
HOW DOES SOCIAL AWARENESS INFLUENCE TEENAGERS PARTICIPATING IN JIU-JITSU CLUBS IN NORTH MACEDONIA?

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ABSTRACT

Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ) has become a global sport, including in North Macedonia. The sport promotes moral growth, encourages social awareness, and builds mental resilience in teenagers, helping them resist aggression. BJJ acts as a tool that enhances self-awareness and social skills through constant practice, with no specific goals, while teenagers improve executive function and learn to help others regulate hormones and adapt to different roles.

Why is Jiu-Jitsu a global sport?

A moral duty for an individual teenager is to stand up for oneself in the face of right and wrong in the world. Therefore, Jiu-Jitsu, as a sport, encompasses values and responsibilities that influence performance, such as tolerance, honesty, justice, openness, and respect (Santos et al., 2017; Goncalvez et al., 2020). Similar to UNICEF for youngsters, using martial arts as a fostering tool for global protection, policy, and International Safeguards for Children in Sport regardless of ability, pay, or development (UNICEF, March, 2017). In North Macedonia, several clubs have grown over the last decade and have developed pedagogical and self-defense programs that high school students can join in private clubs in Skopje, according to a project funded by the Western Balkan Democratic Initiative (WBDI, 2019).

Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu

Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ) originated in Japan and developed methods of unarmed combat in the 20th century (Adachi, 2020). Following Japanese traditions, it was adapted in various schools, allowing practitioners to develop their own variations. When Jiu-Jitsu was introduced in Brazil by Sir Mitsuyo Maeda during his travels, it was influenced by Helio Gracie's legendary findings, making him a revolutionary figure known as the brother of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. The rise of BJJ began two decades ago, with the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) in 1993, and has since included larger competitions and tournaments around the world that require better skills in high school teenagers than bigger or even stronger competitors. This Jiu-Jitsu legacy produces teenagers trained in adaptability, self-esteem, and resilience, teaching them to improve their self-defense skills and develop cognitive skills in the classroom (Dobrich, 2024). When we talk about cognitive skills, BJJ emphasizes tolerance as its main goal, teaching teenagers to stay composed and persistent while building positions, guards, or resisting failed submissions. In ALS, foster self-awareness by forcing practice and routine day by day to recognize physical limitations and mental reactions under the pressure of sparring (Rathod, 2025). In that context, the second ability for tolerance is to endure physical and mental youth for better rigor against larger or stronger opponents. Thus, capacity is tied to resilience and self-awareness, qualities identified by many authors (Dobrich, 2024; Petreska, 2023; Willbert, 2007). Many professors and scientists research self-awareness in BJJ to better understand the skills and movements of young children, such as teenagers and students, enabling smaller people to use techniques effectively rather than resorting to force. By mastering traits, this category of teenagers who practice BJJ directly influences their self-esteem and ability to handle challenges not only in sports, but also in occupations, other sciences, technology, engineering, and emerging STEM fields, as well as challenges in the classroom, at home, and in the community with peers.

Differences in Martial Arts

There are three deferential martial arts, unlike Jiu-Jitsu, which originated from wrestling, including boxing and Muay Thai (Dobrich, 2024). In a defensive approach aimed at neutralizing competition, the ultimate goal of Jiu-Jitsu is to involve strategy. The Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) goal is to gain leverage and joint-lock bits in risk. In contrast, MMA and boxing goals are similar; however, Jiu-Jitsu utilizes strikes and neutralizes fast openings (Dobrich, 2024). The main focus for an individual should be self-awareness and self-esteem, or the control of self-fulfilling prophecies.

Table I. Different Martial Art Characteristics.

| Type | BJJ | Muay Tai |
|------------|--|--|
| Aim | Grappling based art with lower impact | Striking-based art with full-contact |
| Philosophy | Deft larger opponents rely on leverage | Individuals that emphasized conditioning and damages |
| Techniques | Utilize submission | Utile strike |

Note. Dobrich 2024

Teenagers' Awareness of Martial Arts Sports

Regarding the benefits of hormonal physical development in teenagers, martial arts have a positive impact, helping to avoid conflicts of self-interest, build resilience, and enhance focus on safe adult habits in the classroom. Therefore, a multifaceted approach focusing on mental, physical, and emotional aspects—rather than only combat and techniques—is essential to recognize conflicts before they begin (Harwood-Gorss et al., 2021). A recent study titled “*The Effect of Martial Arts Training on Cognitive and Psychological Functions in At-Risk Youths*” found that the effects of BJJ training are not inherently risky. However, the study claimed that there are still some risk factors for these teenagers. Six months of training at a club, with measures of cognitive functions such as inhibition, set-shifting, processing speed, and problem-solving, showed significant improvements. The study further found that hormonal changes in youth influence outcomes in long-term practice (Harwood-Gross et al., 2021). Six months of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu training significantly improved executive functions, including inhibition, set-shifting, and problem-solving, in at-risk teenagers. The study also concluded that long-term practice positively affects hormonal levels, increasing oxytocin and regulating cortisol, which contributed to reduced aggression and enhanced self-esteem.

