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(Photo by Will Funk)

Tiny Tots Judo: Small People, Big Judo

by Tony Farah

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When my 2 children and I began judo about 12 years ago our club like many others started enrollment for kids at age 6. At some tournaments I might see couple of 5 years old competing. After asking around why clubs do not enroll kids at younger ages, I heard all the possible reasons. Judo is too technical, it is physically demanding, it could be dangerous for young kids.

I did not buy into that so about 5 years ago, I approached our Head Sensei Gary Goltz with the idea to teach judo to kids as young as 3 years old. Anyone who knows Sensei Goltz learns quickly that he would not stop at anything to help and promote judo. His instructions to me were simple "create a program that will instill the love of judo in these kids so much that parents will use judo to reward good behavior or as a privilege that can be taken away as a reprimand."

The program has been a great success and today we average about 40 kids a session from ages 3 to 6.

Recipe

The recipe for a successful Tiny Tots Judo Program is simple...

Make sure the program is fun. This starts with the instructors and assistants that enjoy being around little kids, have lots of patience, are able to communicate at their level, build a good rapport while maintaining authority. My choice for a second instructor was my daughter [Ashton](#). She started teaching with me at the age of 18. Kids and parents love her. She is also an inspiration to little girls who want to achieve a black belt someday.

Use games for warm-ups, and drills. We start our warm ups with imitating animals: duck walk, small rabbit hops, big frog leaps, monkey walks, alligator walks, etc. Each designed to strengthen a core muscle. Be warned: Use the correct animal name/walk combination or get ready to be rebuked by these little kids as they each demonstrate what the walk should look like. Throw in a little activity where they get to yell and scream "KIAI" as loud as they can. It is always a good excitement builder.



For instance if you want to teach "The Guard", play Sharks and Penguins. To teach "Turn Overs", play bull dogs. To emphasize moving around with a partner and controlling him, play "Dodge Ball" or "Snakes Pit". There are lots of resources for games, be creative and don't be hesitant to experiment.

Simplify instructions. Avoid walking around the mat with thumbs stuck in your belt, shouting orders and instructions. Instead explain falls, throws, holds, and principles with terminology a 3 year old will understand. Ultimately the kids learn by discovering what works and being corrected while trying rather than by following the instructions or even demonstrations.

For example, to teach o-goshi we tell the class to "grab your partner with the judo grip. Pull your partner up on his toes like a ballerina. Give your partner a big hug around the waist and say moo like a cow. Turn and look where you partner is looking. Bow to throw your partner and hold their arm while they take a breakfall."

After explaining and showing a throw, I like the kids to do the throw with the instructors and assistants. That allows one on one instruction and the opportunity to add details as needed. After couple of classes practicing the throw the kids will then start trying it on each other.

Create routines the kids will get familiar and comfortable with.

Modifying drills too often will cause the kids to get confused and frustrated. Small and incremental refinements with lots of repetitions will help to motivate the kids. Remember each of them learns with different levels of athleticism and coordination. Make sure not to compare their performances. Instead, track each one individually and be sure to mention any progress they make. I can't count the number of times kids shouted my name, and with the biggest smile of pride on their faces to show me how they can now do what they were struggling with previously.

Just as in life, competition is an integral part of judo. I have heard the competition argument over and over again. Clubs labeled as either competitive or recreational. What I've come to realize is that the competitive or recreational aspect of judo is not determined by the club as much as by the judoka. Offering these young kids the opportunity to experience competition is critical to them loving and appreciating the sport. After each 3 month session we do a Tiny Tots tournament for our 2 classes.



The tournament is optional and free. We average over 90% participation. Parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, neighbors are invited.

The atmosphere is incredible and always a surprise to the instructors and the parents to see how much these kids learned. Pools are divided into a maximum of 3 to 4 players and everyone a 1st, 2nd or 3rd place award.



