

**Gloucester County Times, The (NJ)**  
**Martial arts become therapy for child with disorder**

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Published: March 24, 2008

For most children, group activities like Little League teams and dance classes are about building a skill and making new friends, but for others like 6-year-old Jonathan Kassal, his after-school martial arts class is crucial therapy for what could be a debilitating disorder.

Three times a week, Jonathan attends a mixed martial arts class at Underground Fitness in Washington Township that not only helps to keep his small frame in shape, but helps him cope with Asperger's disorder, a social condition his mother Maria Kassal of Washington Township refers to as 'the other autism.'

"It is martial arts combined with fitness, and at the same time, working on character development," said Underground Fitness owner and instructor Mark Moore.

The program, called **DEFY** (defense and exercise for youths), teaches self-defense techniques derived from boxing, kick-boxing and grappling combined with basic fitness that Moore said helps to improve children's self-confidence and self-control.

Jonathan is the only child at the school with Asperger's disorder. Although Underground Fitness does take children with autism or other mental health issues that can use self-esteem boosting as therapy, Moore said, everyone is welcome.

Asperger's is a high-function form of autism, according to Dr. Daniel LeGoff at the Center for Neurological and Neurodevelopmental Health in Voorhees.

"I call it the other autism because everyone on the news and TV, they all want to give these parents the signs and symptoms with autism," said Maria Kassal.

"Their speech is clear, but they don't want to talk to anybody."

Those with the disorder have intact language function, which sets them apart from most autistic children. Their impairment, however, is with social interactions. They usually have high IQs, like Jonathan's at 135, but have severe difficulty in social development like relating to fellow schoolchildren and family members. They lack eye contact, and have no understanding of empathy and of others' emotions. People with Asperger's can often say very inappropriate things, according to LeGoff, that may be embarrassing to others; they can have repetitive behavior like requiring the same dish in order to eat a meal, and often have odd, categorized interests like types of automobiles or species of insects.

"These people do not understand other people at all," said LeGoff, one of Jonathan's doctors.

LeGoff said Jonathan "is a cute little guy," but he is hard to read, sometimes with muted facial expressions.

"They do not deal well with frustration or change," LeGoff said. "They are very brittle, fragile people, and don't make friends well."

Jonathan has been officially diagnosed with Asperger's disorder for three years, according to his mother Maria Kassal. Although they have tried other means of therapy, including social developmental group therapies like Lego Club with Dr. LeGoff in Voorhees, the mixed martial arts class at Underground Fitness is the only class that has helped Jonathan work through his symptoms of Asperger's disorder.

"It is amazing to see the difference in him," said Maria Kassal.

According to his mother, Jonathan could not sustain eye contact while talking to someone. Because, she said, Moore does not let the children in the class talk to him without looking at him, Jonathan's eye contact, as well as self-confidence and self-control, has improved dramatically.

"Martial arts and swimming are two (activities) that our kids do very well at," said LeGoff.

Team sports like soccer, he said, are all about expectations of skill performance. Children with Asperger's disorder do not understand sports, are often very clumsy, and can get frustrated when they are not performing on the same level as other normal children their age.

"The biggest thing with martial arts is about self-improvement," said Moore. "So it doesn't matter where they are, it is all about them achieving at their own pace."

Jonathan, however, is not the only child with a form of autism who has experienced results with martial arts classes at Underground Fitness.

Twelve-year-old Antar Leek, chaperoned at the class by his grandparents Chuck and Helen Simmons of Washington Township, has autism. Antar is a martial arts orange belt, and has been attending classes at Underground Fitness three times a week for nearly a year. When asked why he comes to Underground, he looked away and said in a whisper, "Jackie Chan."

Although Antar wants to learn fighting tactics like Hollywood martial artist Jackie Chan, his grandfather Chuck Simmons said the classes did more to improve his attention span, and helped Antar to become more focused.

"He (Moore) teaches discipline, and helps the kids as far as their schooling, and how to carry themselves," Simmons said.

When they get a good report card, Antar's grandmother Helen Simmons added, Moore brings it up in the martial arts class, and all the children must applaud each other.

"I think the basic premise of it is that you have to capture their motivation,"

LeGoff said. "Make it a creative social experience that is fun for them."

Despite the initial difficulty in getting Jonathan through the door for his first few classes at Underground Fitness, he recently earned his yellow belt, and can move up to the next level of martial arts.

"His confidence has definitely skyrocketed," Moore said. "Now, when I am asking who wants to go first, he puts his hand up."

For the Kassals, the simple act of raising his hand in a class full of kids is groundbreaking - that breakthrough, Maria said, is "amazing."

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