning this undertaking, it seems prudent to address certain foundational issues; what is sparring and why is it part of our training regimen? The ideas put forth here represent a framework for thinking about sparring and consequently how to teach it to UTF students.

A succinct definition of sparring is difficult and it may therefore be easier to begin with a self-evident proposition; sparring is not fighting. Fighting has no rules and a participant's only real measure of success is the ability to walk away. The physical maneuvers of Tae-kwon Do are self-defense tools that a practitioner can use in a fight, but actual fighting is impossible to practice for reasons of human dignity and physical safety. Nor does it seem appropriate to say that sparring is Tae-kwon Do's practice or preparation for fighting. Tae-kwon Do is a martial art and all areas of its training are in some sense preparation for fighting. Any practice that does not in some way enhance a student's selfdefense capability has no place in Tae Kwon Do.

The key feature that distinguishes sparring from other areas of Tae Kwon Do training is that it deliberately places students in situations with two key features; practice that is stressful (in the sense of creating time-sensitive demands) and interactive. Other central categories of Tae Kwon Do training, such as basics, patterns and forging, allow the student to shut out external stimuli during practice. Indeed, students are encouraged to ignore the external result of their efforts in basics practice and focus entirely on how the technique "feels" internally. While patterns involve different considerations of rhythm and flow between movements, it is essentially the same training scheme present in basics;

external stressors are removed to allow the student to practice their “best” possible technique. Sparring, as this paper uses the term, develops distinctly different areas of the student’s overall martial skill.

For purposes of this discussion, “sparring,” refers to a broad set of training practices currently in use with the UTF; three-step and one-step sparring, slow-motion sparring, push-kick sparring, dyna-strike sparring, and all varieties of free-sparring. Essentially, any drill where a student must employ both offensive and defensive skills under time constraints. Rather than viewing these different drills as distinct practices, they should be seen as part of the continuum of sparring practice.

The different sparring exercises allow the student to practice their technique in increasingly stressful situations that simulate some of the challenges present in fighting. Even under full control, hands and feet flying towards a student’s body place pressure on a student executing a block; knowledge that a counterattack is imminent makes execution of a strike more difficult. Learning to perform techniques under the stress of an interactive opponent (different drills from the student’s perspective present an increasingly interactive opponent) is essential to a martial artist’s physical and spiritual development. The physical development is self-explanatory: self-defense requires the ability to react to externally created threats. The spiritual development is intimately linked to the “martial” nature of the art; our understanding of ourselves and the world around us is the most complete when we are using all of ourselves. Sparring requires the student to use their “total self.”

Different sparring drills provide students with distinct challenges both in terms of “intensity” and the specific skill areas that they train. Consequently, instructors should expose students to different drills while keeping in mind how the skills developed in each drill builds on a student’s “sparring foundation”: the practical skills and mindset needed to effectively use sparring to enhance a student’s overall Tae Kwon Do development.

Additionally, premature exposure to more advanced sparring exercises can foster bad habits in beginning students that require extensive effort to correct.

Lesson Plans

The above-mentioned principals should inform the lesson plans for teaching sparring skills to the following groups:

- teens with behavioral problems
- children under the age of 10
- women
- people over the age of 50

(A) Teens with Behavioral Problems

The unique training areas addressed by sparring pose particular challenges for troubled teenagers, as well as great potential benefit. As discussed previously, a major component of sparring as a distinct training area is the ability to control the stress reaction and emotions that normally occur when people are placed in situations that they perceive as demanding and threatening. Coping with stress and powerful emotions is generally an area of weakness for teenagers with behavioral problems. The inability to do so, may in fact, be a major cause of the difficulties that they experience as many are prone to adopting a very negative or panicked mindset to problems that they encounter in daily life. Thus, the emphasis of sparring training for these students must be for them to use sparring exercises to develop the mental focus and discipline necessary for them to control how they perceive and interact with challenging situations.

In teaching students the different sparring exercises, the instructor should increase the degree of difficulty as students progress, keeping in mind that an overload may be detrimental to the student's development and actually set him or her back. This is particularly true when teaching troubled teenagers as an emotional meltdown during training could cause the student to discontinue training or become dangerous to the other students. Consequently, it is very important that the instructor know the students as well as possible and use his or her experience to assess each student's overall situation. Thus, Master Han's advice seems particularly relevant: "bend, but do not break."

It is particularly important that instructors dealing with troubled students ensure they create a positive environment when teaching sparring skills. This will facilitate the student's ability to experience difficult situations as challenges rather than threats. One way to bring this about is to focus on the sparring training as group activity and experience; the students are not each other's enemy, but rather, partners in developing their collective sparring skills. A few techniques that may be useful for an instructor in this endeavor:

1. Tell students that Tae Kwon Do practice is a family and it is the job of each family member to ensure the family's well being.
2. Strictly enforce the traditional Tae Kwon Do courtesies relating to sparring.
3. Prior to sparring inform students that they must identify one thing that their partner does well (or has improved on) in sparring and one thing that could use improvement
4. After bowing in conclusion of a sparring exchange, students could shake hands and verbally thank each other for the training.

