

Making the World Safe for Children: Cross-Pollinating Aikido with ACES

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My first job teaching children was how to brush their teeth. In 1976 I was a nurse's aide traveling to under-served cities in northern California with a group of Nurse Practitioners. The simple teaching directions they gave me would have been adequate, yet in my characteristic way I sought outside resources to improve my work. I recall going to the S.F. VA Hospital library, watching videos and practicing on plastic mouth models.

As a teacher of Aikido to children since 2003, I'm always looking for potential resources to bring back to my students. O'Sensei said *"The Art of Peace is to fulfill that which is lacking."* (Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of Aikido, is referred to hereafter as O'Sensei which means "Great Teacher"). What missing piece might help light up Aikido for a child? It might be a beautiful spiraling shell, a KIDPOWER exercise or a kid's library book. Here I'll give you a taste of what I'm currently excited about incorporating into my Aikido teaching, as well as why and how.

Our children need us now. Since the Parkland, Florida shootings they are standing up and speaking out. All adults are being called to do their part to make the world safe for children. This is an auspicious time for Aikidoists, especially Aikido teachers, to take their place at the community table. We need to join the difficult conversations and contribute to the process of restoring safety and cultivating resilience.

Not only is there a great need to serve, a paradigm shift in social service and grass roots systems is creating a big opening for us to step into. Still young, it's called ACES or "Trauma-Informed Care". After many years of being on the fringe of society in an extraordinary art, right now with Aikido we can enter and empower a transformational, mainstream movement to make the world safe for children.

The comprehensive Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACES) of 2014, endorsed by the CDC, shows how childhood trauma directly correlates to increases in physical, mental and behavioral problems later in life. In response to these findings, innovative and effective trauma-informed care is mushrooming across all sectors. In schools, healthcare, public safety, workplaces and communities, people are coming together to develop common understandings and shared approaches. Adults and children are learning how brain development occurs, ways to self-regulate and heal and most importantly, how to co-create safe environments for children. Everyone benefits because everyone is touched by trauma and healthy, caring interactions are key to this approach.

Epigenetics research shows why a positive, supportive, safe environment actually makes healing possible. Survival is always our priority. Because survival is threatened in an unsafe environment, DNA inhibitors stop wasting energy on growth. When we feel safe, DNA inhibitors dissolve and our growth potential is activated. Safe learning environments empower children to develop healthy protective systems.

O'Sensei pointed to these same dynamics when he said, *"Rely on Peace to activate your manifold powers. Pacify your environment and create a beautiful world."* As with all of his poetic, mystical teachings, I invite you to sit with his words and wonder what their fit is for your life. At this time his declaration grounds my belief that trauma-informed Aikido makes our world safe and beautiful for children.

Children growing up in safety learn to solve problems relationally, as a process with a perspective of possibility. With trauma disruption, a child relies on the primal protection reactions of fight, flight or freeze, she lacks trust in relationships and constantly looks for danger in the environment. In a safe environment, a child healing from trauma can shift from feeling *"It's all up to me"* to knowing *"We're in it together."*

This was probably the most exciting learning for me when I attended my first lecture on ACES. I was well aware of my tendency to freeze due to my extensive trauma in childhood. I had bonded with Aikido because it gave me an effective way to gradually unwind my deep habits of self-protection and replace them with embodied centering. However, I'd puzzled about my reluctance to solve problems with others. I wanted to enjoy the process of discovery rather than anxiously grasp for solutions. My commitment to my students intuitively led me to incorporate relational, process learning and community-building early in my Aikido teaching. Looking back I see that while my intention was to include these approaches for my students' benefit, they were a fit for my own healing process. As O'Sensei said, relying on peace activated my manifold powers.

In these challenging times when the polarizing reactivity of trauma dominates the popular landscape, it's crucial that Aikido dojos offer peaceful sanctuary. How can we make our dojos safe, supportive environments dedicated to nurturing people, process and possibility? How can we make our dojos trauma-informed? Let's get going!

Just now as I wrote this I got a phone call from a worried young woman. She is hoping Aikido can help her 4 year old step-son who is suffering from a long, messy custody battle. I assured her of the benefits of Aikido for his special needs and referred her to local trauma-informed resources. She got off the phone cheerfully anticipating support for a better future for her boy.

When I began teaching Aikido to children in 2003 I developed 5 Dojo Commitments. Initially their purpose was to engage students in co-creating a safe, happy dojo environment. However, they soon became multi-purpose. Each commitment is symbolized by a natural shape which represents a movement dynamic and an elemental quality. For example, *"Be Safe"* is represented by Tree with the centrifugal and centripetal spiral movement of energy around a vertical core and the qualities of the Air element.

