

Starting them young

Phil Wright started tai chi in 1987 with teachers from the John Kells and the Dr Chi Chiang lineage. In 2013 He was teaching in Cornwall when he received a message on his new Facebook page asking if he would teach tai chi at a primary school. Tackling this venture led him in a new direction and he has now been teaching tai chi in schools for many years. He is known to many children as Mr Tai Chi Man. He writes:

The school where I started teaching was large and requested classes for the entire school. Each year group had two classes so I spent every Monday all day for nearly a year teaching children of all ages from reception to key stage (KS) two.

I started off in a formal tai chi suit and taught in a fairly structured way. There was lots of rote teaching of the form but it occurred to me early on that that was not really working for all children, despite children being very good physical mimics. In that sense I was teaching the form or the external look of tai chi, not the internal principles on which it was based and which formed my own practice. So, I decided to get more creative.

A turning point was reading Stuart Alve Olson's book, *Tai Chi for Kids*. He was a student of T.T.Liang and had also tried teaching children the moving form but he decided that individual moves with animal names worked best, such as white crane spreads wings. This was really helpful. There were hardly any books on teaching tai chi to children, so any clues were useful. I was lucky too, as my wife was an experienced early years teacher and was able to offer good advice.

Traditionally, children start off in 'hard' kung fu styles and then in later life moved into the 'soft styles' such as tai chi. However, I did know that tai chi had been passed down in families and therefore presumably had been taught to children. Even with my rote teaching of the form I had had some good success with engaging children, who seemed intrigued with the moves. So, I evolved some different strategies and realised a few things early on; the major one being that tai chi needed to be fun. It also needed to be very much 'in the moment' and allow for creativity. It needed to appeal to children's imagination. So I started to use visual images to engage their interest and created tai chi games.



I have now developed a flexible approach to teaching tai chi to children. This differentiates between early years (reception age) and KS1 and KS2. With





With younger children, I quickly realised that basing games that taught tai chi principles with animal moves worked well. Children found this fun and could relate to the moves better, such as practising ‘empty stepping’ by emulating a tiger or playing games that taught the benefits of softness or looseness in the limbs.

With older children, working over time, I realised that the qi or the energy fascinated them the most and this became my teaching focus. Most children were readily able to ‘feel the qi’ and were motivated to learn more tai chi and qigong to engage and develop the sensations. Another important aspect with older children that evolved was partner work, a key part of learning tai chi.

I evolved what I did over a long time, developing many games and much freestyle fun. I learnt to be more spontaneous in my teaching and it was a privilege and joy to teach children, though also hard work. I used a lot of feedback forms early on and feedback stated that a high percentage of the children really enjoyed tai chi.

Many of the children’s class teachers gave feedback that children improved in their ability to listen and engage with their school work following tai chi sessions, which seemed a strong motivation to continue. Overall, there was often a marked improvement in children’s ability to remain calm which was a key benefit of the ‘relaxation and letting go’ activities. I surmised that school was often very cerebral and that practising the embodiment principles of tai chi had a positive impact on children’s health and wellbeing. Children learn through tai chi to be soft and relaxed, to yield



and collaborate. Teaching children the internal principles became the most useful elements and made the classes distinct from other exercise. Yoga has become popular to teach children in schools and it is my firm belief that tai chi should also sit alongside this. Qigong and yoga are very similar fundamentally, with tai chi also offering opportunities for partner work. When tai chi is taught without competition, promoting cooperation (think tai chi’s ‘sensing hands’ practised correctly to train softness and sensitivity) partner work and games appeals to older children.

With younger children, group games work well and sometimes have been created on the spot by the children themselves. I have found children to be very receptive to tai chi, relaxed in their bodies, generally more open minded to the concepts of energy and more readily able to feel it. They do not have years of chronic tension to undo, which adults have built up from life experiences. Lack of bodily tension equates to more qi flow. Children can be open hearted generally and, in my experience, it is important to teach from the heart too; to listen to children and to respond to what interests them and engages them.

Over the years, I have had many enquiries asking me how to teach tai chi to children and I have trained teachers in schools and at workshops in conferences around the country. I think for it to work well, class teachers need to have an understanding of what tai chi is and what principles it is built on. Then they can add their own expertise. Tai chi practitioners should have that foundation and use it to consider how they might work with children to convey what they know and what they have to teach.

Due to all the enquiries, I have written a book to cover these two aspects, the philosophical and the practical aspects for educationalists as well as tai chi players. I hope the book will help schools to bring tai chi into the curriculum and support tai chi practitioners and parents who want to teach children this wonderful practice. ☯

Tai Chi For Schools: A Guide For Teachers, Practitioners And Parents
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