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Girls Learn How to Defend Themselves with Grace

—By Kristin Butler



Kurukula® girls in action!

<http://babwnews.com/article.php?id=161>

"No!" "Stop!" "Get away from me!" These words exploded against the backdrop of rhythmic music and an occasional giggle, from a small Albany studio one recent Tuesday night. They came from pony-tailed girls practicing "Kurukula" - a new self-defense program designed to build self-confidence, assertiveness, and strength in pre-teen and teen girls.

Named after the Tibetan goddess of empowerment and protection, Kurukula is the brainchild of black-belt martial artist, Dara Connolly. It combines the elements of Self-Defense, Karate and Kung Fu with meditation, role-plays and informal girl-style "rap" sessions to help girls develop their self-esteem and learn how to protect themselves.

"I tried to create a whole different experience just for girls," Connolly said. "Usually self-defense classes are scary, but this is a fun class, a safe space, where girls can learn to feel empowered."

In Kurukula, girls are encouraged to use their innate strengths - their intuition, voice, hips, balance and mind - to avoid and, if needed, escape dangerous situations. Instead of focusing on breaking boards or winning competitions, Connolly directs her students to focus on finding something they feel self-confident about in themselves and building upon it. She also gently coaches girls to confront the societal message that they must always be passive, gentle and quiet.

"I want you to take back your power, protect your body, don't allow anyone to interrupt your space," Connolly told her students as they warmed up with yoga stretches and meditative breathing. "You don't want to use these techniques on your brother or someone who is just annoying you, but it's okay to fight back, to hurt someone if they are going to hurt you."

Kurukula includes all the practical self-defense skills found in traditional karate classes, but the rigid, structured style of normal karate classes is replaced with a more intuitive method that allows the girls to improve at their own pace.

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Students of different levels work together, encouraging and mentoring one another as their skills grow. "My mom encouraged me to try karate when I was 10 to help build my self-confidence," Connolly, soft-spoken at 33, said. She went on to earn a black belt by the time she was 15, and then started to teach younger kids.

But Connolly was very sensitive to the way the militant style intimidated many girls and was convinced that there was a less aggressive way to teach.

After moving to Albany from Connecticut with her husband three years ago, Connolly decided to put her idea to practice by starting "Albany Karate for Kids," a course for both boys and girls that includes tips on preventing

kidnapping but leaves out the traditional yelling from instructors and frequent bruising and bloody noses found in other classes.

In 2004, she decided that she needed to design a separate program just for girls, bringing in meditation, music and opportunities for girls to express their emotions and discuss topics like body image and being a young woman in the world today. She has offered her Kurukula classes at community centers, Boys and Girls Clubs and her studio in Albany.

At a recent session there, tiny Christmas lights framed a mirrored wall and pulsing music created a positive and energetic mood for five Kurukula students. Shouts warning would-be attackers to stay away exploded against the backdrop of the music and an occasional giggle from the pony tailed girls dressed in sweats. They were all at different stages in their training, but that fact didn't adversely affect the flow of the class.

"I know this is a lot of information in a short amount of time," Connolly said as she taught the girls to charge one another, yell, make proper fists, punch hand-held targets, and kick water-filled bags. "But the idea is to do something."

Rebecca, 16, has been training in Kurukula since July. She found out about the classes from her mother, who takes yoga classes from Connolly in the mornings. A basketball player busily preparing for college, Rebecca said her mom wanted her to take Kurukula to help her develop her self-confidence and feel safe. Rebecca's posture was strong, her moves deliberate and clean, and a small smile curled her lips as she threw her teen-aged hips into every sidekick.

"I like the class because it is more private and personal," Rebecca said.

Nissa, 10, had a focus far greater than one would expect from her one month into the program. Her blonde curls bounced and she grinned with enjoyment as she grabbed Connolly's foam sword and charged her teacher with a well-placed backhanded punch.

"I am taking the class because I really wanted to learn how to defend myself," she said.

Pals Madeleine and Sophia, both 13, were there for the first time and giggled self-consciously as they prepared to play attacker and defender. But soon they caught the rhythm and their awkwardness turned to focus, their punches closer to the target and stronger with each try.

"It's a really fun way to learn how to protect yourself verbally and physically. I had no idea self-defense would be this much fun!" Sophia said.

"No!" "Stop!" "Get away from me!" they shouted, their voices ringing off the walls. They were voices to be reckoned with - ones that would surely make the Tibetan goddess proud! *For more information visit*

<http://www.kurukula.org>