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Gina M. Potenza , Ferman Konukman , Jong-Hoon Yu & Hayrettin Gümüřdađ

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# Teaching Self-Defense to Middle School Students in Physical Education

Gina M. Potenza

Ferman Konukman

Jong-Hoon Yu

Hayrettin Gümüşdağ

**T**he widespread epidemic of bullying seen in schools today is a serious cause for concern. It has been reported that 1 in every 10 middle-school-age students in the United States is being bullied weekly (S. Brown, Birch, & Kancherla, 2005). Schools have taken steps to raise awareness about bullying by implementing programs that include character-building concepts to aid in minimizing school violence (Gibone & Manson, 2010). But what can educators do to teach tolerance among students while at the same time help limit physical violence?

Since bullying can lead to physical confrontations, it is important for students to know that they can defend themselves when they are confronted with harmful situations without having to fight. Self-defense is to be used only when an individual feels that there is direct harm to their physical well-being or life. Many times students at the middle-school level do not know how to deescalate a confrontational situation and may act out by using a physical response to resolve the conflict (S. Brown et al., 2005). However, students need to realize that there are other ways to protect themselves without striking another individual, and that if physical contact is needed, it is to be used only as a last resort.

There are many benefits to teaching self-defense in school curriculums, such as protecting students, establishing awareness, developing strong self-discipline, developing physical skills and hands-on experience, improving

the ability to fight back, developing self-confidence, improving communication skills, improving fitness, and developing mental strategies (Chen, 2011). In addition, Banks (2010) stated that the integration of a self-defense unit in secondary physical education programs is becoming more common in 21st-century curricula because the threats of crime to oneself, one's belongings, or the home are becoming more prevalent. Still, not many physical education programs teach self-defense as a unit within their curriculum because there are teachers and administrators who fear that doing so will promote violence in schools.

Self-defense content can be very informative to middle-school students and can provide them with proper instruction as to how to protect themselves (D. Brown & Johnson, 2000). Thus, teaching students the proper way of using self-defense techniques should actually help to limit the amount of violence in schools (Banks, 2010). Teachers, administrators, and students can all benefit from the skills that are taught in a self-defense unit. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to give teachers tips that will help them to be more effective in teaching self-defense to middle-school students in physical education and to better establish a productive learning environment for this important lifelong skill.

## The Learning Environment

One of the most essential things to remember when teaching self-defense is to first create a proper learning environment that is appropriate for

middle-school students. It can be very easy to lose control of a class when teaching this type of information due to the range of maturity among students in this age group. Some middle-school students may act as though they already know what to do in any given situation, while others may shy away to avoid any kind of confrontation whether it is a real conflict or just a scenario. Making sure that the students feel safe is critical.

Students need to understand that the misuse of the skills taught in class can be harmful to others and will not be tolerated. Each class varies and has its own unique characteristics and chemistry. Therefore, creating a safe and comfortable environment presents different challenges for each group of students.

## Lesson Presentation

Students at this age level may surprise the teacher with the amount of information they may or may not already know about the topic of self-defense. Students come from different backgrounds where they may have experienced some form of negative conflict, so it is important to be sensitive and realistic about how to approach topics on physical or mental abuse. In order to create a safe and comfortable environment, the teacher should immediately set the tone for this discussion. These topics are not easy for some individuals to talk about, but they do need to be addressed.

One way to begin is to let the students guide the discussion. The teacher can ask students what they already know about the subject: what is self-defense, when is

it appropriate to use it, and why do we use it when necessary. The lesson presentation will allow the teacher to stress the importance of defending oneself when someone is inflicting harm and help the students understand the differences between a verbal and physical confrontation. There should be an open discussion about tolerance and how it relates to bullying. The teacher should be sure that students have a clear understanding of these topics before self-defense techniques are introduced. Students should always know that they must do their best to prevent a confrontational situation verbally, before it turns physical.

### A Good Teaching Progression

Teaching the lessons in the right progression is important when teaching self-defense to middle-school students. The first lesson should really focus on what self-defense is and why it is important, and it should make students aware of how imperative it is to not misuse the skills taught. In addition, the students should be informed of the many dangers they may encounter. One of the key things to discuss on the first day of the unit is the importance of awareness and knowing one's surroundings. The teacher could ask students' questions like "Who do you see around you?," "Are you alone or with a group?," or "If the environment you're in is making you uncomfortable, what should you do?"

