



# Children Fight Back

**Many academic schools have policies of zero-tolerance to violence. But are these policies robbing kids of their right to learn valuable self-protection skills?**

**H**uman rights are fundamental to an individual's existence, they are not luxuries. Everybody is entitled to have their human rights respected. With rights come responsibilities to ensure that we do not infringe the rights of others. This is more so when it comes to the rights of the child, which are to be the most agreed-upon set of human rights in international law. The 1989 United Nations *Convention of the Rights of the Child* has been ratified by every country in the world, except the USA and Somalia, who have yet to do so.

The convention states that every child is entitled to the survival rights and protection rights, those being rights that are essential to safeguarding children from all forms of abuse. Yet, according to United Nations statistics, close to two million children have been killed in armed conflicts during the past decade.

For many children around the world, violence is also a regular part of the school experience. School culture can both promote and support violence, or it can evolve a culture and socialisation process that promotes and sustains healthy violence-free relationships. But should schools be providing the necessary tools for students to protect themselves when being confronted with violence in or outside the school?

In a recent *Blitz* forum thread at [www.sportzblitz.net](http://www.sportzblitz.net),\* some discussion ensued as to comments made by a Queensland Professor of Criminology that fighting back could be the worst thing a child could do in a potential abduction. Given that there is also a general adoption of zero-tolerance policy towards violence in schools, it's no wonder that not only is the teaching of martial arts in schools not encouraged, but there is a fundamental misunderstanding as to the real benefits of self-protection training for children.

It is apt what forum member, 'drgndrew', said: "The thing is, self-protection is not just about the physical side of safety. A proper self-protection course will provide the child with the knowledge and ability that will enable them to recognise danger and avoid it; it will teach and emphasise the importance of such

things as stranger-danger, running away and screaming, but if that fails it will give the child a greater possibility of escaping if they are grabbed by fighting back. If a child has been grabbed, then the only way they are going to escape is by fighting back." (sic)

A policy of zero-tolerance to violence, while understandable in its goals of ridding the school yard of all violence and bullying, leaves the victims of school yard violence/ bullying unable to protect themselves from their attacker if they don't have the necessary skills to defend themselves. We should remember that children have fewer options than adults when faced with a bully or a potential abductor. This policy effectively would remove the most obvious option for children placed in a victim-situation.

The law clearly recognises that when an adult is placed in a position of threat to life or limb, that person is entitled to use reasonable force to defend himself or herself. The issue, then, is whether the response was proportionate to the threatened harm.



The law on self-defence extends as far as protecting the life of another as well as oneself in a threatening situation. So, if this is applicable to adults, it would be counter-intuitive that a child is unable to fight back against a bully or abductor, while an adult is permitted to step in and fight for that child. Some might argue that a child does not have the maturity to distinguish between what amounts to a reasonable and proportionate response to the threatened harm, as opposed to just pure force. It is likely that a child would not be able to exercise such a degree of self-control compared to an adult. On the other hand, when it comes to a potentially violent situation, there are simply no rules, as it were.

In my view, it is senseless that an adult is reasonably permitted to fight back under the protection of self-defence, but a child, who has fewer options than an adult, is expected to cop the attack. If anything, the expectation should be reversed, insofar as an adult should be expected to know of and pursue other solutions than violence, and a child should be taught what to do to escape the impending harm, including to fight back.

The failure of schools and society in general to protect children from violence in schools would deny them their right to be free from all forms of physical or mental abuse, and deny them the full enjoyment of their right to education. However, it would seem more difficult to hold the school responsible for refusing to allow the student to learn self-protection skills in order to prevent an impending attack. While many schools advocate a zero-tolerance policy to deal with violence in the school, it's time that they re-visit education values — and look at teaching life-skills by offering practical solutions for students to deal with threatened harm.

*\*Discussion posted on 23 February 2006 by drgndrew*

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