

# Learning life skills at Eltham Martial Arts

SPORT and LEISURE

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PHOTOS BY *Eltham Martial Arts*

For people unfamiliar with martial arts, the sport conjures images of a sweaty and smelly gym with aggressive men trying to hurt each other. However, Eltham Martial Arts dojo is anything but that. The sport teaches important life skills for children as young as 4 to adults 60 years of age. Eltham Martial Arts has been teaching these for 22 years. Owner Kiley Baker, mum of 3 and with over 25 years of martial arts experience says, “Sure, there’s kicking, punching and ‘wrestling’ around on the floor, but there’s kids, women and men of all ages doing that alongside each other. There’s a level of assertiveness being built by all participants; however I’ve never felt it to be violent. I encourage interested persons to come along and watch to see how we structure the classes because it is done in a really safe manner.”

The studio runs classes across the martial arts of karate, kickboxing, jiu jitsu, aikido as well as personal training.

Baker says children make up at least half of the studio’s students. “There are a lot of girls in the jiu-jitsu and karate classes as well. Often we get told it’s family friendly, not intimidating and they feel welcome. If it’s not the kids wanting to do it because their friends do, it’s the parents saying they want their kids to have that discipline, for them to be active. Perhaps it’s an option because their kids aren’t into team sports.”

Baker says although learning discipline is one of the main reasons families enrol their children, confidence is the other major difference she sees in students once they start. “It differs for everybody but the change in confidence is huge. When people join and really start getting involved we really do see their confidence grow, particularly within a group environment. Obviously there are health and fitness benefits as well.

“We’ve had reports that kids have been able to use their jiu jitsu to defend others. It’s not a matter of kicking and punching, but the ability to put an aggressor in certain positions or holds to stop them from hurting someone else.”



Other qualities that she sees people pick up when starting martial arts include staying calm under pressure and perseverance, which helps as Baker says, “Things can get difficult sometimes and you’ve got to work hard.

“Even exercises like the breathing we do is helpful. For example, learning to control your breath when you’re getting squashed in jujitsu and learning not to panic.

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“It’s also important for kids to compete and lose and to lose gracefully, and to learn that you just have to go back to the drawing board and train harder.

The gym has recently opened a wellness area consisting of a sauna, ice bathing and breathwork classes for members and as well as to the public. “A lot of those who come to the breath work and cold exposure aren’t members.”

Baker and the team decided to build this wellness area, as breathwork and ice healing are becoming popular healing modalities. “We started ice bathing in tubs last year but we have recently renovated and created a whole wellness area about six months ago. We take members into

the area for meditation and sound healing sometimes after classes, and it also gets used for events such as drumming workshops and men’s groups. It’s a wonderful new space we hope to expand on in the future.

When considering taking up martial arts, Baker says “Not everybody likes physical contact. Lots of people get over that, some don’t. If they have pre-existing conditions or injuries, they need to work on these before starting. We can help as someone rehabs and slowly eases into training”.

Baker says the dojo is able to be as inclusive as possible, as many things can be worked providing it’s safe.

“We had a student, who was not doing so well with his cholesterol, his heart, and then when he started training, everything changed and his doctors were really happy with the changes to his health”.

“If you’re retired and don’t have a lot to focus on, it’s great to have something you’re committed to that you can do a few times a week, apart from the health benefits.”

The centre also has a friendly club community. “We run a lot of social events at the dojo. We just had a spooky karate dress up for Halloween, we have bring-a-plate days and hot chocolate and marshmallow nights.

“Once you’re involved people feel very close. We call it the d o j o family. There’s a good network here.”

