

# THE MONTHLY

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## First Person:

### Kindling Kindness / A martial arts teacher explains how bullies grow—or don't. | By Louise Rafkin

At the end of every one of my martial arts classes, the kids shake hands with each other. It's my favorite moment, and one that not every child is comfortable with, initially. As I watch them pumping their arms—some, eventually, with the enthusiasm of puppies—I think, this is why I teach. The training is about learning to get along, about respecting each other, about being connected.

But in 25 years of teaching martial arts, I've noticed a gradual slippage in the ways kids relate to other kids—and to adults—a sad trend away from kindness.

The news is everywhere: Bullying is epidemic. In the current frenzy about bullying at school, fingers are pointing every which way. Mostly they're aimed at school administrators, who toss cash at the situation, both out of genuine concern and to guard against lawsuits.

Mandates for safe schools mean action, and there's interesting work being done. Yet remedies to bullying have generally focused on the victim—"Learn to fight back," or "Just walk away," or, more popular these days, "Stand up to the bully." All of these strategies can work, at times, and I support—and teach—them all; I'm especially committed to self-defense.

But since when has the best solution to a problem been the correction of the victim? As if the bully is an immutable object, when, in fact, the bully is another kid (or adult) with hopes and fears and insecurities, seeking a way to belong and get by. The popular assumption that bullies are misfits with rotten self-images is challenged by major studies, at U.C.L.A. and elsewhere, showing that bullies are actually considered "cool." Bullies are often popular, wield power in their peer groups, have friends, and even possess a fair shake of self-esteem. What they lack is impulse control, empathy for others, and respect for authority.

So what is our responsibility? What can we do as parents, teachers, and neighbors, to teach a more inclusive and compassionate way of relating?

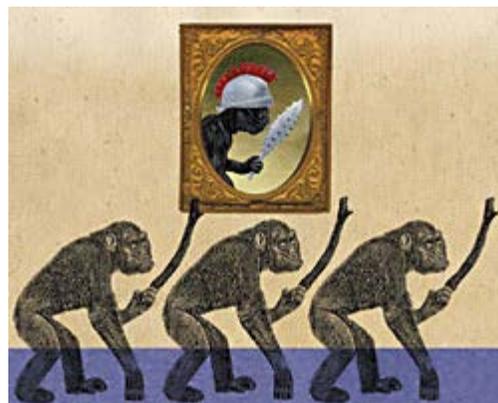


Illustration by Susan Sanford.

Because anyone with a toddler knows behavior is monkey-see, monkey-do from the get-go, the first thing we all can do is look at our own behavior. When is the last time you cursed a bad driver (modeling poor impulse control)? Called a coworker or family member an idiot (exhibiting a lack of empathy)? Undermined your child's teacher or coach (showing lack of respect for authority)?

Was any of this in front of kids, yours or others? We've all done it, and worse. And these days, our kids bear witness to a lot more of our questionable behavior than in yesteryear. The imaginary wall between kids and parents has been all but erased; they're listening to our telephone conversations, watching us work at home. Monkeys are seeing and monkeys are doing.

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Since the 16th century, when fight-to-the-death life skills were eclipsed by the age of weaponry, martial arts training has focused on teaching a way of life, about how to live without fear, gain confidence, and be better people. We've got centuries-old traditions shaping our community. Yet martial arts philosophy is adaptable to both home and school. Away from my studio, I (too often!) have a salty mouth and can be as catty and demanding as the best, or worst. But around my students, both in class and out, I know I'm the "highest rank" and both my kicks—and my behavior—will be copied.

Running a school with zero tolerance for bullying, I've had to think deeply about our community values. We have slogans: "Cliquesy is icky"; "You can't say you can't play." But the most central tenets of martial arts are civility and respect—not always culturally lauded these days. Last fall, when the president of the United States was called a liar by an elected representative during a congressional address, I felt we'd reached a new low. "You can disagree without being disagreeable" is a phrase easily understood by kids, though it takes guts to use it with adults.

As the head of my school, I am often on the receiving end of what I'll politely call "disagreeable behavior" by parents. There are those that challenge my school policies (no, there is no exception, not even for you), and those who strongly question our rules (children must wear uniforms, even if they don't feel like it that day). Last week, a parent was outraged that his child, underage for the school yet "gifted," was not allowed in. In each of these cases, parents tried to verbally bully me into their way of thinking; in two instances, I was criticized personally.

In martial arts, our code of conduct doesn't depend on context but is applicable to everyone—parents and kids—all the time. This challenges those who want special treatment or who think the rules shouldn't apply to their kids, for whatever reason. But a single set of rules creates a safe container for everyone. We don't put up with disrespectful behavior on the training floor, nor is it okay for kids to bow respectfully in class and then treat their parents like servants.

Decades of martial arts experience have shown me that compassion can be taught. Last year, at our Tilden overnight camp, a young boy new to our school brandished a pocketknife at another threateningly. We set up an apology session where each talked

about what they felt. It went . . . okay. But that night, during the great game, "Five Minutes of Fame," in which kids talk about their lives, the new boy spoke: 27 foster placements before a forever home. The next day the bully and the bullied became buddies; compassion and understanding won out over fear and anger.

When kids come to Studio Naga, they are taught to say hello, to ask about my day, and to respond when I ask them about theirs. They are required to mentor newer students, to clean bathrooms, to empty trash. And at the close of every class, the last thing we do is exchange the Indonesian phrase *gotong-royong*. Roughly translated, it means, "I learn from you, and you learn from me," or, more formally, "We share a goal."

In martial arts, we bow an awful lot, but it goes both ways: I to them, them to me. We share the responsibility of what we create. It comes back to all of us, really. Those fingers are pointing right at me.

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Louise Rafkin, a writer and the head of Studio Naga in Oakland, will lead a workshop on Saturday, March 5, at Albany Addresses Bullying: Creating a Community of Allies, a free public event organized by the Albany Unified School District, at Albany High School ([ausdk12.org](http://ausdk12.org)), 8:30 a.m.-1 p.m. Rafkin's current writing projects examine the uses of martial arts philosophy in parenting, life, and community.