

Mill City Aikido

Youth Program

We look forward to teaching you (or your son or daughter) the art of Aikido. We prepared these notes to help answer some common questions.

Youth and Aikido

Aikido is a martial art, yet Aikido seeks peaceful resolution to conflicts. Aikido techniques enable you to control the aggression of an attacker so as to protect both the attacker and yourself.

Students train in self-defense techniques that allow them to safely control an attacker who is bigger and stronger. We learn respond to our partners and how to roll and fall with safety and grace. The difference between raw strength and power become evident in many ways.

A less visible aspect of Aikido involves techniques to manage and control aggression – both aggression directed at you by others as well as that generated within yourself. Students learn how to use an attacker’s energy to allow them to control an attack, and this serves as a kinesthetic metaphor to practice how to defuse other forms of attack.

Learning Aikido involves teaching your body to do new things. Aikido requires considerable practice, and the rewards for that practice are physical, emotional and intellectual. Dedicated practice develops habits which help students pursue other challenges in school and life that require sustained focus.

Aikido can be practiced for a lifetime. In their teens, students may transition from the youth program to Mill City Aikido’s adult program. Many colleges have Aikido clubs or associated Aikido dojos (schools). Aikido training can be found in most areas of the country and around the world. Knowledge of Aikido gained in our youth program will

provide a solid foundation for training wherever you go on to practice.

Whether students in our youth program continue to practice Aikido or move to other pursuits, they will have learned how to fall and roll and protect their bodies, how to blend with an attack instead of running headlong into it, and how to remain centered and focused. And, all of them will have had a chance to practice turning confusion and frustration into, “Ahh, yes, that’s it!”



A typical class

Aikido classes start with the students lined up, sitting in *seiza* (kneeling) at one end of the mat. The instructor (called the *sensei*) walks out and kneels and bows to the front of the

Enrolling in the Youth Aikido Program

- Students must be at least 7 years of age.
- Students need a practice uniform, called a *gi*.
- A registration form and a liability release must be filled out.
- The first month's dues must be paid: \$60/month for the first student (\$30/month for additional family members).

We offer a free, one-time trial class for students who want to give it a try (requires a liability release).

We meet Tuesdays 5:30-6:30 PM and Saturday mornings 11am to noon.

Schedules can change, so check www.millcityaikido.com for the current schedule.

You can contact the youth program instructors via email at: youth@millcityaikido.com

dojo, then turns and bows to the students (who bow in turn to the *sensei*). The class begins with warm-up exercises (these can include stretches of all the main muscle groups, wrist stretches, balance and breathing exercises, and knee walking). After warm-ups, we practice falling and rolling exercises (called *ukemi* practice).

After warm-up and *ukemi* practice, the *sensei* demonstrates a technique – that is, another instructor or senior student strikes or grabs the *sensei*, and the *sensei* demonstrates a counter to that attack. This technique ends when the attacker has either rolled away or been pinned to the mat by the *sensei*. Students are invited to take (or change) partners and try the technique for themselves. During this paired practice, the *sensei* walks around the class and makes suggestions to students on how they might better perform the technique. After the *sensei* finishes making a suggestion, both the student and partner bow to the *sensei* in thanks for the correction. After a few minutes of practice with a partner, the *sensei* claps his or her hands and the students line up and the *sensei* demonstrates another technique.

Sometimes the *sensei* will tell a story illustrating some aspect of Aikido, sometimes students will be instructed to play a game whose activity will encourage some form of physical or mental development. We usually end class with some form of dodge-ball, which encourages student's awareness and mobility (and is also a lot of fun!).

Class ends as it began, with the students lined up in *seiza* and the *sensei* bowing to the *kamiza* (the front of the mat) and then to the students. The students bow back to the *sensei* and thank the *sensei* for the class. The *sensei* leaves the mat and the students bow to one another and thank their practice partners.

Much of our practice focuses on “open hand” techniques (*taijitsu*, strikes and grabs) but we also practice with *tanto* (wooden knives), *bokken* (wooden practice swords), and *jo* (wooden staffs). Aikido weapon training has become an important part of our practice at Mill City Aikido. We have youth sized *bokken* as well as quite a variety of youth sized *jo*'s.

Before and after class

The period before the class starts is an opportunity to practice Aikido techniques with a friend, or to ask an instructor how to do something that is difficult for you.

After class, we ask that you move off of the mat and on with your day. On Tuesday evenings, an adult class starts immediately after the youth class ends, and so it is particularly important to move swiftly and quietly off of the mat.