This week, thanks to this writing process, I realized our 5 Dojo Commitments are principles that fit with the 5 Core Principles of trauma-informed care. Dedicated to embodied learning for the whole child, I emphasize practicing Aikido principles with techniques demonstrating relative effectiveness. Learning martial techniques alone primarily prepares us for face-to-face physical encounters with strangers. By practicing Aikido principles, we grow resilient responsiveness to both the stresses of everyday life

and the extremes of emergency. *"Aikido makes me feel more confident in myself and ready for anything!"* a 10 year old girl exclaimed.

"Depending on the circumstance you should be hard as a diamond, flexible as a willow, smooth like flowing water or empty as space." O'Sensei

Here are the 5 Core Principles of trauma-informed care matched with my 5 Dojo Commitments and examples of how we practice in my kid's Aikido classes.

Aikido Dojo Commitment: "Be Safe"/ Tree/ Air: *"Just like the tree protects, we take care so nobody gets hurt."*

ACES Core Principle: Physical and Emotional Safety

We have a "safe space" off the mat where students can go to recover from a collision or to self-regulate if they feel upset. They return when they're ready to learn. Occasionally, when a child is having trouble staying with the group practice, I'll give them a choice. For example: *"Do you want to go to Safe Space and get Centered or do you want to stay on the mat and follow my directions?"*

"Connect, then correct" is an ACES slogan which clarifies instructing with emotional safety. I communicate care for a student, appreciate what they're doing well, and build on that. My interactions are centered in nurturing relationship, the spirit of musubi (to join or tie together).

Aikido Dojo Commitment: "Have Respect"/ Star/ Fire: *"Just like the sun shines on everything, we are good to ourselves, each other and to all things."*

ACES Core Principle: Choice

Respecting children's unique and diverse learning needs is not part of some traditional teaching. Having choices is crucial for those who've experienced lack of control due to trauma. Participation is a choice in all activities in my classes. When presenting fundamental skills like rolling, I offer a few levels of practice so each child can stay in a familiar level or challenge themselves with more difficult practice.

In our closing circle we pass a talking stick. Each child takes a turn to share if they choose, while everyone else listens. At her first Samurai Sprouts circle a girl held the stick close to her heart. "No one has ever listened to me before!" she said, her eyes wide with wonder.

Playful practice invites children to discover their own fit with what is being taught. Having fun is children's natural way to learn. One of my greatest joys is creating "new" games to illuminate Aikido principles. Children respond with enthusiasm to activities with simple toys like ropes, sticks, balls, bells, stuffed animals and so on. Art and nature inspire children, bringing creativity into the dojo.

Aikido Dojo Commitment: "Show Up"/ Mountain/ Earth: *"Just like a mountain is present and powerful, we come to class and we do our best."*

ACES Core Principle: Trust

Children need clear boundaries and expectations to grow trust. The beautiful bowing rituals of Aikido embody respect and provide a consistent way to express trust in each other and the dojo community.

My Aikido promotion standards are explained in child-friendly, detailed handouts. Parents appreciate having clear guidelines for supporting practice at home. A mother told me of her joyful tears when her son overcame his life-long nighttime anxiety about sleeping in the dark. He told her, *"I just used my mountain power and I lost my fear."*

Aikido Dojo Commitment: "Get Help and Be Helpful"/ Bell/ Space

"Just like we ring a bell to connect with someone, helping each other makes us strong and happy."

ACES Core Principle: Collaboration

Unlike more traditional Aikido, I welcome questions and observations during class. Sometimes student's insights or curiosity move my instruction in a new direction, which I rejoice in publically. They love to catch me making a mistake and I appreciate the opportunity to take my own errors lightly and be a learner.

Before every Aikido promotion my students complete a specific *Service Practice* to help or honor other people, animals or the environment. Community Service helps children discover the joys of contributing to the well-being of others and of growing caring community. Although often forgotten, serving others is core to the martial tradition. O'Sensei made this clear: *"To protect and serve all life is both our mission and our prayer and we call our path Take Musu Aikido."*

For 10 years I organized Creek Stewardship walks for families in Santa Rosa, initially as a way to engage my Samurai Sprouts (age 4 to 7) in community service. One of my students, a boy in foster care said, *"I enjoy being part of community and feel happiness from cleaning the creek."* An older girl who was reluctant to come shared afterwards, *"It's cool to know you're helping animals and saving our planet...and it's fun!"*

I volunteer 3 times a week in Kindergarten at Riverside Elementary in Grants Pass, Oregon, a few doors down from our home. It's great timing because along with many schools in District 7, Riverside just started a 3 year program to integrate trauma-informed practices for healthy development and academic success. I get to attend staff development trainings, learn from other teachers and make creative contributions such as leading movement games, storytelling, and breathing practice with the singing bowl. I'm grateful to be serving in the transformational ACES movement in Grants Pass, which has high rates of poverty corresponding with high rates of trauma among children.

