

# **Aiki Kai (Australia) Junior Grading Syllabus Outline**

**for Minors & Adolescents**

**plus support training suggestions**

## **Introduction**

The Junior syllabus was prepared after examining all available syllabi used in Australia, both current and past, plus information from NY Aikikai and various other syllabi gathered from around the world.

When reviewing all the available data, there are many more aspects to this type of syllabus than preparing one for a reasonably homogenous group such as adults. In addition, there is an implied legal Duty of Care when handling young children and much of the training regime is based around this organisation showing its understanding of this requirement.

Here are some points for consideration that should be kept in mind when considering implementing this syllabus:

- The potential age span is over 11 very formative years – 5-15 year olds
- Attention span of very young students
- Maintaining a 'Fun, active & safe' policy
- Providing regular positive feedback –
  - Gradings & Grade certificates
  - Coloured belt system
  - Time between gradings
- Transition to the Senior syllabus
- Avoidance of wrist and shoulder locks in the young
- Appropriate time to introduce the use of striking techniques
- Support training methods (games and exercises)
- Abiding by state laws regarding working with children

This is not an exhaustive list and as time passes there may be more points added.

## **Age Span**

When reviewing various available syllabi it is clear they were prepared with a certain specific age spans in mind. Some Aiki Kai (Aust.) instructors who teach children have students as young as 5 years old in their class. Therefore, this syllabus has a very wide age range to encompass.

If we see 5yo as the starting point for students then the grading syllabus has to span at least 11 very formative years of a child's life, with the student switching to the senior grading syllabus at the age of 16. Within this time span there are considerable physical, social and psychological changes that will take place and the syllabus must account for the potential starting age and the changes that will occur over time. The physical ability and mental capacity of a fifteen year old adolescent is a world apart to that of a five year old child.

The national education system has three distinct teaching areas to cope with these many changes; early childhood, primary and early secondary education. We, as a responsible organisation, must take the same level of care and understanding of their requirements for those students entrusted to us.

This is the single biggest aspect to consider and creates most of the discussion points to follow.

The syllabus has been prepared with two age breaks in mind, 5-9 year olds and 10-15 year olds, or more simply put, Minor and Adolescent groups. If we adopted the same age splits used in schools then the 5-9 year olds should also reasonably be subdivided into two sub groups, as there are significant variations just within this segment. The Aiki Kai syllabus has not done this, but instructors should bear this in mind when teaching very young students.

### **Attention Span**

We are all familiar with the need to keep younger people amused, that they have a short attention span and require constant movement and sound variation to keep them focused. Colour also plays a great part in the education of younger students. For our Junior students we should be sure that we provide a syllabus that they can absorb and complete with some degree of satisfaction. For the Adolescents we must provide greater mental and physical stimulation, yet at the same time maintain the techniques within the boundaries that suit younger bodies that are not yet fully formed. Above all, there should be a sense of fun and enjoyment.

### **Fun, active & safe**

Taking the point immediately above in mind we should instruct not just the grading syllabus, but prepare a more complete training regimen that holistically encompasses the style of training expected to be taught at the various age levels to meet the requirements of the syllabus.

This is not intended to restrict the enthusiasm or the inventiveness of instructors who teach children, but to give them a guideline of expectations and a starting point for their instruction. Whilst the enthusiasm of our instructors may be very similar, individual abilities may widely vary.

Instructors of children in Aiki Kai (Aust.) should use this as a mantra for our method of training younger students 'Fun, active & safe!'. There is also added protection for Aiki Kai if we provide a more formalised approach to training the young.

### **Regular positive feedback (rewards physical and verbal)**

It is very important to give regular, positive reinforcement when teaching younger people. To keep students engaged the TTC has considered the timing of gradings, the expectation of what is to be performed at the grading and visual signs of accomplishment.

These points are simply parts of a complete structure that is designed to psychologically buoy up the younger student, keep them focused and keen to participate and progress.

- **Aikido Accomplishment Book**

Primarily, the book is designed to give new younger students many small rewards so that they feel they are progressing and having the acknowledgment that this age group requires.

The book is to be presented to all new students when they commence and to be brought to training on a regular basis. The book contains a number of badges (check points) for which the student must have an approval stamp prior to attending a grading. The book shows pages for each grade level and the badges required within each grade. Instructors will stamp the various badges when they feel the student has reached a satisfactory level for that particular endeavour. There is also space to keep a record of class fee payments. New Junior students are also issued with a standard membership book via the Registrar.

- **Grading location & Certificates**

The TTC has approved that gradings may be held in the local dojo. Due to the nature of childrens' classes they are usually preferred close to home and have to fit in with the rest of a busy family schedule along with ballet, band practice and footy. It could be detrimental if these young students (and more importantly the surrounding family) had to drag themselves off to another dojo for gradings. This is not mandatory and each state may choose what best suits its situation.

The head instructor of their local dojo with an invited senior Dan (as determined by the Area Representative) should suffice to form a grading panel at the local dojo.

Certificates should be issued on the day for the student to take home. Aiki Kai (Australia) will print a special certificate for these junior gradings.

- **Coloured belt system**

There are many positive aspects for the simple white belt to black belt system, but these are not applicable for younger students. Keeping in mind the psychology of this age group visual recognition is both a reward and incentive. The colour scheme in the syllabus is based on belts that are readily available. The belt with stripe for the Minor grades is to give the older students some point of difference, as more is expected of them for similar level grades (please refer to the syllabus). It is a suggestion that belts be supplied as part of the total grading cost, which will save parents time and give immediate recognition to the student.

