

MARTIAL ARTS THERAPY: Kids Combating Disease & Disabilities

by Rabbi Sensei Gary Moskowitz

The more we move forward in time with breakthroughs in technology, the more we need to understand how to use and build on ancient wisdom as well. The Indian and Oriental cultures have contributed much to healthy living, rehabilitation and pain management. Martial Arts Therapy (MAT) utilizes this wisdom to help people keep optimum health, and manage and heal those with serious illnesses and those who are disabled.

Martial Arts Therapy is the use of century's old wisdom with modern education techniques to train our brave students/patients that they can be in control of their bodies, thereby controlling their pain and emotional and physical difficulties.



MAT has its roots going back to 1979 when students of Applied Martial Arts were required (in order to receive their promotion in rank) to volunteer their time to receive training in helping sick kids with cancer and those who were disabled. The philosophy is simple: Once you empower yourself, then you must empower others, especially those who often are the most vulnerable in society.

Martial Arts Therapy teaches pain/fear management and physical rehabilitation skills while offering emotional and spiritual support as the patient actively participates in their healing processes through kinetic energy training and guided imagery.

MAT is like a moving meditative dance. As the student advances working with multiple partners, they utilize proprioceptive training known as sticky hands, among other sensory skills. They also work on the Chi-Sage Method, which is a combination of Tai Chi and massage/acupressure where the therapist uses acupressure while the client is in a slow (and later in a fast paced) meditative motion to stimulate the natural healing energies of body and mind. Almost immediately, they learn our combative competitive Virtual Karate and Judo, where they fight each other from a distance with no physical contact; and points are scored by judges deciding whether their attacks would have landed.

MAT is able to motivate and push children without breaking them. It is exciting for them to learn to do things many thought they never could.

One example of our training was when I was working with a 10-year old boy with cerebral palsy who had difficulty opening and closing his hands. I took out a rubber knife and told him we would be working on knife defenses. However, to do that, he would have to try to rotate his wrist to redirect the knife away from him. After working with his hands with some of our training mechanisms, I began making simulated

threatening gestures to him playfully, and eventually I screamed as I thrust the knife towards him. He began

focusing and wrapping his hand around my wrist to catch and redirect the rubber knife. After working with him for a few sessions, he was able to move and rotate his wrist approximately another 20 degrees. He was motivated, focused and having fun.

A 6-year old boy with CP who could barely take a couple of steps without his walker began training. On our first day, I had him sit down and we did some stick foam training. I taught him three blocks and strikes. After 15 minutes, I said the session was over. He asked to stay longer and I told him if he couldn't stand then I couldn't teach him to fight. "Do you want to try and stand and train?" I said. He just got up holding onto his father and we began to practice. Suddenly I purposely hit him with foam stick over the head, and his face became red with his nostrils flaring like a dragon; I could feel his adrenaline pumping. With a burst of energy, he didn't walk, he ran after me trying to retaliate. He took 16 steps striking at me with his foam stick before he finally fell. He was so proud of himself.

Another little boy with brain cancer was in pain and lost coordination from time to time. I took the picture of his MRI of his brain where the cancer was, and we used the guidance imagery technique of throwing darts at the picture and then hanging it up on a striking pad where he learned to punch and kick at it; and where it had an immediate effect of pain relief as he learned to scramble the message of pain.



A young girl with cystic fibrosis learned various deep breathing exercises to assist her. There are many more joyful stories to tell and more to be experienced. Classes are free for children with cancer and other illnesses and disabilities. Visit www.martialartstherapy.org or call 917-916-4681.

Rabbi Sensei Gary Moskowitz is a former New York City police officer, private investigator, teacher, principal, social worker, talk show host, and president of a Long Island Jewish community council. He has trained police in the United States and anti-terrorist units in Israel in riot and hostage tactics. Gary holds a Seventh Degree Black Belt in both Jujitsu and Karate, a Second Degree Black Belt in both Judo and Oriental Weapons, and he is an instructor in Tai-Chi-Aki. His life long desire for educating others and for making the world a better place has led him to teach Martial Arts and a broad variety of other subjects over many years and to found the award winning National Association for the Jewish Poor and other charitable organizations, including Martial Arts Therapy for children fighting cancer.