According to the new progressive pedagogue and author Petreska (2023), individual wisdom concerns moral development, with a trend toward improving selfhood, alongside self-interests and emotional aspects. Furthermore, the author of the book *The Joy of Being* believes that social awareness is related to youth’s fate in both the spiritual and the physical realms and that individuals should not be afraid when facing others, as they gain values, rules, culture, and a sense of fate in God (Petreska, 2023). The author underlined this through moral coping in peace, dedication to hard work, and a free spirit as an emotional aspect of a teenager. The author, by asking questions such as *Who am I*, refers to mainstream ideas that help teenagers build themselves through discipline and problem-solving when they are at risk. In line with Petreska (2023) and Sirin et al. (2017), a teenager is an individual in society divided into two: one who must engage in martial arts as a profession, and the other who is

integrated into other aspects of moral development and being straightened of self. If you exclude one, the other instrument of moral development will no longer be a sustainable part of it, both agreeing (Sirin et al, 2017).

Self-awareness v. Social Awareness

In what self-awareness really is, Eurih analyzed more than 800 scientific studies on self-awareness in sports and martial arts to identify challenges and limitations (Compton, 2018). The study concluded that youth behave as if emotions and satisfaction determine relationships among self-control, self-awareness, and social awareness in martial arts. A nationwide survey he conducted across different professions examined the relationship between self-awareness and various attitudes among young people who practice martial arts. In professional interviews with 10 business leaders and CEOs, four demonstrated self-awareness, which served as a validity test. Fewer of them, women who know themselves well, had to agree, and two believed that their self-awareness could be improved over the course of their lives. In the second category of social awareness research, it is found that skills such as empathy help employees build better relationships with others and feel satisfaction. In conclusion, the author underlined that studies revealed ways to improve self-control, internal repression, locus of control, behavior, and perception. Opposite social awareness, social control, and happiness are affected, so negativity influences anxiety, stress, and depression (Compton, 2018).

Table II. Summary of Differences between Self and Social Awareness

| Feature | Self-Awareness | Social Awareness |
|---------------|------------------|--------------------------------|
| Key Questions | Who am I? | What they feeling about others |
| Focus | Internal factors | Not left behind anyone |
| Emotion | Aimes | Empathy |
| State | Accountable | Networking |
| Role | Empower | Trainer/Coach |

Note. Compton, 2018.

Benefits and Mental Resilience

Benefits and mental health come with self-control and tolerance, which we discussed before. On the other side of the others' well-being, mention is made about resilience and compassion. (Wilbert, 2007). Petreska (2023), like Willbert, agreed that self-identity and cognitive growth are part of children's development. In other words, she embedded the benefits of teenagers' development for emotional self-actualization, the highest level, like in Maslow's hierarchy,

which involves recognizing how to resolve self-problems and enhance social productivity through cooperation, while understanding the components like self-awareness and self-consciousness.

According to McMillan and Reed (1994), teenagers' resilience is described as a strategy that helps children avoid a violent future. Their findings showed that resilient negotiators adopt a team-oriented approach, foster social awareness, and maintain internal control and realistic goals. Furthermore, martial arts teenagers do not blame others and are not afraid to succeed or fail because they have learned widely, systematically, and tactically (McMillan and Reed, 1994).

On the other side, compassion involves both the heartfelt wish that others be free from suffering and the readiness to act in combat on their behalf. It arises from a deep sense of affection for others (Willberg, 2007). Self-compassion must be young to see self-clarity and make changes, because we care about ourselves and want full outcomes, as Professor Willberg described in 2007. Self-compassion and resilience are stories of life's suffering and of finding a way for oneself and others. In this case, you are aware that practicing Jiu-Jitsu is about opening oneself and respecting others by responding with optimism and grit. Many spiritual traditions, the most ethical and conscious forms, such as “there is a God,” tuning with the Universe, and various forms of divinity like different religions, are necessary for a truly integral practice (Wilbert, 2007). In that context, Petreska (2023) argues in her book that the goal is one thing in life, but not the essence of living, and it depends on how you have been shaped by life, which builds self-esteem, supportive words, emotions, and experiences. The author stated that teenagers must learn to say enough when it is enough, learn it by themselves, and that I will do from now on, that I would like to (Petreska, 2023). In other words, teenagers are able to develop and grow as physical, mental, and spiritual people at that age when you learned from their emotions, experiences, tolerance, or some event that does not need to be repeated over and over (Petreska, 2023). For example, Confucius, a Chinese philosopher who taught about personal morality and mental fortitude, adopted the golden rule based on the life principle “Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you.” In Jiu-Jitsu, as a physical activity, it promotes mental, physical, and spiritual health. To help youth change their lifestyle, they must enhance self-control and knowledge of healthy habits.

