

# Family Ties



## To Compete Is to Win!

In ATA it's not about wins, but about learning from your performance and working toward improvement. (And making friends, too!) By Olivia Herstein

Competition through athletic events such as Taekwondo tournaments can help kids reap a wide variety of benefits. Obviously there are the physical skills—strength, coordination, flexibility. There is also the self-confidence that comes from standing before a group and saying, “I can do this,” and knowing it—something psychologists call “self-efficacy.” And there’s the development of a healthy attitude, even in a loss. “[It’s useful for] building resiliency, learning

from mistakes, and learning to cope with frustration,” says Dr. Carlin Anderson, a sports psychologist in St. Paul, Minn., who has a research focus on young athletes.

For many Taekwondo families, though, the best benefit to competition is not a shelf full of trophies but a network of friends.

“The biggest positive we’ve felt through the years through ATA competition is the friends we’ve made,” says Sandy Williams, whose 14-year-old son, Hunter, competes

often. “The kids all hang out together, they go to competitions, birthday parties. It truly creates an extended family. There aren’t many sports where you can become friends like that and be humble around each other.”

Travel to regional and national competitions opens the door to countless new friendships, says Hunter, a 3rd Degree Black Belt who trains and teaches at Sage’s ATA Martial Arts in Jackson, Tenn. “With Taekwondo, you’re learning how to defend yourself and make friends at the same time,” he says. “I’ve traveled to a lot of competitions in Florida, California, and all over the country. When you travel, you can meet new people that you never would have before.”

The Williams family also credits ATA competition with helping to develop Hunter’s manners. “We get so many comments on Hunter’s manners, how he says ‘Yes ma’am’ and ‘No ma’am,’” his mom says. “ATA has really taught him to respect other people, and that makes me very proud.”

And of course he’s gained that self-efficacy, as have friends who train and compete with him. “I’ve seen a lot of people who start out very shy, and now they’re very open—they can talk to anyone,” says Hunter, who was enrolled in ATA at age 5 after his doctor suspected that he might have attention deficit disorder. Hunter was soon hooked on Taekwondo. Now he teaches Tiny Tigers, a leadership class, and white, orange, and yellow belt students.

But it’s the competition, his mom says, that has helped instill the value of hard work in Hunter. “He’s at the school every day,” says Sandy. “He takes class, teaches, and he’s here every Saturday. On Sundays, Hunter and his dad, Randy (a Green Belt), practice their XMA.”

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF (LEFT/BOTTOM RIGHT) LIZ KAUFER

Hunter echoes that appreciation for daily practice and family involvement: To improve in competition, it’s important to practice at home—even when students aren’t told to do so, he says.

It’s also important to put any losses in perspective, says Dr. Anderson. “Many aspects of both winning and losing are actually out of your control.” Parents should help a child know that a competition is a measure of a performance at any given moment, “not a reflection of him or her as a person,” Dr. Anderson says.

“For the first two years I was a Black Belt, I would lose every tournament to two kids,” says Hunter. “I knew that if I kept going, my scores would improve.” They did. The World Champ many times over had his most recent big win in Creative Forms at the 2012 ATA Strong Invitational in October.

That perseverance may continue to pay off into adulthood. “He’s in the adult class, and they don’t look down at him as a little child—he has a lot of seniority because he’s a 3rd Degree Black Belt. It makes me think he will be a leader in life and try to do positive things and accept people for who they are.” ATA

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## WHEN COMPETITION DOESN'T WIN

Sometimes competitors—parents and kids both—can get carried away. Avoid these behaviors:

**TRASH TALKING.** Instead, keep speech positive, especially when your opponent isn’t present. “Kids need to speak nicely about each other, even when they’re not around each other,” says ATA parent Sandy Williams.

**BURNOUT.** It’s possible—especially for busy, achieving kids. To combat it, be mindful of how you push. “We know that kids are more prone to it when their parents criticize their performance or have exceedingly high expectations,” says sports psychologist Dr. Carlin Anderson.

**TOO MANY RISKS.** For the right mindset for healthy competition, kids must take risks. But putting a child into something they’re not ready for can be harmful. Dr. Anderson says to back off if there’s lots of anxiety about competing, a lack of motivation to practice, or a flat-out “no.”



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