

The Benefits of Taekwon-Do for those living with Neurodiversity Julie Hasler testing to 5th Degree Black Belt May 2026



“Here I leave Taekwon-Do for mankind as a trace of man of the late 20th Century” General Chong Hon Hi (1918-2002)

I Believe the General intended his gift of Taekwon-Do to enrich the lives of everyone without discrimination or prejudice.

One thing I love about the clubs I have trained at (Taranaki Taekwon-Do & EmpowerU) is their inclusivity, everyone is welcome, no one is excluded. Students have varied abilities & learning styles. Some have an obvious natural talent, while others find it more challenging.

Over the years I have witnessed the instructors’ unfaltering commitment to teaching Taekwon-Do in a way which keeps a diverse range of students engaged and achieving to the best of their ability. I especially respect the way the instructors measure & celebrate each students’ progress based on their individuality, whilst a certain standard must be met for grading, there is a definite acknowledgement of individual challenges, such as a compromised physical ability, due to age, injury etc. As long as the student puts in maximum effort the rewards are life enriching & for many life changing.

With that in mind, a group of people research has shown benefits from participating in Taekwon-Do are those living with neurodiversity.

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a neurodevelopmental condition characterised by challenges in social interaction, communication & repetitive behaviours.

The practice of Taekwon-Do, with its emphasis on discipline, focus and physical coordination offers a unique blend of physical and mental challenges that can be particularly beneficial for individuals with autism.

Physical Benefits of Taekwon-Do for People with Autism

Many people with autism struggle with motor skills and coordination, which can impact their daily lives & overall confidence.

The precise movements required in Taekwon-Do forms & techniques helps refine gross & fine motor skills. Practicing punches, kicks and blocks helps individuals with autism develop better control over their bodies, leading to improved coordination in other area of their lives. Enhanced balance and body awareness are also significant outcomes of Taekwon-Do training. Many people with autism have difficulties with proprioception- the sense of where their body is in space. Through regular practice of stances and movements, they become more attuned to their bodies, improving their balance and special awareness.

Increased strength and flexibility are natural byproducts of consistent Taekwon-Do training. Muscle strength, particularly in the core, legs & arms are built & stretching routines that are often part of the classes also contribute to improved flexibility, which is especially beneficial for individuals with autism who may experience muscle tightness or limited range of motion.

Cognitive and Emotional Benefits

The structured nature of Taekwon-Do training, with its emphasis on following specific sequences of movements & maintaining attention during instruction, helps develop ability to concentrate for extended periods. This improved focus often translates to better performances in other areas of life, for example in school.

Many people with autism, especially children struggle with emotional regulation, experiencing meltdowns or difficulty managing their feelings. The disciplined approach of Taekwon-Do, which often includes breathing exercises & meditation techniques, can help individuals with autism understand and control their emotions. This improved self-regulation can lead to fewer behavioural issues & better social interaction.

Boosted self-esteem & confidence are common outcomes of Taekwon-Do training for people with autism. As they master new techniques & progress through belt rankings, they experience a sense of achievement that can significantly boost their self-confidence. This can have a positive impact on their willingness to try new things & face challenges in other areas of their lives.

Social Skills Development

For many people with autism, social interaction can be challenging. Taekwon-Do classes provide a structured environment where social skills can be practiced & developed in a supportive setting.

Learning to follow instructions & respect authority is a fundamental aspect of Taekwon-Do training. Children learn to listen & follow their instructor's directions, a skill that can translate to improved behaviour in school & home. The hierarchical structure of Taekwon-Do, with its system of belts & ranks, teaches them to respect those in positions of authority.

Practicing social interaction in a structured environment of Taekwon-Do classes is highly valuable for individuals with autism. It allows them the opportunity to interact with their peers & instructors in a controlled setting, & practice social skills such as taking turns, sharing space & appropriate physical contact. It helps them become more comfortable in social situations and develop better social awareness.

Developing teamwork & cooperation skills through partner work teaches people how to work together towards a common goal, fostering a sense of camaraderie and mutual support which people with autistic struggle to experience.

