

## Martial arts helps children with autism

At a recent class at Strike Back Martial Arts in Webster, 8-year old Alex Maenza stood on the mats, awaiting instructions.

When "Sensei Mike" gave him the cue, he turned around, ran backwards toward the opposite end of the room, and caught a ball thrown at him from 20 feet away.

Alex beamed and bounced with delight. His instructors told him "Good job!" His parents were proud. For most kids, this would be a simple skill. But for Alex, it was something to cheer about.

Alex and the seven other boys in his class are part of Strike Back's Jujitsu Buddies program, for children ages 4-12 on the autism spectrum. For these children, skills like catching a ball, navigating an obstacle course, even interacting with their peers can be a major accomplishment. Strike Back Martial Arts owners Mike Palmer and Dave Nicchitta describe the class as a comprehensive introduction to Jujitsu and martial arts for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. But these kids won't be applying headlocks or throwing their classmates to the mats anytime soon. Other skills are much more important.

Jujitsu Buddies "has a martial arts flavor," Nicchitta said. "But we're more interested in building the other important aspects they need, like core strength, balance and teamwork."

The lessons begin immediately, with "roll call" at the beginning of each class.

"A lot of times these kids have a hard time connecting to their peers," Nicchitta said. "They'll be out playing at lunchtime, but have a hard time interacting. So we get the kids used to talking in front of other people, saying something about themselves."

After roll call come warm-ups and drills emphasizing core strength, coordination, balance, agility, body awareness, and following multiplestep directions. Traditional Jujitsu skills, including striking and take downs, are gradually introduced as the session progresses.

Classes are limited to eight students, so the three adult instructors and two youth assistants can provide almost oneon- one attention.

The program is so well respected that it draws students from all over Rochester. Paul and Jamie Kieffer have been driving all the way from Gates every Saturday for almost a year.

Thanks to the program, Paul said, their son Jackson now has "self-awareness of objects and boundaries around him." That includes an awareness of people and willingness to interact with them.

Typically, "Once we get past two or three people, (Jackson) goes in the corner and plays by himself," Paul said. But then one day in his Buddies class, "he stayed with a large group of people, mingled in, listened to instructions and followed along. That was pretty great."

Jackson and his classmates probably don't realize that while they're having fun running, crawling and hopping, they're practicing valuable life skills. That's OK. Bottom line, these children only need to realize one thing: they can accomplish anything they put their minds to.

That lesson, at least, seems to have sunk in with Alex Maenza.

During one class, after completing a particularly difficult drill, Alex scampered off the floor towards his mother. With a big grin, he ran up to her and said, "I'm pretty good at this, if I do say so myself."

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Jackson Kieffer works his way down the floor under the watchful eye of co-owner Mike Palmer.

MISSY ROSENBERRY



Co-owner Dave Nicchitta and student Alex Maenza watch as students perform a drill at Strike Back Martial Arts in Webster.

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