

Lesson 10: Student Retention

Student retention is one of the most important things in having a good school. Without retention, you will never have a high number of students. Also, without retention, you will never get the critical high belt helpers to make your life easier. In order to get high retention, you first need to know why students might quit:

Note, that often what matters is not the actual situation, but what the student perceives the situation to be. If you care about a student, but don't show it, they may get the idea that you don't care.

- **“Good Enough Training”** – If you are always just going to the bare minimum and never really trying to improve, the students may leave.
- **Unfair or Disrespectful Treatment of Students/Uneven Application of Discipline** – Don't have a “teachers' pet” because all those students who are not your favorites may leave. It's good to have standard punishments, or tiered ones based on age or belt level. For instance, if all black belts who forget their belt have to do 50 pushups, there isn't a problem. However, if some students have to do it and others don't, then you have a problem.
- **Lack/Perceived Lack of Knowledge of Instructor** – If in the bottom of his heart, the student doesn't think that you can make him better, then he is not likely to stay.
- **Personality Clash** – Sometimes, you will just not get along with certain students, or more likely their parents. You should take steps at first to resolve the differences. Try to ignore things, see things from their perspective, etc. However, if after all this, you still don't get along with them, it's best to let them go. One problem student can cause an incredible amount of damage in your school. This will usually be with the instructor, but it could also be a class of two students or two parents. Try to have them in separate classes, or sit down together to talk about it.
- **Failure to Follow Through on Promises** – If you always say you'll help a student, or if you promise to teach the children discipline, then you have to do that. If you don't, then students will lose trust in you and may quit.
- **No Sense of Progress** – If the student spends time and money in training, but doesn't feel like they are getting better, they are not likely to stay. At first, remind them of the progress vs. time graph (found in the KAT handbook) and let them know that the higher they get, the harder it is to progress. Also, usually in the middle belts, students may get unmotivated. Let them know that this is normal, and now is the time that they will learn to follow through on commitments.
- **Not Seeing the Benefits** – Of course, the benefits of martial arts come over time. However, sometimes, a situation can develop where people believe that the training will not help get them the benefits it should. For example, if the instructor is overly-critical, coming to class might be a source of stress rather than a release. You will lose students this way.

- **Injury/Fear of Injury** – These injuries could be from Taekwondo or from outside activities. Also, if someone thinks that they will get hurt, they will be less likely to do those activities. This usually comes up in relation to sparring. To help them avoid fear of injury, make sure that they are doing drills appropriate to their age/skill level/injury. I.e., don't make someone with bad knees do plyometrics.
- **Burnout** – This often goes along with injury. Students sometimes get so excited, that they train a lot. Sometimes, this causes them to put other areas of their life on hold, and then when they get behind in them, they drop out of TKD. Avoid burnout by limiting the training of younger students. Also, make sure all students balance hard training with fun activities and also periods of rest.
- **No Goals** – If the student does not know where they want to go with their training, they will be less likely to remain excited. Set goals together. The belt system provides perfect feedback and a set of goals. Keep setting goals even for those students who are already black belts.
- **Change in Policy/Schedule** – Sometimes, you will need to change the curriculum or schedule. Unfortunately, in a large school, there will be a few people who do not like the new way. Also, many people are naturally resistant to change.
- **Class/Student Mismatch** – This is not usually a problem at KAT, because of the large numbers of classes and flexibility of our schedule. However, sometimes someone is in a class that is too easy or too hard for him. He may become either bored or frustrated. Also, this includes having beginning students spar too soon, especially without proper instruction (i.e., have a “Sparring 101” class).
- **Getting Out of the Routine** – This is often the case when students who seemed to love everything about class suddenly stop coming. It's not that they don't want to be there, but once they stop training for a month or so, they feel almost like they're no longer part of the class or that everyone is ahead of them. They're often high belts who have forgotten their form, maybe after an illness, tough semester, or extended vacation. Now, they feel like they'll embarrass themselves and the school if they come back. Encourage them to start slowly.
- **Moving** – Oftentimes, students will move away and be unable to continue training. Always keep them in contact with the school via emails and newsletters. Also, help them to find a school in their new home. Often, they will still refer people from their old home to join the school.
- **Financial Difficulties** – Sometimes, due to a career change or life event, students may no longer be able to afford training.
- **“Not for them.”** – I include this last one because it is often a reason why students may take a free trial or a 6 week beginner program but not continue. However, due to the amazing number of benefits of martial arts, this one is usually more a case of you, as the instructor, not getting them to understand all of the benefits that they could achieve. Still, sometimes people are at a point in their lives where they do not choose to engage in healthy behaviors, and often nothing can be done to deter them.