Today technology is prevalent among youth. Students are almost always wearing their iPod or looking down as they walk while texting on their cell phone. Students need to be aware that when they disconnect from their environment so they cannot hear or see what is going on around them, they can be an easy target for whoever may be looking to cause them harm. By understanding how to interact with their surroundings they may be able to remove themselves from a threatening situation.

At this age level students are also starting to experience parties, drugs, alcohol, and many other aspects that involve social interactions with their peers. It is important to make sure they are aware of the potential dangers that are

associated with these types of environments. These topics are often discussed in the students' health classes and may need to be only briefly addressed. Collaborating with health teachers in the school building may prove helpful in determining whether or not this is an area that needs to be addressed further.

After informing the class about potentially dangerous settings and social interactions, activities can be introduced that teach the students different skills associated with self-defense. At this age level the skills taught should not be associated with defending against a weapon, but rather focus on how to defend oneself against an attacker without a weapon. This will build a foundation of basic self-defense techniques, and students can progress to more advanced skills, such as defending against a weapon, as they advance in grade level.

Below are three examples of situations students may encounter on a school campus and the skills needed for self-defense. The teacher can stress the importance of balance, not panicking, the element of surprise, and how this awareness can aid during the execution of the self-defense skills being used. An attacker generally chooses victims who they feel are at a disadvantage compared to themselves (D. Brown & Johnson, 2000). That is why it is important for students to understand that the element of surprise can be very helpful to them. Students should also understand that when these skills are used in a real-life scenario they should immediately seek out a responsible adult who can help them with their bullying situation. (The teacher should make sure to stress the significance of not misusing the skills learned so no one is harmed during practice.)

### Activities

These activities teach self-defense skills that will help students to get out of confrontations without having to strike the attacker. Table 1 shows self-defense teaching cues for the three activities described below.

*Pinned Against a Wall.* The following activities will address how to get out of a



situation while being pinned up against a wall or locker. Students will work in pairs, with someone they are comfortable with, to practice the skill. In all scenarios one partner will be the victim and one will be the attacker. The victim will have his or her back against the wall while the attacker grabs the shoulders, applying pressure so the victim cannot move. To get out of this hold, the victim quickly drop straight down to his or her knees and rolls underneath the attackers' arms, either to the right or left, to move away from the situation.

When the victim drops, the attacker will lose balance and fall into the wall, at which time the victim makes their first move. The downward directional change creates a split second of confusion for the attacker and allows the victim the opportunity to quickly get away. Many times when the students act out this drill they may find that the attacker is still holding on to their clothing or shoulders. If this is the case the teacher can introduce an addition: after the victim drops, he or she strikes the groin or solar plexus located at the center of the abdomen where the rib cage meets in order to be released.

*Being Pushed.* This next example describes what to do when the victim is repetitively being pushed. Again the

teacher can stress that balance and the element of surprise are advantages. When asked “What is happening when someone is pushing you?” students should respond that the attacker is moving forward while the victim is being pushed backward. For this skill, when the victim is being pushed they are going to step either to the right or the left,

grab the arms of the attacker and pull them toward the ground as they step aside. The victim’s foot should remain between the attacker’s legs so that they trip as they are going by. For this skill timing is very important. Due to the fact that the attacker is aggressively moving forward, the quick directional change by the victim toward the attacker causes

the attacker to lose balance and fall to the ground. In this skill the balance and momentum of the attacker are used to the victim’s advantage.

