

The Mechanics of Safe Sparring

By Master Sean Kim

Sparring should be a positive experience for both partners. Here are some suggestions to make that possible.

1. Always remember how you felt when you were a beginner. Spar beginners with awareness and never emphasize speed or power; it will come naturally to them with practice and time. Don't try to overwhelm them with fancy techniques or trickery. They must feel comfortable sparring with someone that will not take advantage of them.
2. The two most common problems with unsafe sparring are bad temper and rough techniques. To avoid mishaps, strive to spar with a genuine attitude and keep a clear mind when dealing with different personalities. You might not agree with the way they spar, but keep a good attitude.
3. Be sensitive to your partner's needs. Do they prefer to spar lightly or otherwise? How do you know what they want? Get to know them better by opening a positive line of communication. Never assume they want to spar a particular way by their outward appearance.
4. Control your emotions. You cannot control your actions unless you first control your thoughts. You've always heard the saying, "use good control." What that means is, "control your temper." The sparring begins to take an unsafe turn as soon as you get frustrated. Practice with people who are trustworthy and concerned for your well being.
5. You are not bound to spar with anyone you feel to be unsafe. Be discriminating with whom you spar, but always be respectful and polite. Not everyone that spars roughly has a bad attitude; sometimes they just don't know their own strength.
6. Are you giving out signals that your opponent might interpret as threatening? Are you unwittingly inviting confrontation? Be aware that some gestures might be understood as a sign of aggression. It might not be an obvious gesture, such as a sudden charge toward your opponent, but a subtle one, such as tightening your shoulders or making a mean face.
7. Know when too much is too much. When you feel the aggression level heighten, take a breather and count to ten.
8. Set the proper mood. Instill a sense of calmness and harmony in your sparring sessions. Even if someone starts out sparring roughly it doesn't mean that you have to do the same. If they don't get the message by your example, simply let them know that they are sparring too hard.
9. Be able to point the finger at yourself. If someone has to tell you that you are sparring too hard, most likely you are. Be open to suggestion and be willing to accept sensible criticism.
10. Sparring hard is not wrong. Still, you must know when it is appropriate to do so. Both parties must consent and follow sparring guidelines. Sparring should still be graceful and allow both partners to develop their techniques.

11. Attitude is everything. Don't try to show off. You spar to improve, not to impress others. Keep a sound mind and spar as if you have nothing to prove. It doesn't make you more of a person to be able to defeat someone. Students that spar with composure and a chivalrous attitude show great promise... no matter what belt they are.

12. Control the snap speed of your kicks and strikes. Injuries occur when speed increases.

The dojang hosts people from all backgrounds and beliefs. Try to deal with each person accordingly. Still, be aware that some individuals are not apt to immediate change. By sparring in a positive way you might help shape the attitude of others so that they will not follow the wrong example.