

The EIGHT  
Things to Look  
Out for in  
Choosing a  
Self-Defense  
School!

by  
Master Barry Brill

## The EIGHT Things to Look Out for in Choosing a Self-Defense School!

A Common Question That I Hear Is:

*“What Should We Look for in a Quality Martial Art/Self-Defense Program?”*

This is a Wonderful Question, and I would like to guide people with some of the things I learned in my 30 years of teaching. This Helpful Guide is intended to help answer that question!

With the information you will find in “The EIGHT Things to Look Out for in Choosing a Self-Defense School,” you can make an informed decision about what type of Martial Arts School would be best for you.

I want to advise people by supplying them with critical knowledge they would have never known, or ever thought of on their own. Nobody wants to spend months or even years at a school that wasn't a correct fit, wasn't right for them, or didn't match their goals.

There are “Eight Things” I believe you should be looking out for in your search for a Self-Defense Program. I want to make you aware of all the facts, so you can make an educated decision. (Even if it's not with us.)

### The Eight Things:

**The first thing to look out for** is found in schools that we call “Calisthenics Academies.” These are schools that mostly focus on exercise. I know that sounds terrific and the idea of a strong fit body is very appealing! Strength training is a big part of Martial Arts and having a strong body is helpful for self-defense.

But...

The issue is that most of the time spent in class is focused on Calisthenics and not on Self-Defense. In order to improve self-defense skills, a lot of time spent in class should be used for learning, correcting, and practicing techniques, skill-building, reaction time, and appropriate responses to all self-defense scenarios. And yes, with Stretching and the right amount of Strength Training.

**The second thing to look out for** is schools that have a wide range of ages in one class. When that happens, it generally doesn't work well because of the different levels of maturity. Among different age groups, the mentality is completely different, and they should not be taught in the same way. You shouldn't mix 6- & 7-year olds with Pre-teens. The younger ones can get hurt; therefore, you constantly need to tell the older kids to be careful with the little ones. In addition, the pre-teens will be resentful of being with the "Baby's." Even if you start them at 8 or 9 in this class, it will not be long before they become Pre-teens and annoyed with the program.

At Brill's Karate, we group the ages as follows: Little Dragon 3 ½ - 5, Peewee 6 – 7, Juniors 8 – 9, Pre-Teen 10 – 11, Teens 12 & up, and Adults. (Every time they move up to the next level, they feel like they are making progress.)

**The third thing to look out for** is short classes. (With one exception.) Lately, I see that schools are going to 30-minute classes, and it seems to be the new trend in some Martial Art Schools. I guess it is like a restaurant turning over tables quickly to seat more customers. The issue is, it feels like the class is over before it even begins. To compound the matter, when the class has 20 or more kids, it is a challenge for the students to get any attention. *(You start to question if it's worth the trip, driving back and forth.)*

The one exception is the Little Ones (3 ½ - 5 yrs.), because their attention span is short, and you will "lose them" if the class is too long for them.

**The Forth thing to look out for** is found in schools that are overly serious. (Dreary & Depressing Academies.) Classes should be fun and exciting because that is how to keep students for the long term (even adults.) There should be discipline, focus and the instructor should keep order and have great control of the class, but it should not be boring or overly strict!

**The fifth thing to look out for** is the "sports-style" training in schools that don't allow throwing strikes aimed at the head because of sport rules. When they spar, (practice fighting) throwing punches aimed at the head is not allowed, *(we are not taking about contact, just aiming)* therefore the students don't practice throwing punches to the head, or practice blocking the punches to the head. (A punch to the head is the most common attack.)

**The sixth thing to look out for** is another technical training issue. This happens in schools where the students keep their hands down while point sparring – and therefore, they are not guarding the head. (Hands-Down Academies.) “Point Sparring” is the sport at most Karate tournaments and since it involves mostly kicking (when rules state, there are no punches to the head), they may have their hands down toward their opponent’s feet. This anticipates their challenger's kick and sets them up to block it when it is coming up to hit them.

Keeping your hands down is a habit that leaves you vulnerable, because you are not protecting your head from a punch, or any strike in a real self-defense situation. In a real-life self-defense scenario, you will most likely receive a punch to the head first.

**The seventh thing to look out for** is found in schools that do not teach any blocking defense. (“No Block Academies”) These are the schools that only practice grappling and submission fighting. Grappling is incredibly important and essential to learn when on the ground for Self-Defense!

But.... when Grappling is done as a Sport-Style, there are rules to follow and the Rules are Clear, No Strikes. Therefore, many Grappling schools very rarely practice blocking punches, kicks, or any strikes and in these schools there is also no hitting allowed, so they are not training to block. That's a big disadvantage when Students are not practicing either Karate Strikes, or Practicing Blocking the Strikes.

**The eighth thing to look out for** is more subtle- when Karate Schools practice their Forms or Techniques without keeping their hands up, and not guarding their head. (“Hands-Down Academies”).

For example, when practicing Karate forms, if they are not blocking or punching, **(Important)** check and see if their hands are in “Chamber Position.” Chamber Position is when you make a fist and put the meat of your hand on the side of your ribs (For example, right hand, right ribs) as close to your armpits as you can get. (If you opened the fist, the palm would face up.)

The reason this is done is to teach the student to generate power from their center and it’s a good lesson. The problem is you don’t need that high level of repetition in one form, no less in every Form! It would be better if taught as a lesson with all the other power theories.

Unfortunately, it always teaches the student to have their hands down (at their side) while practicing. This reinforces the muscle memory - to keep their hands down and results in a bad Self-Defense habit.

**Important point:**

Something to look out for is “sport schools” teaching their students bad habits for Self-Defense! This is where there’s a big difference between Sport Martial Arts and Street Self-Defense.

The Old Adage, “What You Practice is What You Do!” This is critically important to remember. It’s about what you practice and your muscle memory. The Sport Style rules sometimes cause disadvantages for Street Self-Defense application in different ways.

**Additional Question That I Hear:**

“How can I tell if a school teaches a sport style or a self-defense style?” Also a Wonderful Question, and a quick way to get a good indication is to ask if they participate in tournaments. Another way is to look around the school and notice if there are trophies being displayed.

**Quick Reference**

Calisthenics Academies:	1 <sup>st</sup> thing to look out for.
Wide Range of Ages:	2 <sup>nd</sup> thing to look out for.
Short Classes:	3 <sup>rd</sup> thing to look out for.
Dreary & Depressing Academies:	4 <sup>th</sup> thing to look out for.
Sport Style Training:	5 <sup>th</sup> thing to look out for.
Hands Down Academies:	6 <sup>th</sup> & 8 <sup>th</sup> things to look out for.
No Block Academies:	7 <sup>th</sup> thing to look out for.

**Bonus Information**

***(Things to Avoid)***

1) Schools that have only one Payment Option. Because every family is different, there should be different options to choose from to suit you or your family’s situation.

(Avoid one size fits all.) Some examples are-

- A) Only a Monthly Option with a Contract.
- B) Only a 6 Month Option.
- C) Only a 12 Month Option (or more).

2) Schools that have Contracts. Why have Contracts at all? Are they afraid that the students would not want to stay voluntarily?

Binding Contracts are not necessary when people are happy and benefitting from the program.

3) Schools that have Auto Renewal. Ask if they have an Automatic Renewal clause in their Contracts. In this case, you need to give written notice (30 – 45 – 60 days) before the agreement ends, or you get automatically renewed into a new Contract.

*(This is the biggest complaint I hear from people that are switching from a school they are not happy with. Most of the time they want to finish their contract and move onto their next activity, but unfortunately it always seems to end badly.)*