Table III. Optimal and Poor Teenagers’ Health Habits

| Optimal Teenagers’ Health | Poor Teenagers Health |
|---|--|
| Jiu-Jitsu change behavior that interfere with | jiu-Jitsu include physical adjustments, that |

| | |
|---|---|
| good health | prevent acute and chronic disabilities |
| Jiu-Jitsu must environment to be support, peers, coach and parents in good health | Jiu-Jitsu and mental issue, that limits independent functioning |
| Jiu-Jitsu Enhance self-awareness and knowledge of healthy habits | Jiu-Jitsu significant impact on individual, family, community and society |

Note. Kim Willbert 2007

Teenagers build self-confidence in Jiu-Jitsu Clubs

How confidence and self-esteem contribute to a teenager's positive outlook in sport depends on trust and the ability to succeed, brain reward, and positive beliefs based on the teenager's actions. The physical dimension of Jiu-Jitsu reflects the health of the body. Better physical wellness is evidenced by the ability to maintain a better mindset without pain, effectively function with adequate energy to be responsible for self-care and care for others, and continue to be open and play Jiu-Jitsu. The active BJJ serves young purposes and addresses youth needs, self-worth, and satisfaction, aiming to serve the self, family, and community while protecting the intellectual, physical, and emotional parts of the self and vulnerable others (Rhind, 2020).

Confidence creates a positive mental state that helps teenagers who practice BJJ improve their abilities, health, and brain function, while rewarding and reinforcing their skills over time and reducing risk factors. Like many risk factors, these have led youth in North Macedonia to stop playing martial arts. Those include health problems, physical factors, poor nutrition, school obligations, loneliness and ineffectiveness, poor physical environments, substance abuse, spiritual and social risk factors, low self-esteem, and environmental risks like personality, thinking, bullying, and other influential factors (Petreska, 2023).

A New Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu Awareness in North Macedonia

One of the biggest priorities of the Government of North Macedonia's Strategy, aligned with the Ministry of Social Policy, Demographics and Youth Action Plan 2023-2027, is to prevent children from joining gangs and from experiencing community exclusion (Agency for Youth and Sport & FDW, 2025). Therefore, martial arts clubs that welcome Jiu-Jitsu provide a positive space for North Macedonian high school teenagers to participate, build resilience, and belong in the school's after-school program.

Matejko, A Teenager Athlete's Journey with Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu from Titan Pro stated:

At sixteen, I always felt a strong desire to train in a combat sport. I was fascinated by disciplines like kickboxing, MMA, and judo, but I did not know which path to choose or which club would be right for me. One day, a friend invited me to try a Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu

class. I hesitated at first, unsure about stepping into something unfamiliar, but I decided to go. After that very first session, everything changed—I felt excited, challenged, and curious. From that moment on, I knew I had found the sport that was meant for me.

Since September 2024, Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu has become a major part of my life. The sport is not only about physical strength or fighting skills; it teaches values that shape a person's character. Respect for teammates and instructors, confidence in your abilities, patience when learning difficult techniques, and especially discipline are all essential qualities in BJJ. Discipline means showing up even when you feel tired or unmotivated. Many days, I arrive at training exhausted, but by the end of practice, I always feel grateful that I pushed myself instead of staying home.

BJJ also has a clear progression through belt ranks, starting with a white belt and progressing to blue, purple, brown, and finally black belt.

As a white belt, everything feels confusing, and your main goal is to survive during sparring. When you reach the blue belt, you begin to understand the basics and gain more control, though many people still rely heavily on strength.

At the higher belts—purple, brown, and black—the focus shifts toward mastery of technique. Experienced practitioners defeat opponents not through raw power, but through precision, strategy, and timing.

Although BJJ appears to be a purely physical sport, it is also deeply psychological. During sparring or competitions, athletes must remain calm and think clearly, even under intense pressure. Learning to escape from difficult positions or attempt submissions forces you to stay focused and composed. This mental training builds resilience that carries over into everyday life. As many people say, “pressure builds diamonds,” and BJJ constantly places you in situations where you must grow stronger mentally.

When joining a new club, the beginning can feel uncomfortable due to social barriers. Everyone seems more experienced, and it can be intimidating. However, as time passes, the teammates who once felt like strangers slowly become like family. You share victories, defeats, laughter, and hard training sessions with people of all ages. Choosing the right club is important because the environment should be supportive and enjoyable, not only focused on competition.

Training in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu has also transformed my daily habits. I pay closer attention to eating healthy foods, maintaining my strength and conditioning, and never skipping practice unless necessary. These changes have improved not only my athletic performance but also my overall lifestyle and well-being.

Today, I see BJJ as a central part of my life. Through every training session, I continue to develop not only as an athlete but also as a person. If I had never discovered Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, I might have chosen another sport to stay active. However, I doubt that any other activity would have taught me the same level of discipline, resilience, and personal growth as BJJ has.

The BJJ clubs in North Macedonia clearly promote mental, spiritual, and cognitive growth, while also strengthening mental health, emotional balance, and self-esteem through practice and discipline. By learning strategies, practicing self-prioritization, and developing social empathy, a teenager around the world becomes better prepared to proactively face and solve challenges, leading to success in school and ultimately in their future career.

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