Why study a martial art?

What is the point of anyone, youth or adult, in studying a traditional martial art? What relevance does it have in today's hyperactive, violent, media-focused world?

There are many reasons...

- Many people cite self-defense as a reason to study a martial art. Almost all martial arts (including Aikido) require an expert level of skill to protect you from an attacker in a life threatening situation – a level of skill that requires years of focused training. However, a modest amount of Aikido training will allow you to protect yourself from many troublesome but non-lethal attacks – a grab or a strike, or simply a fall. In addition, Aikido gives you the ability to respond to non-lethal attacks with just the amount of force necessary to counter the attack. The Aikido student doesn't have to respond to a grab by punching someone – but instead by cleanly and gently twisting out of the grab. The goal of Aikido is to de-escalate situations, not make them worse.
- People often think martial arts training will give students self-discipline. Certainly, anyone who achieves a significant level of skill in a martial art will have self-discipline. Less clear is a simple causal relationship between studying martial arts and developing high levels of self-discipline. Do people without considerable self-discipline generally drop out of martial arts, leaving behind those with self-discipline to become skilled? Or does participating in a martial art which requires continued long-term practice develop self-discipline that will spill over into the other areas of a student's life? Examples of both can probably be found.
- Skilled martial artists often (though not always) display a number of qualities that most people consider admirable: self-confidence, humility, generosity, seriousness, understanding, and serenity. Does participating in a martial art cause one to acquire these qualities? There are certainly aspects of all martial arts that go well beyond the techniques that are taught – at advanced levels there is as much “inner” work as there is “outer” technique. Aikido practice allows us to explore conflict and our reactions, both physical and emotional, to the emergence

and flow of that conflict. For some of us, what we learn becomes integrated with our character.

Behavior in the dojo

Aikido techniques are powerful and can be dangerous (particularly during the learning process). In the dojo we seek to create an environment where people can *learn Aikido safely*. An attitude of respect and focus is



required on the mat in order to participate in training.

We identify four key aspects of behavior:

Safety. Every student is responsible for safety; for themselves, their partner, and for other students. This means (at a minimum):

- wait until your partner is ready before attacking
- attack your partner cleanly with the correct attack using appropriate force
- make sure that your partner will not run into anyone else when you throw them
- use the minimal force necessary to execute a technique, and never attempt to injure your partner
- keep your hands and feet to yourself when not specifically practicing an Aikido technique, particularly before and after class

- get up off the mat quickly after being thrown (lying down on the mat is very risky)
- enter or leave the mat only with the explicit permission of an instructor
- bring objects (ball, weapon, etc.) onto the mat only with express permission of an instructor
- keep fingernails and toenails short, and hands and feet clean
- leave jewelry (for example, earrings, watches, bracelets, necklaces, rings) off the mat

Attentiveness. Every student needs to pay attention; first to the instructors, second to their partner, third to the environment on the mat. By sitting in *seiza* (kneeling) you show that you are focused and prepared to listen. Please practice looking at the instructor when they are talking to you.

Focus. Every student must work on the assigned technique during practice. It is particularly important to stay with your partner and continue to work on the techniques even if you or your partner have difficulty executing the moves. Chatting during class does not reflect focus on the techniques.

Respect. Every student must treat all others with respect. This means:

- do what the instructors ask you to do
- work with partners – both more and less advanced than you are
- allow other students to be attentive (do not distract other students)
- take turns
- sit properly in *seiza*; avoid slouching against walls, sprawling on the mat
- leave your shoes in the rack by the door – shoes are not allowed in the dojo
- wear a clean uniform and keep a clean body
- keep your voice low

It is our goal to create a relaxed, friendly and safe and impose the minimum structure necessary for the students to be able to *practice Aikido safely*. The behaviors listed above constitute that minimum structure.

Exceptions

To ensure that all students will have a chance to learn, we have established a few simple procedures.

1. **Age:** Due to motor and cognitive development stages, any student under seven (7) years of age will spend their first month in the dojo under evaluation. We want to make sure the student has a sufficient attention span and motor coordination to benefit from Aikido instruction. At the end of the evaluation month the youth program instructors will initiate a dialog with the student's parents and decide if the student will be able to benefit from our classes in Aikido.
2. **Behavior:** If at any point a student exhibits unacceptable behaviors that they will not or cannot change, the youth program instructors will approach the parent, detail the behavioral problems, and put the student on a 2 week probation period. The youth program instructors are volunteers from all walks of life who love Aikido and who love teaching. They are not behavioral therapists and cannot solve behavioral problems or give professional advice. We ask parents to seek outside help if they feel their children would benefit from such attention. After a probation period the student may either:
 - a) be asked to leave the program indefinitely
 - b) be asked to take a short leave of absence.
 - c) simply return to their previous status.