*Being Pulled.* This example will focus on what to do when being pulled by an attacker. For this skill, the attacker is going to grab one of the victim’s wrists and start pulling in toward them. Naturally

**Table 1.**  
**Self-Defense Teaching Cues**

Skill	Verbal Cues	Visual Cues
Being Pinned	<p><i>Victim:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stay calm</li> <li>• Use your balance and their balance</li> <li>• Feet shoulder-width apart</li> <li>• Drop down fast</li> <li>• Roll out to the right or left</li> <li>• Run away</li> </ul> <p><i>Attacker:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Press partner’s shoulders against the wall at a moderate pressure</li> </ul> <p><i>Note: Balance and the element of surprise are important</i></p>	<p><i>Victim:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pressed against the wall</li> <li>• Drops to knees</li> <li>• In a bent position, rolls out to the right or left</li> <li>• Stands up and runs away from attacker</li> </ul> <p><i>Attacker:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hands are on partner’s shoulders</li> <li>• Loses balance</li> <li>• May fall forward toward the wall or follow partner in a downward direction</li> </ul>
Being Pushed	<p><i>Victim:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Timing is important</li> <li>• Step to the left or right</li> <li>• When you step your foot should be between your partner’s legs</li> <li>• Push arms out of the way and grab the top of the arms</li> <li>• As you step past, pull the attacker behind you and step through</li> </ul> <p><i>Attacker:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Push just below the shoulder</li> <li>• Push two or three times for timing</li> <li>• Push at a moderate rate for realistic results</li> </ul> <p><i>Note: Balance and the element of surprise are important</i></p>	<p><i>Victim:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Steps to the right or left</li> <li>• Foot between legs</li> <li>• Grabs and pulls behind</li> <li>• Steps through</li> </ul> <p><i>Attacker:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Steps forward, pushes on the shoulders</li> <li>• Body is leaning forward</li> <li>• Feet are staggered shoulder-width apart or more</li> <li>• Repeats as needed</li> </ul>
Being Pulled	<p><i>Victim:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resist the pull by leaning back</li> <li>• Keep moving your feet</li> <li>• When you are ready, run forward toward your partner</li> <li>• As you run at them push them at the same time</li> <li>• Your hand will be on their shoulder when you push</li> </ul> <p><i>Attacker:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• With both hands grab one of your partner’s wrists</li> <li>• Pull them toward you as hard as you can</li> </ul> <p><i>Note: Balance and the element of surprise is important</i></p>	<p><i>Victim:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resists</li> <li>• Runs toward partner</li> <li>• Pushes</li> <li>• Runs by</li> </ul> <p><i>Attacker:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pulls partner from the wrists</li> <li>• Leans backward</li> </ul>



the victim is going to try to resist the attacker and pull away from them. The “victim” is instructed to continue to pull and resist, but when ready, he or she quickly changes direction and runs toward the attacker. As the victim moves toward the attacker he or she pushes on

to have the knowledge needed to defend themselves during a harmful situation and to feel a sense of empowerment. It has been suggested that regular participation in self-defense and martial arts classes can develop a greater sense of self-control, self-esteem, and self-actualization in students

the attacker’s shoulder to continue to cause a loss of balance. The quick directional change by the victim toward the attacker causes the attacker to lose their balance and fall to the ground. For this skill to work the victim has to resist as much as they can so that the attacker is pulling them and starts to lean back. Once the victim sees the attacker pulling as much as they can and see the change in body position, the victim should make their move.

### Conclusion

Self-defense is a skill that — if used correctly — can allow individuals



(D. Brown & Johnson, 2000). By teaching this material in a physical education setting teachers can properly inform students and provide them with the knowledge base to successfully use and understand the art of self-defense while participating in a safe environment.

It is also important for physical education teachers to research the art of self-defense. They could bring in guest speakers or demonstrators from local martial arts facilities in the area to help aid in the teaching of skills and ensure student safety. The teacher needs to feel comfortable and competent teaching this information to students. It can be risky to present this information in physical education, but this is a lifelong skill that can help to raise awareness about bullying and help to prevent a threatening situation from escalating into something more.

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*Gina M. Potenza is a physical education teacher in the Victor Central School District in Victor, NY. Ferman Konukman (fkonukma@brockport.edu) is a professor in the Department of Kinesiology, Sport Studies & Physical Education at The College at Brockport, State University of New York in Brockport, NY. Jong-Hoon Yu is an assistant professor of physical education in the Department of Education at Glenville State College in Glenville, WV. Hayrettin Gümüşdağ is an assistant professor in the School of Physical Education and Sports at Hitit University in Çorum, Turkey.*