- The two-tiered syllabus means a Minor student would have to move up to the Adolescent level and the timing could be extended for another couple of years.

For Adolescent students starting at say 10, the Junior grading syllabus timing should be able to take them into the Senior syllabus.

### **Transition to Senior syllabus**

When an Adolescent student turns 16 he/she may have been training a number of years and their Adolescent training and the techniques performed at gradings may be far more extensive than that required for a Senior 5<sup>th</sup> Kyu. An Adolescent 6<sup>th</sup> Kyu will be regarded as equal to a Senior 4<sup>th</sup> Kyu and may apply for that grading when they turn 16. All other Adolescent Kyu grades may apply for Senior 5<sup>th</sup> Kyu when they come of age. In all instances, Adolescent students will be expected to participate in a formal grading with a senior age Uke when making the transition to the Senior syllabus.

### **Avoidance of wrist and shoulder locks in the young**

The use of wrist and shoulder locks on young children should be avoided. Undue pressure could create damage that may affect them the rest of their lives, therefore the syllabus does not require anything more than ikkyo until the last two grades (6<sup>th</sup> & 5<sup>th</sup> Kyu). The application of kotegaeshi should also be done with great care from 8<sup>th</sup> Kyu onwards.

### **Appropriate use of striking techniques**

Similarly, striking techniques, particularly when used by young, uncoordinated students who have little concept of the potential damage that could be caused, is also to be avoided. For the very young the concept of passing techniques and not blocking them is quite complex to begin with and so non-striking, more rigid step-wise techniques have been chosen for the early grades so that they can be performed, more or less, in kata fashion. The foundation techniques like shomen uchi iriminage, for instance, are introduced much later in the Junior syllabus when compared with the Senior version.

More dynamic Aikido techniques have been left until the students have some depth of training and understanding.

### **Verbal repetition of training maxims**

In the younger years verbal repetition of lessons and key points aids the retention of knowledge. The grading system supports this technique and there will be a question and answer section at the start of the 10th Kyu grading. In a group, students will be asked to identify dojo etiquette, why they need clean nails, hands and feet, why wear a gi, who is Nage and who is Uke, what is ukemi, what happens if someone pulls you (enter) or someone pushes you (turn away), who is the Sensei, why should you listen carefully to what he/she has to say, etc.

There will also be a group demonstration of ukemi and basic training movements right throughout the Junior grading syllabus to reinforce the importance of these actions.

### **Support training methods & games**

By games it is meant exercises that teach aiki movement or skills but are not strictly a technique. In the past Sugano Shihan he has used these types of activities many times over the years with senior students.

Below is an outline of some suggestions. The TTC welcomes feedback on these methods, please submit in writing any improvements and/or variations that you think might be worth passing on to others.

#### **Daruma roll**

Sit on the mat with the soles of the feet together and your hands holding your toes. Roll sideways onto your back and around to the other side coming back to a sitting position without breaking the contact of your feet or using your hands/elbows. You may roll a number of times in one direction and then change to the other.

#### **Ukemi fishing**

One person is nominated as the 'fish' who may start by standing anywhere on the mat. A number of other students are selected as parts of the 'net'. The nets may each choose to do one forward or backward roll, one person at a time, trying to surround the fish. After all the nets have all rolled the fish can have two rolls in any direction but can't pass between nets that are able to hold hands (touch fingers will do). The object of the exercise is that the nets can work together to trap and capture the fish.

#### **Shikko tag**

Everyone is on their knees, one person is nominated to start and has to tag another student, then both have to tag more students until everyone is tagged. They must only move in shikko.

#### **Pushme Pullme**

Two people stand close together facing each other. One is selected to either push or pull the other person. That person may step in to push or reach to grab the sleeve or shoulder and step back to pull. The other person must step back when pushed on the side they were pushed or step forward when pulled, again on the same side. Once they are a little experienced the Giver can push or pull across the body, i.e. step in on the left foot and use the left hand to push the partner's right shoulder. Another variation is to separate the body into four quadrants and only move the shoulder or leg depending on what was push/pulled.

#### **Belt jumping**

Tie a knot at the end of a belt and swing the belt out wide, keeping it low to the ankles. Spinning in circles so the other students have to time jumping over the turning belt. If it is a big group tie two belts together. This can be used as a knockout exercise as well.

#### **Catch the knot**

Tie a knot at the end of a belt and swing the belt out wide, keeping it low to the ankles. This time students have to see if they can grab the knot. The swinger has to keep the belt moving and changing direction so that it can't be captured.

#### **Wrist release**

Two students stand close together and one tries to hold the wrists (one at a time) of the other. The one being grabbed must turn the wrist and free it in the space between the thumb and forefinger. This should be done repeatedly so that it becomes second nature for the students to be able to free themselves from a wrist grip with minimum effort.

**Stick dancing**

Two students stand in right hanmi on either side of a jo. A designated person has to try and be on the same side of the jo, with both hands and body, as their partner. The partner must keep moving around the jo so they are always stay on the opposite side. When moving either partner must have at least one hand holding the jo. They have to keep the jo at waist height and should try to move around it so the jo stays in a static position.

**Knockout**

Two people are required to stand at either end of the mat with the rest of the students in the centre. Rolling a ball or balls (of varying sizes) the people at the end have to try and hit the feet of the students in the middle. When struck that student runs to an end and uses the ball(s). Last in wins. A variation is not to allow jumping so they have to use more tai sabaki type of movement to avoid the ball.

**'Working with children' certificate**

All Aiki Kai (Aust.) instructors must comply with state regulations regarding working with children. Please refer to your state or area representative if you are unsure of what are the regulations applicable to you.