Building friendships is a natural outcome of the shared experience of Taekwon-Do training. For people with autism this is particularly valuable as they often struggle to connect with their peers in other settings. The shared interest in Taekwon-Do provides a foundation for connections & friendships that extend beyond the dojang.

Tips for Instructors

- **Difficulty interpreting body language:** allow the autistic student to have only a few different partners for partner work/sparring so they can become familiar with them.
- **Auditory processing:** autistic students struggle with understanding verbal instructions. Providing a written syllabus with instructions helps.

- **Sensory Overload:** autistic students can become overwhelmed with noise, bright lights, lots of people moving around and, in that moment, may miss the verbal instructions. Sometimes working one to one in a quiet corner for a while may help.
- **Unexpected things:** autistic people can be thrown by unexpected changes, or anything new. Having a routine format for the class helps with this (warm up, stretches, basics, patterns etc).



Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by persistent inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity, which can significantly impact an individual's daily life, academic performance & social relationships. Common symptoms and challenges include Difficulty focusing on tasks. Easily distracted by external stimuli. Trouble organizing & prioritizing activities. Forgetfulness in daily activities. Fidgeting or restlessness. Excessive talking & interrupting others. Difficulty waiting for one's turn.

Physical Benefits of Taekwon-Do for people with ADHD

The physical demands of Taekwon-Do can help satisfy the sensory needs of individuals with ADHD & be an outlet for excessive energy which can help reduce hyperactivity & restlessness. Physical exercise also helps reduce anxiety which is often associated with ADHD.

Cognitive and Emotional Benefits

Taekwon-Do requires intense focus & concentration, which can help people with ADHD develop & strengthen their ability to maintain attention on specific tasks.

The structured nature of Taekwon-Do encourages the development of self-control & self-discipline, skills which are often challenging for people with ADHD.

The complex movements & sequences involved in learning Taekwon-Do can help improve executive function skills, such as planning, organising & decision making, which people with ADHD can struggle with.

The structured training environment & a routine format help people with ADHD to feel grounded & focused.

The identifiable belt system to mark progression helps individuals with ADHD to set and achieve set goals with enhances their motivation.

A sense of accomplishment as Taekwon-Do skills improves boosts self-esteem & confidence which individuals with ADHD often struggle with.

Social Skills Development

The nature of Taekwon-Do practice provides immediate feedback on one's actions, helping individuals with ADHD learn to regulate their behaviour and make quick adjustments, this improves their relationships with others. The group aspect and teamwork help individuals with ADHD to build positive relationships with peers.

Tips for Instructors

- **Interruptions:** Young students with ADHD are more likely to shout out in class which can be distracting for other students & prevent them from hearing the instructor.
A method to avoid interruptions is to have the students count out loud as they do the exercises. This gives them the opportunity to verbalize what they are doing & focus on counting helps them stay on task.
- **Waiting for Turns:** This is difficult for students with ADHD due to their excess energy. Giving them physical challenges to do while they are waiting such as star jumps, holding a plank, helps them feel like they are not waiting at all.
Another strategy is to actually give them more turns. Have the line of students take their turn on the pads, run to the back of the hall &

do 5 push ups, if the student does solid quick push ups, they can get back to the line quickly for another turn. Students with a slower pace do not miss their turn as they go at a speed that is best for them. This strategy rewards speed & serves as a positive reinforcement for excited students.

- **Fidgeting:** One of the best ways to address fidgeting is by assigning a task to the student's hands & feet-how they stand, how & where to hold the hand. By getting into Taekwon-Do stances, helps to avoid fidgeting. Also, repetitive movement in Taekwon-Do helps fulfil the need to fidget.
- **Focus Challenges:** Drink breaks or transition between activities are difficult periods for individuals with ADHD who often start wandering off or lose interest. Assigning them an activity or a task such as getting the mats or pads out, helps to keep them engaged.

In summary participating in Taekwon-Do provides huge benefits for individuals with neurodiversity. Whilst there may be challenges at times for both the students & their instructors, if we do not focus on the diagnosis or the associated behaviours, & instead provide a learning environment where neurodiverse students can experience their symptoms but limit their struggles and enable them to thrive in a structured environment, the lives of both the students & their instructors will be enriched.



References & Readings

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