

## How to Pick a Good Self-Defense Program

Kidpower is an educational charitable organization that, since 1989, has brought "People Safety" education to over 1.2 million children, teenagers, and adults, including those with special needs, from many different cultures - close to home and around the world. For publications; free articles, podcasts and e-newsletter; and information about our services and locations, please visit [www.kidpower.org](http://www.kidpower.org).

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The quality of the program and approach of the instructor will make a huge difference in the results of any kind of training. Self-defense is no exception. Done well, self-defense workshops can be exciting, empowering, and useful. Done poorly, they can be boring, discouraging, and destructive. If training is about self-defense or any other important life skills, the potential benefits are real and so are the potential dangers. It is worth taking the time to make a thoughtful decision.

**Here are some questions to consider when evaluating a self-defense program:**

### **1. Is the content positive, accurate, comprehensive, and appropriate for the ages and life situations of the students?**

The best programs will teach a range of personal safety skills for being aware, taking charge of the space around you, getting help, setting boundaries with people you know, de-escalating conflict, and staying calm and making choices instead of just getting upset when you have a problem. Physical self-defense skills will be taught in a context of having done everything possible to get out of a situation safely without fighting first.

Look for programs that focus on the skills to learn rather than on reasons why we have to learn these skills. Realize that children can become traumatized by scary stories about bad things that happened to other children. Children learn best if their teacher has a calm, matter-of-fact approach which makes it clear that they can keep themselves safe most of the time by learning how to do a few easy things.

Look for programs that are based on research from a wide variety of fields including mental health, education, crime prevention, law enforcement, and martial arts.

Look for endorsements from real people and credible organizations.

Look for programs that are willing to give credit for what they have learned from others rather than saying that they have invented "the best and only way to learning true self defense."

Be wary of programs that give simplistic, absolute answers such as, "If you wear a pony tail, you are very likely to be assaulted" or "If you train with us, you will never have to be afraid again."

## **2. Is the teacher clear, respectful, in charge, enthusiastic, and able to adapt?**

You and the children and teens in your life deserve to have teachers who are helpful rather than discouraging. Good teachers do not make negative remarks about their students or anyone else and do not allow others to do so, even as a joke.

Look for teachers who know how to be both firm and respectful when they set boundaries with students who are doing things that detract from the class.

The best teachers will change what they do to meet the needs of their students rather than having a standard, canned approach. Role-plays to demonstrate or practice skills should be described in terms of situations that students are likely to encounter. The way something is presented should be in terms that are meaningful to a student. Instead of telling a blind student to look at a potential attacker, for example, a teacher who knows how to adapt will say something like, "Turn your face towards the person so that he knows you know he's there."

Good teachers will listen to your concerns with appreciation for your having the courage to raise them rather than with defensiveness. When possible, they will change what they do to make the class work better for you. At the very least, they will explain their reasons for what they do and why they cannot accommodate your wishes.

## **3. Is the approach more action-oriented or talking-oriented?**

In general, people remember more about what they have seen than what they have been told. People are more likely to be able to do what they have practiced themselves than what they have been shown to do or told to do.

Look for programs that involve showing more than explaining and that provide lots of opportunity for learning by doing.

## **4. Is the learning success-based?**

It can be destructive to students' emotional and physical safety if they feel as if they are failing when they are trying to learn self-protection skills. Success-based learning means that students are guided through what they need to learn in a highly positive way. Practices go step by step starting with where each student actually is. Success is defined as progress for each individual student rather than as perfection according to some standard of the teacher. Students are coached as they do the practices so that they can do them correctly as much as possible. They are given feedback about how to improve in a context that communicates, "mistakes are part of learning."

## **5. Is the approach more focused on traditional martial arts or on practical self-defense?**

Martial arts programs, like other activities involving interactive movement such as sports and dance, can be wonderful for building confidence, character, and physical condition. However, for teaching personal safety skills, the approach of most martial arts is like long-term preventative health care. Practical self-defense is like emergency medicine which teaches in a few hours skills which are very focused on preventing abduction, assault, and abuse from strangers, bullies, and people we know.

The most important skill in choosing a good self-defense program is being able to act on your intuition without being stopped by feelings of confusion or fear. It can be hard to stay clear about what your needs are or what the needs of your children are when you are bombarded by often conflicting advice from experts. If something someone does seems wrong to you, even if you can't justify your feeling logically, walk away rather than staying in a potentially bad situation. Keep looking until you find the type of program that answers to your satisfaction the kinds of questions described above.

Whether you are looking for a self-defense class or any other important training, pay attention to uncomfortable feelings you have about someone's approach, no matter how highly-recommended the person is and no matter how much you like the teacher as a person. Often very well meaning, knowledgeable people try to teach through talking about what can go wrong rather than through helping their students practice how to do things effectively. Remember that what programs actually do is more important than what their literature or representatives say they are going to do. In Kidpower Teenpower Fullpower International, we do our best to uphold high standards for all of our services. Please let us know if ever we do not follow through on this commitment.