

After homework, kids learn self-defense with poekoelan



By Janet Somers
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

It's 3:15 on a Wednesday afternoon, and kids are piling out of a minivan in front of a North Oakland martial arts studio. They sign in, change into white pants and T-shirts with a yellow dragon logo and scramble up

EDUCATION the stairs. They're ready to toil an assailant with a swipe of a "tiger's paw" or a saber kick. But first, there's more pressing business.

The 12 kids grab snacks, sit down at a butcher-block table and hit the books. Seven-year-old Alivia Chegia is writing about what she likes to do when it's raining. Anthony DaSilva, 8, pores over a page of shapes for a geometry assignment. Twelve-year-old Dominique Haskell is working on a review of a video.

Homework? In a martial arts studio?

While the Bay Area has an assortment of after school "homework clubs," a plethora of martial arts schools and a few kids' self-defense classes, Studio Naga's "After School Homework and Martial Arts Club" is a concoction of all three. The program is for elementary and middle school students.

"We have this culture where the top athletes in school aren't good students," said Louise Rafkin, owner and head instructor at Studio Naga, one of 15 schools worldwide teaching the Indonesian art of poekoelan (POO-kuh-lan). "Martial arts teaches you it's an inclusive thing; you can't just be a star and then screw up in school. There's a responsibility to develop the whole person."

Rafkin, who at 45 holds a fourth-degree black belt, began the twice-a-week homework/self-defense combination last year, partly because she felt too many kids were just being warehoused after school. The program includes van transportation from participating elementary schools.

She thinks she and her instructors function as "point people" for kids, providing an impetus for success. "Just like they want to do well for us on the floor, they'll show us their homework," she said.

Denise Sadler, principal of Chabot Elementary School in Oak-

land, agrees with that assessment.

"What they learn in the program about respect and focus has a positive effect," she said. "It's clear from observation that they enjoy it. I'm always interested in that instead of, 'OK, I want you to sit in the room and do your homework.'"

Rafkin encourages the kids to help each other with homework.

"The philosophy is, everybody helps everybody else. It's about creating community and being your personal best," she said. On a recent short school day, the class cleaned up trash on the sidewalk for the extra hour; sometimes they cook and eat Indonesian food at Rafkin's house.

After an hour of homework, the kids move downstairs to the practice floor. They warm up for poekoelan by running in place and then letting loose across the floor screaming "nooo" at the top of their lungs.

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"I want you to scream like the nearest person is two blocks away!" Rafkin told kids in one recent class. Poekoelan, similar to kung fu, uses animal-based forms, so kids get to imitate tigers, monkeys, cranes and snakes. It's also a martial art suitable for small people. "Poekoelan was developed by Indonesians, who are historically smaller people than their dominators, the Dutch," Rafkin explained.

Besides working to perfect the forms in pairs, kids practice pounding padded instructors with fists, knees and elbows, yelling "No!" with each strike. One small 5-year-old boy in the class seemed surprisingly fierce and would probably make a would-be assailant think twice.

Rafkin has two of her adult students help out by pretending to be attackers. Rafkin told the class: "They're really nice people, but

Self-defense for kids

Some Bay Area schools offering self-defense training for kids:

► Studio Naga, 5850 San Pablo Ave., Oakland, (510) 652-6242; www.studionaga.com. Classes are also held at schools. Poekoelan with self-defense for ages 2 through adult, including physical and verbal skills against mock assailants for ages 5 and up. Also, after school martial arts/homework club.

► KidPower, (800) 467-6997; www.kidpower.org. Classes held at schools and social service agencies. Short workshops in personal safety for families, ages 3 and up. Training against a padded instructor for ages 6 and up. Special-needs training available.

► Impact Bay Area, 146 E. 12th St., Oakland, (510) 208-0474; www.impactbayarea.org. Classes held throughout the Bay Area. "Full-force self-defense" for women and girls age 12 and up, including training against a padded male assailant. Techniques loosely based on martial arts, police reports and psychological aspects of self-defense.

they're going to pretend they're not nice. Let's say you have a bad feeling about this person. Do you want somebody who's not nice coming right up to you?"

As Bob Gotsch, 66, and Josh Rose, 33, approached the kids with malevolent glares, sometimes plying them with phony compliments, kids practiced yelling, "Stop! Leave me alone! I don't know you!"

In another exercise, when an attacker grabbed the arm of one delicate-looking girl, she underwent a metamorphosis, growling, "Leave me alone! I don't know you!" and pummeling him ferociously with elbows and knees.

All the poekoelan schools teach the "No! Go! Yell! Tell!" method that includes running to a known adult and describing what happened. This method was trademarked five or six years ago by Rafkin's teacher, Barbara Niggel, a Cape Cod resident.

"Do you remember what the guy looked like? How old he was, how tall he was?" Rafkin asked her

Above: Anthony DaSilva, 8, and India Prasad, 8, release energy during poekoelan class at Studio Naga in Oakland.
Right: Haley McLeod, 7, (from left) Dominique Haskell, 12, and Anthony DaSilva discuss math homework before self-defense class.

class about would-be kidnapper Rose. (Rose said he usually gets described as "old and hairy.")

About half of Studio Naga's students are female. "Most karate schools are mainly boys," Rafkin said. "I think it's interesting that we have so many girls; I think they see a woman being strong and they know they can do it. The martial arts are still viewed in this country as something very macho and aggressive." She said aggression is used by a true martial artist only when necessary and that her classes emphasize de-escalation skills.

Rafkin says that many children are aware of the recent child abductions in Florida and elsewhere.

Amber Haskell, 12 and Dominique's twin, said seeing the widely televised video of the Florida ab-



Photos by MIKE KEPKA / The Chronicle

duction of an 11-year-old girl, who did not resist her abductor and was later found dead, made her glad she had enrolled in poekoelan. "I know I have the power to say, 'No, get away from me,'" she said.

Rafkin opened her studio in 1997 after several years of teaching friends informally in a park. She's passionate about teaching self-defense to kids.

"Kids generally think they're too small or weak to fight back; we

teach them otherwise," she said. "Absolutely, studies show kids have a better chance of safety in any dangerous situation by fighting back."

Nine-year-old Naomi Zingman-Daniels buys that.

"If they grab my hand, I might panic," she said. "But I'd know what to do."

E-mail comments to ebayfriday@sfchronicle.com.