In a nationwide research study conducted by **Gary Gabelhouse** for Fairfield Research, they found that of everyone in America who had trained in Taekwondo at one time, 86% had quit. These are the reasons that they came up with.

Reason Why Quit	% of Quitters
Personal & Job Time Constraints	31%
Moved Away From School	23%
Just Lost Interest	18%
Injury/Medical Problem	13%
Classes Ran Their Term	8%
Finances/Cost of Classes	7%

It is interesting to note that over half (54%) of the people quit for reasons that had nothing to do with the quality of the school. However, if you make the school an inseparable part of the students' lives, they will stay. At KAT, we've had students not move or put off moving out of town just because of the school.

Always assume that you can stop a particular student from quitting. It's not true, but by thinking that way, you will end up stopping many that you thought you could not stop. It always hurts to have your students leave, especially in the beginning. But you have to know that everyone, even great teachers, lose many students. Bruce Lee probably lost hundreds of students in the few years he was teaching. I'm sure Helio Gracie has lost thousands, or even tens of thousands, in the decades that he's been teaching.

On a final note on students quitting, it is important to note that the more proactive you are, the better. If you notice signs that a student is veering off course and correct them immediately, they will be less likely to develop into a full fledged reason to quit. For instance, if you notice that a student is heading for burnout, order him to take a few classes off. If someone has misses several tests and is not quite ready for the next one, offer a free private lesson or two. If you changed the schedule and then noticed some people not coming, sit down with them and plan out a good training regimen. If someone has an injury, explain to them how to still train around it. Doing little things like this ahead of time is the best way to stop people from quitting. The most important thing is to start emailing or contacting students when they start missing classes. It's probably innocuous, but there might be a problem. Sometimes you will have to talk for a while to get to the root of the issue, but usually you will get there and then know what to do to resolve it.

Why Students Stay

Students will stay if the program has good quality and value and they see their own progress. What things contribute to making them want to stay?

Excellent Value – The classes shouldn't be too expensive, and the students should always feel like they're getting more than their money's worth. They should feel like they're 'cheating' us, i.e., getting more out of the training than the money they're putting in.

Challenging Curriculum – The material that you teach and how they advance through the belts is incredibly important. This is usually set by the school, and not the individual

instructors. If they need to work hard to succeed, but are not overwhelmed, this is the ideal situation. The curriculum must be easy enough for white belts but not bore the black belts.

Focus on Black Belt – For color belts, having the focus on getting a black belt and knowing that they can achieve it are very important. For black belts, different goals are necessary.

A Sense of Progress – Students who know that they're getting better will not want to leave.

School Community – This is especially important for middle school age children and adults. If the school is where all their friends are, they are not going to leave. The need for a community is a fundamental part of human nature that is mostly unsatisfied in modern life. Students also feel a responsibility to their junior ranks, and a debt of gratitude to their senior ranks.

Motivating Instructor – Sometimes students will keep training because of the instructor and how he or she motivates them. For instance, when one student is having a problem, you could magnify that problem and show how he could overcome it. For example, if the student was tired from a bad night's sleep, you might say something like "*I know that you could not sleep for a week, and still work harder than most of the other students in class!*" This will motivate him and reframe his problem into not being so bad.