

Karate grandma, 80, teaches kids the chops — and their confidence pops

By Kansas City Star, adapted by Newsela staff on 04.07.15

Word Count **620**



Helen Dugan, owner of karate school Champs Achievers, shows a defensive move to 7-year-old Brayden Bond in Lenexa, Kansas, March 9, 2015. The 80-year-old grandmother is a third-degree black belt and teaches karate classes exclusively to people with special needs. Photo: Allison Long/Kansas City Star/TNS

Helen Dugan has gray hair, wrinkles and 17 great-grandchildren. She is also a third-degree black belt in American karate.

Now 80 years old, she can still break boards with her feet.

“Want to know what my grandsons say about me?” she says as a smile sneaks across her face. They say, “My grandma can beat up your dad!”

Laugh if you want, but this karate grandma is no joke.

Karate Kids Surprise Their Parents

For 25 years, Dugan has used her karate skills to teach students often turned away by others. Her nonprofit martial arts school is called Champs Achievers. It teaches martial arts to people with special needs. About 20 of her 60 students

are on the autism spectrum. They have problems with social skills. Some of her students have attention deficit disorder (ADD), which makes it hard for them to pay attention. Other students have hearing and vision problems.

“Helen is an amazing woman,” said Angela Degnan. Her 3-year-old son, Aiden, began taking lessons in October. “She has dedicated her life to children with special needs. My son has special needs, and it’s been a wonderful experience for him.”

Karate and other martial arts can improve concentration and balance. They build independence and self-esteem.

Serena Faith's 7-year-old son takes lessons from Dugan. “I’m 35, and I can’t do a third of what she does,” Faith said. “My goal in life is to be Helen when I get to be her age.”

A Late Start

Dugan began learning karate when she was about 47. She took lessons with her two sons. Her kids lasted four years, but she stuck with it.

Karate strengthened her body and mind. It gave her the self-esteem she had lost in childhood. Dugan founded her own karate school in hopes of helping others become stronger.

You see, Dugan’s students are not the only ones with a disability.

As a child, Dugan failed many of her classes. She was creative. Yet, she could not do math and had problems remembering. She struggled to learn in the same way other kids learned. She thought she was dumb.

It was not until she was in high school that Dugan realized she had a good brain. She just had to learn things in her own way.

She worked hard to get into a nursing school. After graduation, she got a job at a hospital and then married her husband, Barney.

Dugan still struggles with “face blindness.” This condition makes it difficult, if not impossible, to recognize faces, even of friends and family.

She has trouble even remembering the faces of her students.

The Thrill Of "Their First Belt"

Dugan's first student was Michael Payne, who hurt his head. Michael is the son of one of her karate teachers. He had balance and vision problems.

“Back then, there wasn’t anybody doing this,” said Michael’s mom, Patti Payne. “It was Helen who thought about helping these people. Nobody taught her how to do it.”

In time, the training improved Michael's balance, self-esteem and life.

"When you see a child get their first belt?" Dugan said. "When you see them get their first trophy? Remember, these are kids who don't get awards. They don't get trophies, and when you see the expression on their face when they get their first trophy, it's such a self-esteem builder."

In a recent class, a group of children lined up on a red-and-blue mat. Up above hung karate belts in 14 colors. There were white signs that read "respect," "attitude," "cleanliness" and "honesty."

As she heads into her 81st year of living, Dugan hopes to help special needs kids as long as she can.

"Put me with the kids," she said. "They keep you young."

Quiz

- 1 What would be another good title for the section "A Late Start"?
 - (A) "Karate Instructor Becomes A Nurse"
 - (B) "Dugan Learns A Lot And Helps Herself Through Karate"
 - (C) "Dugan Dreams Of Her Own Karate School"
 - (D) "Karate Causes Trouble Remembering Faces"

- 2 Read the article and select the main idea of the article.
 - (A) Helen Dugan used her knowledge of karate to start a martial arts school for children and their parents.
 - (B) Helen Dugan created a martial arts school to help young children build concentration and do better in school.
 - (C) Helen Dugan taught martial arts to special needs students for many years. She has now stopped teaching because she is old.
 - (D) Helen Dugan's early learning problems inspired her to help special needs students and opened a martial arts school to teach them karate.

- 3 Based on the entire article, what is the main goal of Helen Dugan's school, Champs Achievers?
 - (A) to help students with special needs win trophies and awards in martial arts
 - (B) to teach martial arts to children with special needs
 - (C) to help Dugan regain her self-esteem and confidence
 - (D) to help Dugan relive her childhood by working closely with all types of kids

- 4 Select the paragraph from the section "Karate Kids Surprise Their Parents" that describes the effect of martial arts training.

Answer Key

- 1 What would be another good title for the section "A Late Start"?
- (A) "Karate Instructor Becomes A Nurse"
 - (B) "Dugan Learns A Lot And Helps Herself Through Karate"**
 - (C) "Dugan Dreams Of Her Own Karate School"
 - (D) "Karate Causes Trouble Remembering Faces"
- 2 Read the article and select the main idea of the article.
- (A) Helen Dugan used her knowledge of karate to start a martial arts school for children and their parents.
 - (B) Helen Dugan created a martial arts school to help young children build concentration and do better in school.
 - (C) Helen Dugan taught martial arts to special needs students for many years. She has now stopped teaching because she is old.
 - (D) Helen Dugan's early learning problems inspired her to help special needs students and opened a martial arts school to teach them karate.**
- 3 Based on the entire article, what is the main goal of Helen Dugan's school, Champs Achievers?
- (A) to help students with special needs win trophies and awards in martial arts
 - (B) to teach martial arts to children with special needs**
 - (C) to help Dugan regain her self-esteem and confidence
 - (D) to help Dugan relive her childhood by working closely with all types of kids
- 4 Select the paragraph from the section "Karate Kids Surprise Their Parents" that describes the effect of martial arts training.
- Paragraph 6:**
Karate and other martial arts can improve concentration and balance. They build independence and self-esteem.