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## Karate kids: should we be worried about martial arts in pre-schools?

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Some pre-schools and early childhood centres are teaching young children self-defence – but is this ok? Child/self-defence image from [www.shutterstock.com](http://www.shutterstock.com)

When you think of martial arts, you probably think of bare fists and bloodied faces, not a four year-old in a child care centre.

But martial arts and self-defence programs do appear to be growing in popularity in childcare centres and pre-schools. In one case, three and four year-olds at a childcare centre in Melbourne are being taught self-defence techniques based on Krav Maga – a martial art developed by the Israeli military .

While there is some concern about safety and exposing pre-schoolers to violence, martial arts and self-defence can have a place in the physical education of young children, even before they reach primary school.

But this all depends on how it's taught.

Self-defence classes, as with any physical education program for children of this age, can be a fun way to learn new skills and keep active. But there are other dangers here and we must be extremely cautious how martial arts and self defence classes are carried out.

First, we need to ensure that those doing the teaching are qualified, have the necessary training and understand the best pedagogy. Pre-schools, childcare centres and parents need to ensure that instructors have the right qualifications and experience to teach these programs.

After all, children learn in different ways and at different rates. They need an environment that is deliberately and skillfully created by the teacher, enabling all abilities amongst the group of children to be inclusively catered for.

We also need to recognise that we're dealing with very impressionable young minds. If they have a good experience (likely their first learning through movement) then it can have a positive effect and help them enjoy a physically active life.

But if the class is not taught carefully or professionally then children can easily be given the wrong impression.

This is where the major dynamic in physical education comes into play – safety. In Japan for example, where martial arts is a mandatory part of the curriculum for older students, there have been serious concerns. In some cases, lessons by unqualified instructors have resulted in injuries and even fatalities.

Yet funnily in Australia safety has been one of the main selling points for self-defence organisations, who argue that students need to protect themselves from predators or bullies.

But is it okay for children to forcefully handle their peers in the name of self-defence? Are they mature enough to identify a self-defence situation from that of child's play?

If martial arts and self-defence are being taught to young children then we need to make sure this is happening for the right reasons and that's part of a wide range of physical activities.

Participating in a variety of physical activities enables children to discover what they enjoy and are good at. It enables them to develop the fundamental motor skills that will lay the foundation for them to continue to enjoy physical activities. After all, punching and kicking, the movements primarily developed through martial arts and self-defence, are important movement skills.

Martial arts and self-defence can supplement an early childhood physical education program only if done in a quality educational manner. But they cannot and should not replace such physical education programs.

Physical activity and sport can be a powerful learning tool where children learn to respect each other and themselves and where they can be proud of their improvements. Undoubtedly self-defence can play a positive role, but parents and educators also need to be aware of the risks.