The goal of using practices such as these is to enable the instructor to establish the proper atmosphere for the students to experience sparring training. Emphasizing Tae Kwon Do courtesies can help to give students the feeling that they are in a safe and controlled environment within which to encounter the challenges presented by the instructor. The pauses occasioned by bowing at the end of each session can also provide an opportunity for students to recollect their emotions and regain focus that may have been lost. Requiring students to provide each other with immediate feedback helps them in two ways: (1) they must pay more attention to what their partner is doing (a good sparring practice in general) and (2) to understand that they are responsible for each other's training. Having students give their peers both negative and positive feedback can help to give students a sense of perspective: a necessary element for controlling how one perceives and reacts to situations. Lastly, while shaking hands is not traditional to Tae Kwon Do, it may be a useful custom for student groups comprised of troubled teenagers as an extra measure to encourage camaraderie and mutual respect.

It is important to note that a student "loosing control" or otherwise having an emotionally intense experience during training is not necessarily bad. The dojang should be a forum for students to grow and develop; students must sometimes address their weaknesses and step out of their comfort zones for that growth to occur. A student becoming particularly flustered or angry can provide instructors with a "teaching moment" if handled correctly. An instructor should try to stop the student in that moment and help them to examine their thought process and see how it led to their loss of emotional control.

Instructors must take care when counseling the student not to do so in a way that may cause the student to lose face. Rather, the instructor should point out how the lesson for that student is applicable to every member of the group and reaffirm that having difficulties is normal and necessary in Tae Kwon Do training. The challenges of sparring can then be used to help troubled students learn to master themselves in potentially stressful situations; an essential skill for their growth as martial artists and human beings.

(B) Children Under the Age of Ten

The primary focus of teaching our youngest students should be in developing a solid foundation (spiritual and physical) for more advanced training in the future. Sparring instruction for children should therefore focus on developing the student's ability to control their body and maintain mental calm under pressure. Because advanced sparring practice to some extent simulates fighting, instructors of young children should be certain to reinforce the philosophical opposition of Tae Kwon Do to violence; children must be told in definite terms that the physical techniques of Tae Kwon Do are exclusively for self-defense. Children learn in fundamentally different ways than adults (and even teenagers) that create both challenges and opportunities for instructors. While younger children often lack the focus for prolonged repetitive exercises, they often bring tremendous energy and enthusiasm to their training. Sparring drills for children should capitalize on that energy by emphasizing movement and requiring active engagement of the mind. Although children can potentially be taught all of the sparring exercises, including contact sparring, instructors need to always provide close supervision of their training. Instructors should remember that young children's lack of judgment can lead them to make unsafe choices. As with any other group of students, it is imperative that the instructor know the capabilities and personalities of the children that he or she teaches.

Small children often have difficulty focusing, especially when they are presented with an open-ended task. Consequently, general sparring exercises like one-step or free sparring may be problematic, especially for children more junior in their training. Sparring practice where they can use all of their techniques may be so broad that children lose focus. One approach is to have children perform the drills with special conditions attached that will help develop particular skill sets. For example, three-step practice, where the

receiving student has to dodge the last punch prior to counterattack or combine a strike with a take-down maneuver. By giving children more guidance they may be better able to stay “in the moment” and learn to react to what their partners are doing. These more focused drills may be able to more effectively harness the energy that children to their training.

Children’s natural predilection for games and competition provides a good potential teaching tool for instructors seeking to impart sparring skills. For example, sparring drills such as group knife-hand sparring where all participants must keep a foot in the circle or the “back tag” game that Ms. Vimont often uses with her younger students can impart fundamental skills for successful sparring. While instructors should not make Tae Kwon Do training into mere recreation, children should learn that even serious endeavors can be fun and should be engaged with enthusiasm.

Additionally, making sparring training “fun” can help children that are shy or more easily intimidated, perceive potentially stressful situations as challenges. These exercises can also help to remove a major impediment to learning; the fear of failure. By giving children the chance to safely experience a partner “getting in”, they can learn to perceive their imperfections as an opportunity to improve their technique. The ability of a student to not lose their mental focus after being “struck” is one of the most important lessons of sparring training; it is necessary to persevere in the face of adversity. Instructors should impart this lesson, like all others, in steps that begin small and increase in intensity with the student’s ability. Competitive games provide a good opportunity for children to take those initial steps.

Instructors teaching children should keep in mind that children lack the emotional and intellectual resources of adults. In particular, children may react more strongly than adults to negative experiences, such as becoming scared after being struck or otherwise intimidated during sparring training. Each child is different and their ability to cope with adversity varies widely, it is the instructors responsibility to be aware of how their students are doing and to keep communication open. While children should not be shielded from all difficulties, instructors must keep in mind the limitations of their students.

