

## Understanding Why Some Karate Students Don't Try

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Have you ever wondered why some karate students don't fully dedicate themselves during practice, or wondered why some students give less than 100 percent effort? Why some say "I can't" instead of "I'll try"? Besides, obvious answers such as physical maturity, cognitive development, and temporal fluctuations due to lack of sleep, poor nutrition, and stress, there may be motivational-attributional reasons behind all this. Educators have increasingly dealt with these motivation and self-concept issues in traditional classrooms to effectively encourage students to excel. "Karate Educators" also need to understand these concepts and know how to use these concepts in their dojos to more effectively motivate their students to learn.

### Attributions

We begin early in our childhood trying to explain the events and behaviors encountered in life -- our search for understanding. In achievement-related situations, this search for understanding results in our tendency to attribute successes and failures to one of four factors: Ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck. Ability and effort are internal attributions -- within our perception, while task difficulty and luck are external attributions -- outside our control. We make these causal attributions or ascriptions based on what are known as past or "antecedent cues." These past cues relate to specific information such as prior success, history, social norms, patterns of performance, persistence of behavior, task characteristics, information from others, and so forth.

Two of the more important antecedent cues are performance and information from others. Performance includes the individual's present performance on the task and the individual's past performance on the task. When the present outcome is consistent with past performance, we tend to contribute the cause to ability. If the outcome is inconsistent with past performance, the attribution is likely to be to effort. Information from others can come from feedback from parents, teachers, and peers. Parents and teachers, whether consciously or unconsciously, continually provide feedback to children and students on performance, and the significance of that performance. Consider the impact children have on each other, particularly of the negative variety such as name calling and peer pressure. Information from others also arise from observing others' behaviors and performance.

### The Consequences of Attributions

The attributions individuals make, especially children, influence both their emotional reaction to success and failure, and to their expectations for future successes and failures. When causes of success are external to the individual (task difficulty and/or luck), one is not likely to experience feelings of competence. Causes of success ascribed to internal causes (ability and effort), however, result in one experiencing pride and feelings of competence. However, when attributions for failure are made to ability, individuals experience shame and their self-worth is lowered.

In regards to future expectations of success, attributions to stable factors such as ability and task difficulty have greater impact on the expectation of future success than attributions to unstable factors, such as effort or luck. For example, failures which are attributed to ability will result in stronger decreased expectations of future success than failures which are attributed to a lack of effort.

Lack of ability is one of the most dysfunctional causal ascriptions for achievement failure because this belief will lower self-esteem and it will give rise to low expectations of future success.

Unfortunately, a central part of achievement is the need for students to protect their sense of self-worth. The major process involved is the student's perception of ability. If a student believes that it is unlikely that he/she can succeed due to lack of ability, their main priority is to avoid failure. Therefore, to lessen this stress, students will consequently create barriers that will prevent them from having to attempt the task. One example of a failure-avoiding strategy is the setting of goals that are either so easy that success is assured, or are so difficult that students can fail with honor. Another common tactic is to significantly lower the amount of effort needed (i.e., not trying) in order to use this as a primary attribution for failure.

### Identifying and Changing Attributions

It is rather easy to identify the attributions karate students make -- they frequently tell us, both verbally and non-verbally. For example, we often hear "I can't" or "I'm not any good at this", and observe facial expressions or body language indicating frustration and anger. Sometimes, we note that these are the students who are very hard on themselves expecting to perform a technique perfectly the first time and, failing, become frustrated.

Changing attributions are not as difficult as you might think. First, it requires adopting an attitude in which you, as the instructor, believe that students want to succeed and want to feel successful. One very important way to change attribution is through verbal persuasion which entails telling students that they can successfully perform technique that they had failed to successfully perform in the past. Verbal persuasions are more likely accepted if the student is provided with strategies that will help improve their performance. This leads us to the second step which is to provide students with the strategies for improving their performance. Another important strategy is to get students to practice what they have learned. This may require enlisting the help of others such as parents to supervise the practice away from the dojo. Additionally, whole and part task practice (contingent on the task being mastered), setting attainable goals, and building on past learning are extremely important strategies to use with students.

Since feelings of lack of ability stem from past achievements, we need to switch from thinking "ability" to thinking "achievement" and communicate this to your students. That is, achievement results from knowledge and skill, which can be learned through instruction, practice (effort), strategies, and feedback. Stress that failures should be attributed to effort and that successes should be attributed to a combination of effort and achievement. Explain that effort does not necessarily equal time. Distinguish for students the difference between productive and nonproductive effort and make sure you and your students have the same perceptions of effort. Prior to beginning a new task stress the importance of effort and give students examples of effort. Effort can be operationalized as strategy use, practice, and seeking help. Establish rewards for effort. In most cases, verbal praise or a pat on the back is all that is necessary. Tokens, such as stars to be sewn on uniforms as tangible rewards, may also work. Finally make sure students understand that errors are okay and even expected -- they provide feedback and help us monitor our performance. Admit that even instructors make mistakes, and learn from correcting their errors.

In all the above make karate fun. Be willing to try new approaches to teaching. Carefully listen to what your students are telling you about their performance and provide a comfortable, considerate, and competent, and constructive environment to achieve.