Aikido Dojo Commitment: "Pay Attention"/ Fox/ Water: *"Just like a fox can focus, we use our eyes, ears, hearts and bodies to be aware and to learn."*

ACES Core Principle: Empowerment

Neuro-biology tells us *"What fires together, wires together."* It's optimal when skill-building is embedded in empowering experiences which honor a student's ability to inquire and discover. Simple things like asking *"What would be safer and why?"* or giving a couple of variations for a technique and asking how they differ helps energize the

learning process. Making room for students' spontaneous questions and comments (with hand-raising for permission to speak) empowers integrating and expressing their learning in the joyful moment of inspiration.

I begin and end Aikido kids' classes with listening to a singing bowl and *"gathering our minds into our Center"* with a gathering gesture. Children settle quickly with the soothing resonance of the bell. Passing the talking stick in our closing circle is a rich process as we reflect upon and celebrate our experiences of Aikido. I'm rewarded as their Sensei when I hear comments like *"This is the best part of my whole life"*, *"I like it because everyone is so nice to me"*, and *"I love being a Protector of Peace!"*

A basic tenet of trauma-informed care is that only a self-regulating adult can help a child self-regulate. Because self-regulation is learned body-to-body, we must continually embody calming and centering. Teachers of children also need to become experts of self-regulation because we're responsible for the safety of our learning environments. ACES is highly valued in schools now due to the findings that a child is not ready to learn until their nervous system is calm. The first step is to establish safety.

Trauma-informed models offer age-appropriate ways to teach children the biology of self-regulation. Children are fascinated by their own bodies. Growing awareness of the connections between brain and body, between what goes on inside and our direct experience is empowering! Resilience grows as children learn to notice the relationships between impulses, thoughts, feelings, behaviors and brain science and making new choices.

I long for a reciprocal influence between Aikido and trauma-informed care world-wide. Yet the ACES movement is just one of countless quality resources we can cross-pollinate with Aikido. I include a list of resources strongly influencing me over the years in teaching Aikido to children. O'Sensei's words confirm and uplift my efforts to grow Aikido for children in new ways: *"Engage in everyday training...that is fresh and alive and speaks to the needs of the modern world, as well as those of future generations."*

In 2005 when I was wavering about writing what became my Samurai Sprouts manual *Shape*, O'Sensei appeared to me in a dream. Facing me up close he firmly said, *"Do It Now!"* Then he gave me a warm hug. I woke up and began that day. The book poured out of me in three swiftly flowing months of writing and illustrating. So I say to you, with my love and respect, *"Whatever is yours to do, do it now!"* Peace on Earth is at stake. As Grandmother Agnes Pilgrim, spiritual leader of the Takelma tribe of southern Oregon says, *"We're all together in this leaky canoe."*

In closing, I'm thankful for the support of so many since I began Aikido training on 11/3/81. I'm especially grateful to my husband David whom I met on the mat at Aikido of San Francisco in 1984. I'm honored by the children and families who come to my Aikido "dojo-to-go" for kids at the Williams Grange in Oregon. We're co-creating a beautiful, peaceful world. For this collaborative commitment I feel thankful, happy and blessed. Contact me at michelle@wellspringai.com or cell 707-508-5052

Recommended Resources

www.acesconnection.com community of practice social network for ACES

www.aikiextensions.org dedicated to application of Aikido in everyday life

www.braingym.org movement-based practices for optimal learning

www.cnvc.org non-violent communication and conflict resolution for all ages

www.edutopia.org dedicated to transforming education so students thrive

www.ecoliteracy.org dedicated to cultivating education for sustainable living

www.greatergood.berkeley.edu science-based insights for a meaningful life

www.kidpower.org teaching skills for safety, respect, confidence for all ages

www.mindup.org neuroscience, mind-full awareness, social-emotional curriculum

www.movementbasedlearning.com children with special needs learning how to learn

www.rootsandshoots.org Jane Goodall's youth service programs

www.tolerance.org for educators committed to diversity, equity and justice

BOOKS

Aikido and the Harmony of Nature by Mitsugi Saotome

Ah...to be a Kid, 3 dozen Aikido games for children of all ages by Michael Friedl

Can You Say Peace? By Karen Katz

Courage by Bernard Weber

My First Encyclopedia of the Human Body by Robert Coupe

Some Friends to Feed, the Story of Stone Soup by Pete Seeger

The Martial Arts Book by Laura Scandiffio

MOVIES

Paper Tigers documentary about ACES transforming a high school environment

Resilience: the Biology of Stress & the Science of Hope documentary about ACES