The idea is no one should leave the tournament disappointed for not placing. We are awarding the courage to participate and at the same time encouraging them to do their best to get the best award possible.



Awards do not have to be fancy and expensive. You can find some nice picture frames at your local 99¢ store, print your own certificate and place it in the frame. Unlike most common beliefs, I never had a single student drop out of the program because of competition. On the contrary several parents have informed me that their kid was about to quit judo until they participated in the tournament. The atmosphere and excitement of the competition is what got their kid hooked.



Success Stories

In the February issue of Growing Judo, Mark Lonsdale wrote a great article regarding Recruitment and Retention Practices. To this end the Tiny Tots program has turned into a farm team for our regular judo classes. Several of the kids who started in Tiny Tots have continued on to our Junior Judo Program. As per the mission of the Tiny Tots Program, these kids have the love of judo in them. Most of these kids compete on a regular basis, and despite their still young age (7-9 years old now) they are a great example to others and always come back to Tiny Tots help out. It's "Jita Kyoei" in action.

Parents have seen firsthand the effects of discipline, and the confidence that judo instills in their kids which is the best antidote for bullying. This leads to another by-product of Tiny Tots program which is the enrollment of older siblings in our Junior Judo Program. Once they see their younger siblings enjoying a good judo practice, they can not sit still. Many of them start doing the exercises on the side as the class goes on and soon enough they ask their parents to enroll them too.

In addition, since most of the Tiny Tots class parents are in their mid-20 to early 30's they are still a good age to start in judo. After watching for a session or two, the judo bug often bites them as it did me when my teenagers started judo. Several of these parents have joined our Teen/Adult Judo Program. Some have stuck with it even achieving black belt ranks and becoming great contributors to the club. Other parents have become big supporters, always volunteering to assist at tournaments and other activities.

Another byproduct of our Tiny Tots Judo Program is our Kid Safe Seminars where we teach safety tips, awareness, and avoidance. These regular two-hour seminars attract a dozen or so children and their parents and are a great opportunity to incite interest in our judo programs. The Kid Safe Seminars satisfy the requirements for the Safety Award in Girl Scouts, Brownies, and Daisies. Following our most recent seminar we had five new students signed up for Tiny Tots!

Free Marketing and PR

Our Tiny Tots Judo Program has generated lots of PR for our club and judo in general. The program recently made the cover of the City of Claremont recreational activities brochure which is gets distributed to thousands of homes in the local area.

Yesterday we had our Tiny Tots Tournament to which our resident PR genius, Sensei Goltz, invited the Mayor, Chief of Police, Senior Managers from Claremont Human Services, as well as a reporter and photographer from The Daily Bulletin, our local newspaper. Many of the parents and kids interviewed gave the Daily Bulletin reporter positive testimonials for his story that's due to come out just in time for our Spring Session.

Another highlight of the event was our club received a Certificate of Appreciation from the Mayor of Claremont, San Pedroza.



Final Thought

Another sign of the success of the Tiny Tots Judo Program is that since its inception GTMA our uniform supplier has to expand its product line to now include size #0000 in addition to size #000 which was the smallest size gi they carried. Who knows perhaps in the future we'll need them to make us size #00000! (They do make that size now!!!)

About the Author

Tony Farah is (now) a Yodan – 4th Degree Black Belt at [Goltz Judo](#) in Claremont, CA. Tony never won any national or international tournaments nor hold any fancy titles. He is a dad, who got hooked on judo about 12 years ago thanks to his daughter [Ashton](#) and son [Matthew](#) are (now) both Sandans – 3rd Degree Black Belts who (today) run their own club ([Strong Roots Judo](#)) in Fontana. Tony works as an IT manager for Mercury Insurance. You can contact him via his e-mail at tony@farahfamily.com.



[Daily Bulletin Article on Goltz Judo's Tiny Tots Tournament, 3-12](#)

[Claremont Courier Article on Goltz Judo's Tiny Tots Program, 2-15](#)