

Education Lifestyle / Family & Relationships

# Hong Kong kids take self-defence classes to fight off school bullies

With Hong Kong children as young as seven seeking psychological help to deal with bullying, it's no wonder some learn the physical skills and confidence to deter the bullies – who these days are as likely to use social media as their fists

Reading Time: 5 minutes

Why you can trust SCMP



Listen



**Kylie Knott**

Published: 7:30am, 20 Feb 2018 | Updated: 7:46am, 20 Feb 2018

Advertisement

Alex Corner, 13, is tall for his age. But his height didn't protect him against bullies at boarding school in South Africa when the verbal abuse he received turned physical. As he slipped through the cracks in the school's support system, he became reclusive and his grades suffered. And while the bruises faded, the mental scars remained. He now takes medication for depression.

Advertisement

"Once I was rugby tackled into a wall and had to go to the sanatorium. It was pretty bad ... I wish I had the skills I know now when I was being bullied," says Corner, referring to the techniques he's picked up at anti-bullying classes organised by Hong Kong Self Defence & Krav Maga club.

## Hong Kong self-defence classes help fight bullying



It's a cold Saturday morning in February and the fourth-floor drama room at West Island School in the middle-class district of Pok Fu Lam on Hong Kong Island is filling up. Among the parents sitting at the back of the room is Susan Corner, who says her son has made huge strides since he started lessons with Donovan.

That is South African-born Donovan Ryan. He has a strapping build, biceps popping out from a T-shirt that reads "Never A Victim Always A Fighter". And he's got 25 years of martial arts practice under his belt (make that belts: he has two black belts – in tae kwon do and karate – and a blue belt in Brazilian jiu-jitsu).



Donovan Ryan leads a self-defence class at West Island School in Hong Kong. Among those taking the class is Alex Corner (far right). Photo: Edward Wong

Advertisement

He is also the city's most qualified instructor in krav maga, which is not classified as a martial art but is a combat system developed for the Israeli military, which he incorporates into his classes.

“Bullying knocks kids’ confidence, it prohibits them from enjoying their childhood. It can ruin their life,” says Ryan. Surprised to learn that there were few self-defence classes in Hong Kong when he moved to the Chinese special administrative region in 2015, he set up Hong Kong Self Defence & Krav Maga.

### **Hong Kong kids suffer in silence as cyberbullying contributes to youth suicide spike**

“Sadly we live in a world where children are taking their lives because of bullying,” he says.

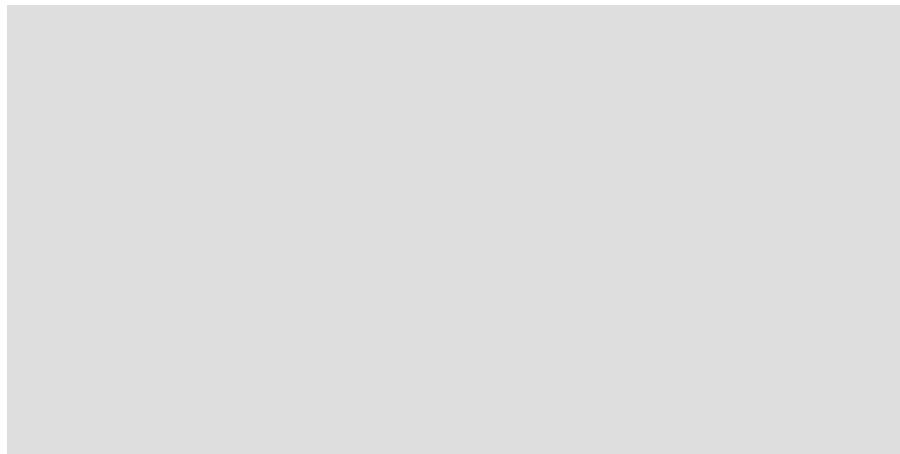
Advertisement

Ryan says his classes give youngsters the confidence and skills needed to stand up to bullies. While prevention and avoidance are key components, a physical approach is also taught in case diplomacy fails. “Sometimes verbal de-escalation doesn’t work,” he says.

Ryan’s classes on this day are divided into two: one for five- to nine-year-olds, which are fun and noisy, and the other for 10- to 15-year-olds, which focus on discipline. The classes are the first for which he’s hired space at a school (they are usually held at his studio in Sheung Wan).

With the first class about to start, students form a line in front of Ryan, place their arms at the sides and yell *kida* (Hebrew for “bow”), lowering their heads in the process. Discipline is another important element.

Advertisement



Tallie Lin, eight, attends Ryan's class. "You have to learn to protect yourself in case you are kidnapped or someone tries to kill you," she says. Photo: Edward Wong

Attending the class is eight-year-old Tallie Lin. She knows the importance of self-defence: "You have to learn to protect yourself in case you are kidnapped or someone tries to kill you."

That's where krav maga comes in. It teaches students to defend against punches, kicks and chokes, and to be streetwise against a knife or gun attack. Or a kidnap

attempt.

Advertisement

#### FURTHER READING

**Hong Kong schools must stand up to bullying**

---

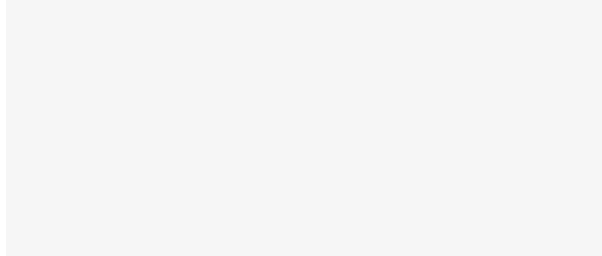
“Kids in Hong Kong live in a bit of a safe bubble, so when they visit cities with high crime rates they are easy targets. These classes will help protect them,” he says.