(C) Women

Women, as a group, generally come to Tae Kwon Do training with less prior experience in sparring or combative sports/activities in general. This provides both advantages and disadvantages: while women are often less comfortable with “combative” activities, they may be easier to teach, due to a lack of preconceptions. As a broad statement, female students tend toward a more defensive approach to sparring. Consequently, instructors should focus on teaching sparring skills that favor a more defensive approach and work to counteract advantages from male opponent’s superior size and weight. The instruction must address both the physical challenges faced by female students (unfamiliarity with sparring-type activities, smaller size and weight) and the psychological challenges (intimidated by “fighting” and aversion to behavior perceived as aggressive) faced by female students. As with all groups of students, instructors should teach sparring skills to female students in a way that builds off of their strengths to develop their deficiencies.

Instructors can help female students to develop their offensive sparring skills by using drills that emphasize the role of “offensive” techniques in sparring defense. For example, one-step drills that focus on using “check kicks” or “blocking kicks” to control space and disrupt an opponent’s offensive movement. Teaching female students these types of techniques can help them to gain skills necessary to offset some of the disadvantages of height and weight that they may face with male partners (or attackers).

Sparring instruction for female students should also focus on how to use the openings created by the overly aggressive tactics of larger opponents. Sparring drills that focus on mobility and counterattacks are particularly appropriate (these are also excellent drills for any set of students). For example, drills where dyna-strike targets are presented in different locations to a retreating student can help students learn to control their posture so that they can effectively counterattack under pressure. In the context of self-defense, female students can gain an advantage by feigning retreat to create vulnerability in their opponent.

The psychological barriers that female students may face from apprehension about sparring often stem from unfamiliarity. The idea of being hit, especially for newer female students, can be very intimidating and cause an unwarranted degree of anxiety that

interferes with the development of sparring skills. Instructors should help students to overcome these apprehensions in the same way that they would approach any other new area of training to a student: present the challenge in manageable increments that increase with the student's level of confidence and ability. The goal is to get the student to understand that being hit, while not fun, is also not the end of the world.

Exercises that force students to deal with incoming techniques can help to allay sparring-related anxieties that female students (among others) may experience. For example, drills where one student has their back to a wall and blocks push-kicks or slow motion techniques from their partner (or partners) can be useful. The defending student has a good opportunity to develop their sparring defense and will inevitably get struck. The reality of being hit (never pleasant) will replace undefined fears and apprehensions that stem from the unknown. At more advanced levels, contact sparring can also be useful for the same purpose. The ability of a student to master these types of anxieties is a major component of the physical and mental development that sparring training brings to Tae Kwon Do.

(D) People of the Age of 50

The main considerations for an instructor teaching sparring skills to older students will be the physical limitations of the students themselves. The physical capabilities of people over fifty vary widely based on the student's age, habit and health. Some people over fifty may be in excellent physical condition and be able perform like a person in their thirties, while others may be severely limited. Given this variability, it is especially important that instructors of older students pay attention to their student's physical condition and tailor the instruction accordingly. Instructors should make a point to become aware of any health problems that older students may be dealing with and any pre-existing injuries that they have experienced. Furthermore, instructors should make it absolutely clear to older students that they should feel free to step out and take a pause any time that they feel it necessary.

Sparring instruction for older students with limited physical capabilities should emphasize smooth movements and transitions between techniques. Teaching older students economy of motion can be especially helpful to relieve some of the stress on the

body that often occurs during sparring drills from rapid movement. One exercise that may be helpful is the “mirroring” drill, where students touch palms and one student leads while the other keeps the physical contact from breaking. This exercise teaches students to be sensitive to the movement of the leading partner while being aware of their internal balance points; students learn to only move as necessary from their center with a balanced posture. Applying these movement techniques can reduce the stress on joints that can occur during sparring drills (as well as lead to overall better technique).

Instructors of older students should keep in mind that the purpose of Tae Kwon Do training is to help the student develop their physical and mental capabilities to the utmost of that person’s potential. Older students that are more severely restricted in their physical activities can still obtain benefits from sparring practice. Slow-motion sparring offers students the chance to develop their mental focus by applying their techniques to unanticipated situations. Instructors may consider using “tai chi style” slow-motion sparring, wherein the students execute techniques in combination with deliberate breathing. This sort of practice can provide sparring training while limiting any impact on older student’s joints.

When older students are present in a class with younger students, instructors should be cognizant of the student’s dual role; the respect for older people that is embedded in the Tae Kwon Do tradition requires us to view them as both juniors and seniors. This is especially true when children are present as respect for older people is a core value that we wish to impart to our younger students. Consequently, older students should be referred to as Mr. or Ms., so-and-so in front of the class. Instructors should admonish children that are senior in rank to an older student of the need to show that individual appropriate courtesy.