

Dyspraxia: A guide for martial arts instructors



Dyspraxia, also known as Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD) affects movement and coordination in children and adults. It is surprisingly common, affecting around 5% of school-aged children with difficulties continuing into adulthood in most cases. Whilst Dyspraxia doesn't affect intelligence it can affect speech and non-motor skills such as organisation, planning, memory and attention. Together these difficulties make it hard for dyspraxic people to carry out everyday activities that others manage easily.

The health and wellbeing benefits of physical activity are well known, but negative experiences of PE, games and sports can have a long-lasting impact on dyspraxic people's confidence to take part. This is worrying as inactivity is linked to problems with fitness, weight, physical health and well-being. It is important to find ways to encourage and support dyspraxic people to take part in and enjoy physical activities throughout their lives.

Martial arts are good for dyspraxic people, with benefits for posture, balance, strength and coordination as well as confidence and self-esteem. Dyspraxic people also benefit from the relative stability of the environment in which martial arts take place, compared to activities such as team sports and ball games for example. Repetition and the familiarity of movement sequences are good for dyspraxic people, as well as the supportive, encouraging ethos. Martial arts groups often include people of different ages, so comparing progress with peers is less likely. In the words of one parent *"Karate has without doubt improved my son's balance and coordination. Additionally it has given him a huge boost in confidence and a sense of achievement. Karate is an excellent way of getting fit in a non-competitive way, often a stumbling block for children with dyspraxia."*

You may observe the following:

- Difficulty with balance and maintaining a good posture due to poor core stability
- Difficulty coordinating movements in more than one limb at a time
- Movements can appear 'bigger' than necessary, with some overflow to other parts of the body
- Delay in responding to instructions and organizing the body into the right starting position
- Difficulty following directional instructions (especially left and right) due to problems with spatial awareness
- Takes longer to master new movement sequences
- Tires quickly meaning movements become less fluent and coordinated over time

How you can help

- Ask the individual (or their parents if appropriate) how dyspraxia affects them individually so you can adapt your approach accordingly
- People with dyspraxia can have difficulty translating verbal instructions into movements. If appropriate, provide hand-over-hand guidance to help the person 'feel' the movements until they are mastered. One way of doing this is to use the person to

model the movements for the class, positioning their limbs and facilitating the movements as you do so.

- Allow the individual time to process your instructions and organise their body into the correct position before giving the next instruction
- Position the individual behind someone who is smaller but able to do the moves well, so they have someone to follow
- Place marks on the floor so the individual knows where to stand or which space to return to. Some people with dyspraxia get disorientated in a big space while others tend to move around more than usual because of their poor balance and coordination
- Put markers on the wall to indicate the left and right sides, for example a yellow 'lemon' on the left and a red 'raspberry' on the right
- Sometimes counting and rhythm can help individuals with the timing and sequencing of movements
- Asking people to verbalise the moves as they do them can also help establish the movement patterns for some, but not all dyspraxic people
- Don't tell the individual to 'try harder' – they are already working twice as hard as everyone else.

See also:

[Dyspraxia and my karate Journey \(dyspraxialifemagazine.co.uk\)](http://dyspraxialifemagazine.co.uk)

[Jiu-jitsu and dyspraxia: 'I feel capable and proud that I am finally able to compete' – The Irish Times](#)

Useful links:

[The English Karate Federation: WKF appointed NGB for English Karate](#)

[Karate | Karate England | Open for All](#)

[Official Martial Arts \(nakmas.org.uk\)](http://nakmas.org.uk)

[Home - British Judo](#)

[British Ju-Jitsu Association Governing Body \(bijagb.com\)](http://bijagb.com)

[TAGB Tae Kwon-Do](#)

Further information available from:
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