

AikiQuest

A Guide for Students and Families



AIKIDO OF AMHERST
THOUGHTFUL VIGOROUS MARTIAL ARTS



TDS Center
for Communication
and Social Learning

Welcome to *AikiQuest*!

This guide will give you some basic information about this program, the values that inform it, and the practices that embody it. We recommend keeping it as a reference. Families could benefit from reading it together.

AikiQuest is a program that uses the martial art of Aikido to support neurodivergent adolescents and adults in their quests for lives of dignity, meaning, and joy.

Aikido is a defensive martial way that utilizes fluid circular movement, mindful breathing, relaxation, centering, and good body alignment. Consistent Aikido practice improves one's physical conditioning--coordination, balance, flexibility, endurance--and one's mental conditioning--concentration, self-confidence, and concern for others. Aikido is not a sport; it has no tournaments or competitions. Practice is frequently done with a partner, and practitioners continually help each other learn and improve, cultivating an energetic and supportive environment.

The *AikiQuest* program offers specific supports to make this transformative art open and available to neurodivergent individuals. These include:

- A full-hearted embrace of the neurodiversity paradigm and deliberate avoidance of languages, concepts, and mindsets associated with neuropathology.
- Small classes with multiple instructors where students receive individual attention and progress at their own pace.
- An aesthetically pleasing, low-impact sensory environment.
- Practices of etiquette and respect that are clearly communicated and gently enacted.
- Verbal and non-verbal teaching methods that cultivate fully-embodied learning.
- A supportive and friendly community of neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals.

AikiQuest is a collaboration between Aikido of Amherst and TDS Center for Communication and Social Learning.

Practices, Expectations, & Etiquette

Class Procedures

- Please do your best to arrive to the *dojo* (school) at least 10 minutes before class begins. (Sometimes arriving late is unavoidable. A little further down, we explain the etiquette for late arrival.)
- When you first enter the dojo, remove your shoes in the entryway and place them on the shelves.
- Quickly go to one of the dressing rooms and change into your *gi* (uniform). If you need assistance with your *gi*, any of the instructors or mentors can help.
- When getting onto the mat for the first time, do a kneeling bow in the direction of the scroll.
- When class begins, line up in front of the scroll sitting in *seiza* (formal sitting posture; knees on ground, hips on heels, back straight). Quiet, focused deep breathing is the first activity of class.
- Warm-up exercises follow the deep breathing. Stand up, spread out, face forward, and follow the exercises shown by the instructor.
- After the warm-up exercises, sit in *seiza* along either side wall. Carefully watch the instructors demonstrate an Aikido technique. The instructors will then assign you to a group or partner to practice the technique. After a few minutes, the instructors will signal that it is time to repeat the process and practice a new technique.
- The final portion class is Mat Chat, a time to ask questions, have conversation, and reflect on our experience of Aikido.
- Class ends with a standing breathing exercise, followed by lining up in *seiza* and seated deep breathing.
- When leaving the mat for the final time, do a kneeling bow in the direction of the scroll.

General Etiquette

- Always exhibit the utmost respect and care for your fellow students and the instructors. Aikido is a challenging and rewarding art that requires the sincere, careful and thoughtful practice of an entire community. All of us are invested in each other's learning, growth, and joy.
- Once class has started, remain quiet. Save questions and conversation for Mat Chat.
- The best way to sit on the mat is *seiza* (knees on ground; hips on heels; back straight). If this position is painful, you may sit with legs crossed and back straight (*anza*). These postures cultivate robust attention and express respect for oneself, the space around you, and the art you are practicing.

- Refer to the Chief Instructor as *Sensei* (teacher). You may refer to assistant instructors and mentors by their first names.
- During class, if you need to leave the mat for any reason, get the attention of one of the instructors. (See the section on "Taking a Break")
- When you are unavoidably late to class, enter the dojo quietly, change into your gi, and sit on the edge of the mat in seiza. One of the instructors will acknowledge you, and you will join the class in-progress. Although arriving early is ideal, it is important to practice whenever you are able and to always travel safely to the dojo.

Embodied Learning, Quiet Practice, and Mat Chat

To learn Aikido well, you will need to open your mind and fully engage your body. The instructors will often demonstrate movements and techniques and then verbally describe them. For best learning, you should carefully watch everything the instructors do during a demonstration; then you should listen carefully to everything they say. Sometimes they will say very little or nothing; then you should concentrate on seeing all that you can. Frequently you will practice in a small group or in a line; when it is not your turn practice, your learning will improve significantly from carefully watching the practice of others. Also, while you practice, much of your learning will also occur through the sense of physical touch.

We remain mostly quiet during practice, because our minds are most open and our bodies are most malleable when we are quiet. (Of course, if you are not feeling well or need to leave the mat for any reason, get the attention of one of the instructors; more on that in the next section.)

If you have a question during practice, note it in your mind, then ask it during Mat Chat. Mat Chat is the time when we come together to voice our questions and think aloud and reflectively about our experiences of Aikido. This conversation, at this time, enriches everyone's practice.

Taking A Break

Aikido will challenge you physically, mentally, and emotionally. You are, however, fully capable of meeting this challenge and drawing great benefit from it.

Sometimes during practice you will need to take a break. You might be physically exhausted. You might be experiencing some strong emotions that interfere with your concentration. Your body might insist on moving in ways that are not part of Aikido practice. Your mind might feel extremely full. You might feel an urge to speak that you cannot resist. When you have experiences like these, get the attention of an instructor, and say: *I need to take a break*. Then go to the edge of the mat, bow, and spend some restorative time in the lobby or a dressing room. We all need a break sometimes. It is part of being fully human. It is also an integral part of Aikido practice.

VOCABULARY

General

Aikido: The way of blending with energy

Dojo: school; "place of the way"

Genkan: entryway of the dojo where we remove our shoes

Sensei: teacher

O Sensei: the founder and creator of Aikido; Morihei Ueshiba (1883-1969)

Sempai: senior student

Kohai: junior student

Nage: person receiving an attack and performing a technique

Uke: person performing an attack and receiving a technique

Ukemi: falling/rolling; performing role of uke

Hara: center; vital point

Onegaishimasu: Will you please [practice with me]?

Arigato Gozaimashita: Thank you [for practicing with me]?

Gambate kudasai: Give it your best! Try your all!

Gambatemasu: I will!

Positions

Seiza: formal seated posture; knees on ground; hips on heels; back straight

Anza: seated with legs crossed; alternative to seiza

Hanmi: ready stance

Attacks

Shomenuchi: front strike

Yokomenuchi: side strike

Tsuki: thrusting punch

Katatetori: one hand grabs wrist

Morotetori: two hands grab one wrist/forearm

Ryotetori: two hands grab two wrists

Techniques

Ikkyo: first immobilization technique

Kotegaeshi: wrist turn technique

Shihonage: four-direction throw

Iriminage: entering throw

Tenchinage: sky and earth throw

Kokyuhō: breath power technique

Exercises

Ikkyo undo: ikkyo exercise

Funakogi undo: rowing exercise

Kokyu dosa: breath power exercise

Body Movements and Directions

Tenkan: turn; pivot on front leg

Irimi tenkan: entering turn; stepping with back leg then pivoting

Ura: moving behind uke

Omote: moving in front of uke

Numbers

Ichi: one

Rokku: six

Ni: two

Shichi: seven

San: three

Hachi: eight

Shi: four

Ku: nine

Go: five

Juu: 10