In cases b) and c) students are under a "3 strike" policy, should their problems recur. This is to say that if their behavior fails to meet the minimum standards

three times, they will be asked to leave the program indefinitely.

Competition

Aikido, as practiced at Mill City, does not sanction matches or sparring. When working together, both partners are trying to learn Aikido. One partner attacks, the other defends (and then they switch roles). They are only in temporary opposition and are partners working together to find out what does and does not work. Aikido practice is not the place to hone your competitive spirit, but rather a laboratory to practice recovering cooperation and harmony.

Rank and belt colors

As in most martial arts, Aikido has a variety of ranks for adult students of Aikido.

Adults move through the ranks from 5th *kyu* to 4th *kyu* and so on to 1st *kyu*. After 1st *kyu* comes *shodan*, also known as 1st degree black belt. After *shodan* the numbers go up again, to 2nd degree black belt (or *nidan*), then 3rd degree black belt (*sandan*), and so on. In our dojo adults do not wear colored belts prior to 2nd and 1st *kyu*, where adult students wear brown belts.

In the youth program, we extend the *kyu* ranks and introduce colored belts: 10th *kyu* – yellow belt, 9th *kyu* orange, 8th *kyu* green, 7th *kyu* blue, 6th *kyu* purple, 5th *kyu* brown, 4th *kyu* brown 1 white stripe, 3rd *kyu* brown 2 white stripes, 2nd *kyu* red, 1st *kyu* red w/black band.

Testing and promotion

We test for rank promotion twice yearly, in the spring and the fall. Not every student will test during every test period, especially as students reach the more senior ranks. A month or so prior to testing the instructors will discuss testing with each student (and sometimes with their parents).

Preparing for a test tends to shift many students from passive participants attending a regular class to a more active learning style,

as there are specific techniques that they wish to master for the test. We treasure the times when a student comes up to an instructor before or after class and asks to be taught or corrected on a particular technique for a test. Testing places the student under a different kind of stress from a regular class, and part of the goal of Aikido is to practice equanimity and focus under situations of varying stress.

Ultimately, preparing for the twice-yearly tests focuses all of us, students and instructors alike, on the fundamentals – the core of our practice. Whether a student is testing themselves or helping prepare others students for testing, the period before the tests is a period of heightened awareness for everyone.

When test time comes around, the instructors will decide which students will test based on some combination of their overall level of skill, their attitude, and their attendance. One of the instructors will give the student a sheet containing the specific techniques, questions, and in some cases written essays that constitute the test they will be asked to take. Those students who are not testing during this period are expected to help prepare the other students for their tests. Aikido is a shared endeavor requiring a skilled partner in order to learn the techniques and we expect a great deal from partners as well as those being tested.

A student should always ensure that they know the moves required for their upcoming test, and a wise student will ensure that they recall the techniques from their previous tests. We revised the test standards a few years ago, and rarely test students for more than the next step. We may however ask for techniques not listed on their test sheet – especially for the higher ranking students.

We do not skip students over levels, even those students who show unusual promise. The ranks are based not only on raw ability to perform the techniques correctly, but also on attitude and attendance as well as a variety of intangible factors. Students of similar ability frequently end up in the same rank,

but this is not always the case since visible ability to execute the techniques is not the sole measure of rank.

We do not hurry students through the ranks and belts. Each test provides an opportunity to learn, and more importantly, to learn how to learn. There will always be another test for which the student can prepare, and another one after that.

Transition to the adult program

At the level of 5th *kyu*, the youth program tests begin to overlap with the adult program tests. At that point students are being tested on the same techniques as the adults of the same level, though typically not to quite the same standards. We have tests that mirror the adult tests from 5th *kyu* through 1st *kyu* and we even have defined a youth Shodan test, though to date nobody has achieved this rank in the youth program. Students should expect to repeat some tests after transition into the adult program that they have already “passed” in the youth program.