Bullying is a major problem worldwide, and Hong Kong is no exception. But with few local studies of bullying, it is difficult to gauge how big an issue it is for children in the city.

### **How a Hong Kong cyberbullying victim came back to the web**

In 2010, the department of social work at the Chinese University of Hong Kong asked 1,800 teenage students from eight secondary schools about their experience of school violence. Just over 70 per cent reported being victims of violent bullying behaviour, a figure marginally higher than reported in the United States and Great Britain.

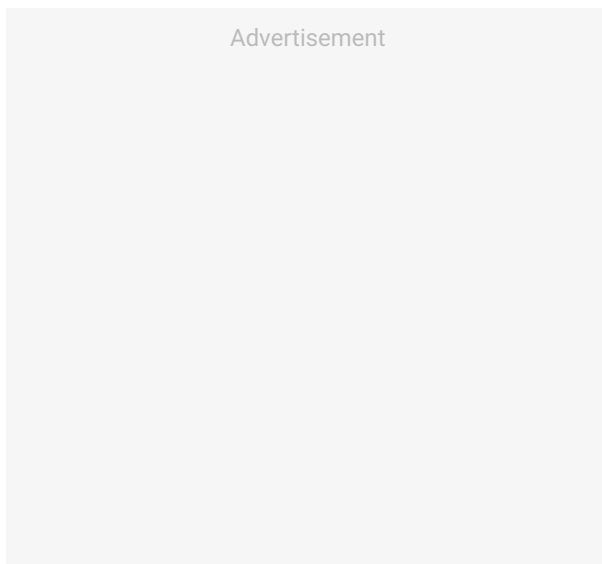
Advertisement



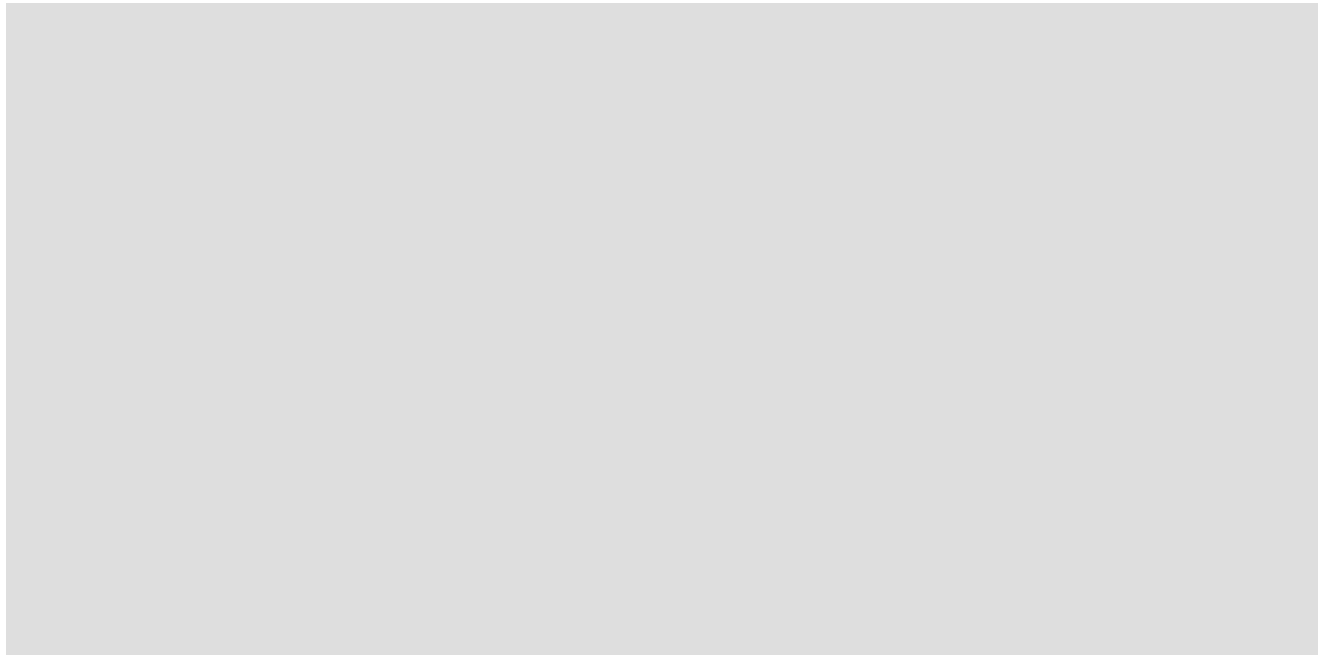
Most information about bullying in Hong Kong comes from media reports, such as one about [an incident in November 2017](#) when a mother told police her son had been bullied at a Tuen Mun primary school, including having a pencil eraser tip inserted in his ear.

Quratulain Zaidi, a clinical psychologist in the city's Central district, treats bullied children. She says bullying is a huge problem in Hong Kong schools and workplaces. Recently she's noticed a disturbing trend.

"I'm seeing victims as young as seven, and that's worrying," she says.







It's one thing for classmates to talk behind a child's back. These days they are as likely to engage in cyberbullying. Photo: Alamy

A major concern is the lasting effects bullying has on mental health, with studies linking it to depression, substance use and suicide.

Zaidi cites a 2009 study published in the *Archives of General Psychiatry* that followed more than 5,000 children in Finland. It found that boys and girls who were frequently bullied were more likely than their peers to require psychiatric treatment in their teens or early 20s.

Advertisement



She says the study only examined physical bullying, and that more research needs conducting into cyberbullying – in which bullies spread cruel words and lies about their victim through emails, text messages and social media posts.