

Ninjutsu for Children

By Josh Sager

3 Ninjas. Mighty Morphin Power Rangers. Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Beverly Hills Ninja. Children have a fascination with the mysterious ninja warriors of ancient Japan. Every Halloween they go trick-or-treating as ninja - dressed in black, wearing hoods and sporting plastic ninja swords. Fortunately the image of the ninja in our society today is shifting to a more accurate depiction than the sinister henchman image of the 1980s. Ninja were not evil assassins who killed for fun. Ninja did engage in guerrilla warfare and espionage when necessary, but for the most part they were ordinary people who developed certain skills in order to survive the difficult times in feudal Japan's history.

Yesterday and Today

A ninja's training began at an early age. Because children became disinterested in activities quickly, instructors taught the necessary skills under the disguise of games. The children were taught balance, climbing, wrestling, and stick fighting without thinking the training was work. As the child grew older, he or she was introduced to other life protection and martial arts skills. By the time they were old enough to effectively protect their family, they already had all of the skills needed to be a ninja.

In today's ninjutsu dojo, children learn the same skills as the ninja of the past. Any technique that was not effective died on the battlefield with the person using it, so the techniques learned by today's ninja children have been used successfully in actual defense situations for over 1,000 years.

Stretching

Stretching allows the muscles to warm up and helps prevent injury. Special attention is given to make sure the hips, knees, ankles, feet, and leg muscles are well stretched. Stretching is obviously not a concept unique to ninjutsu, but it is an important part of the training nonetheless. Ninja are known to be extremely flexible. Stories of their amazing ability to leap, roll, and contort their bodies made them mythical legends among the Japanese people.

Rolling and Taihenjutsu

In ninjutsu, rolling and injury prevention is known as *ukemi*. Being able to perform front, back, and side rolls allow ninja to fall or be thrown without getting hurt. *Taihenjutsu* (body changing) encompasses a wide range of techniques, from *kamae* (known as "stances" in other martial arts), to *taisabaki* (footwork and walking techniques), as well as methods to create the proper distance and angling when defending against an attacker.

Taihenjutsu and ukemi training teaches children that techniques will not always work the same way every time. *Kamae* are transitional movements, not static fighting positions. By learning how the body moves naturally, ninja are able to react quickly and instinctively in any situation.

Basics

Sanshin no kata (form of the three hearts) is the name of the first 5 techniques in ninjutsu. They are: *chi* (earth), *sui* (water), *ka* (fire), *fu* (wind), and *ku* (void). Each technique is named after an element. Ninja respond and react using movements similar

to the way these elements react in nature. For example, if a ninja feels defensive during an encounter, he or she would most likely use a water feeling to react. Similar to the way a wave flows back from the beach and then crashes into the shore again. If a ninja feels like avoiding the situation altogether, he or she would probably use a wind feeling. This is comparable to the way the wind blows into a sail moving a sailboat away from the shore, or the way the wind moves a flag on a flagpole.

Kihon Happo

Students learn the *kihon happo* (8 fundamental techniques) to become familiarized with the various blocks, strikes, throws, grabs, kicks, and takedowns used in ninjutsu. By practicing these techniques, children also learn about balance (keeping themselves on balance while keeping the opponent off balance), timing (when is the right time to block or counter attack), and distance (where to position their body in relation to an attacker so they can hit without being hit). Most of the technique variations found in ninjutsu are based on the *kihon happo*.

Weapons

In class, children are taught the *bo* (staff) and *hanbo* (3-foot staff) most often because of their easy substitution with modern day objects (brooms, golf clubs, tree branches). *Shuriken* (throwing star) is the weapon most commonly associated with the ninja. Ninja children learn to throw, as well as avoid shuriken in the form of games. In one game, students try to throw rubber shuriken into a target. In another game, students use *taisabaki* to avoid being hit by rubber shuriken.

Other weapons such as the *katana* (sword), *kusari fundo* (short chain), and *yari* (spear), are not practiced as often, but are still occasionally taught to expose students to the traditional tools and weapons used by ninja.

Wilderness Training

The skills ninja learn in order to survive in the wilderness are strikingly similar to those taught for generations by the Native Americans. Both groups have a special relationship with nature, so it's only fitting that ninja perfect these skills not only to perpetuate their own survival, but also to do so in a way that won't destroy their surroundings. Students learn tracking, fire making, camouflage, silent movement, and finding food, water and shelter. These skills prepare them for any survival situation, and allow them to provide and care for others should the need arise.

Ninja also learn how use their surroundings to their strategic advantage. Something as simple as throwing leaves at the eyes of an attacker can provide enough distraction to allow the ninja to escape unharmed. Broken logs and sticks along a path make great barricades for slowing an enemy's pursuit.

Philosophy of a child ninja

Although a typical ninjutsu class may not seem very different from other martial arts children's classes, some fundamental philosophies differ from other styles. The attributes of a ninja stressed in children's classes are quiet, patient, flexible, responsible, and happy. This is undoubtedly an unusual grouping of principles for most martial arts, but we must remember that ninja are not typical martial artists. They were common citizens. What was important to the samurai did not always apply to the farming and merchant communities from which the ninja came.

Another valuable compliment to the ninja's physical training is the idea of protecting self and others. Almost all martial arts teach how to defend oneself from an attacker, but very few teach how to defend someone else from an attacker. The late Dr. Robert L. Humphrey helped to integrate the "protecting self and others" philosophy into modern ninjutsu training. Being able to protect others goes beyond helping one's friends when they are in trouble. Training to protect a friend from an attacker without hurting the attacker is the ultimate goal.

Don't give up

Students of ninjutsu are frequently reminded of the saying "*gambatte*" – keep going! This is of course a simple concept in theory, but it can be very difficult in application. Throughout life, no matter what you do; you have to "keep going". The benefits can last a lifetime, but you have to put forth the effort to get results. Children that study ninjutsu are encouraged to keep going and do their best at all times. Everyone has good and bad days. It is easy to keep going on the good days, but not so easy to keep going on the bad days. It is perhaps more important to keep going on the bad days, or during the times when a plateau has been hit. This does not just apply to training. Whether in school, martial arts training, or even around the house with family, ninja keep going and do the best they can, and do so with a positive attitude. This attribute is what has allowed the ninja tradition to survive, even flourish, for over 1,000 years! Not many other martial arts can trace their lineage back that far.

Is ninjutsu the best style for children?

No one can definitively say if one style is better suited for children than another. Regardless of what martial art a child learns the benefits are better than most other activities available to them today. Because ninjutsu is a balanced martial art, ninja children are likely to have a more rounded martial arts education than a strictly grappling or kicking art. The benefits gained beyond the physical training are the most important aspect of ninjutsu, especially for children. If you agree that a child should be responsible, happy, flexible, and patient, as well as have the ability to protect themselves, their family, friends, and others, then ninjutsu is without a doubt an excellent art for them to learn.