Students from the youth program can transition into the adult program at any time that they are physically and emotionally ready to do so. There is no fixed formula for the transition into the adult program, for each student is an individual with his or her own strengths and weaknesses. This transition frequently comes at a difficult time in a student’s life, often during adolescence, when there are many other demands on their time and concerns in their life – all of which complicates something that would seem straightforward. The instructors of the children’s program will consult with the student, student’s parents, as well as senior members of the dojo adult teaching staff to try and make this transition as smooth as possible for each student who reaches this point.

Frustration (or, Why go to class today?)

Most students (at every age) find the study of Aikido extremely frustrating at one time or



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another. Part of why we study Aikido is to have an opportunity to practice moving through these periods of frustration without losing our motivation.

Every student undergoes cycles in his or her training. Sometimes they are learning quickly and it is all “coming together” in a very satisfying way. At other times, nothing seems to go right, the other students are a pain, the instructors have it in for them, and class seems a complete waste of time. It is important to realize that we *all* go through these cycles in our training. We can either use them as an opportunity to say, “yes, this is one of those times when training is difficult” and continue to train, or we can use these low periods as an opportunity to move to another activity which promises us less frustration. However, as the Zen phrase goes: “wherever we go, there we are.” We will always find low periods in any extended practice. It is in the low periods of our practice that we are offered one of the greatest opportunities to be gained from the practice of Aikido, since it is during these times that we are offered the opportunity to grow beyond our usual and customary approach to the challenges that life presents us.

Learning Aikido is, at times, complicated, frustrating, and difficult. This is true for every one of us, no matter our age. The youth look at the adults and say “If only I were as big and strong as they are, I could do this easily.” The adults look at the youth and say “If only I had started Aikido when I was their age, how easy it would be for me now.”

We all struggle with the next level of our training, and most of us think that it is easier for the other students. It isn't – the next level of our training is difficult for all of us.

Ultimately, the biggest obstacles to overcome in Aikido are those inside of us that would have us stop training. There is always a reason not to attend the next practice session. The challenge, then, is to train anyway.

How to learn Aikido: Observation

Aikido is taught, in large part, by an instructor demonstrating a technique several times from several directions, and then having students pair up as partners and practice the technique themselves. In the early days of Aikido, few words were spoken about the technique being shown – the key aspects of what made the technique work were not pointed out. Students were required to “steal” the techniques from the instructor.

In contrast, we talk about and demonstrate what does and doesn't work at some length. Still, in order to learn Aikido in our classes, students need to practice *active observation* – they need to focus their attention on the demonstration with the intent of learning all that can be learned from it. Students must watch not only the hand motions necessary for the technique, but also the foot positions – ideally they will also be aware of the hip motions of the instructor demonstrating the technique. Part of what a student will learn in Aikido is how to see and observe.

Parents

We have a few requests for parents, in order to allow the class to run smoothly :

- We encourage parents to bring students (particularly the younger ones) to and from the dojo already dressed in their *gi*.
- Parents may drop students off and leave for the hour, if they desire. Students are expected to be on time, and likewise, prompt pickup is mandatory.

- We encourage parents to stay and observe the class, and ask that you do so in a quiet and respectful manner. Eating is not permitted in the dojo, except during special events. Parents' (and siblings') shoes must be left in the shoe rack at the door. Parents should not attempt to coach their children during class. Most children have trouble focusing on their partner if their parent is interacting with them in any way while they are on the mat.
- Parents who are enrolled in the adult Aikido program are encouraged to join the youth classes as assistant instructors. Please contact one of the instructors to discuss this possibility.
- Please review the section on “Behavior in the dojo” with your child prior to the first class, and as often as seems necessary thereafter.
- Students need a practice uniform, called a *gi*. Either the karate style or the judo style can be worn. The karate style is thinner and, thus, less expensive. Both styles shrink considerably and will usually lose 2-3 inches in arm and leg length. If you have a white *gi* from another martial art, you can probably use it for our program (check with an instructor). A common problem is that the pant legs and sleeves are too *long*. If your child's pant legs cover her/his feet, please hem the pants so that your child doesn't trip and fall. The sleeves of the jacket should not cover your child's hands. Your child will have a safer and more enjoyable time in class with shorter rather than longer pant legs and jacket sleeves.

Thank you

There is always something to learn on the mat when doing Aikido, and while we are teaching Aikido we are learning many things ourselves. We want you to know how very much we value the opportunity to be learning those things from each of you. Every one we

work with has something very unique and special to teach us and one of our goals is to try to give back to the students as much as they have given to us.

Respectfully,

Kim Kinnear & Jeremy Ahouse
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