

Step by step?

by Victoria Arnett
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Learning ballet trains the body and the mind. For small children, attaining a grasp of the physical coordination needed is a feat in itself. Ideally it should be a disguised feat, made to appear as a series of games or stories to retain the interest of three, four and five-year-old children. But is this ballet? It is dance aimed at steering the children towards ballet or contemporary dance or whatever direction they may take. Without inventing a new term for it, let's go with 'ballet' since that is what everybody calls it.

Ballet is a strictly codified form of movement producing professionals who have bodies honed to a high degree of athleticism and who can move their limbs in a way like nobody untrained in the form. The main factor that makes this different to other sports or dance techniques is the turn-out of the legs allowing them to be raised to the height of the ears or further without distorting the line of the pelvis. Balancing the body weight over legs turned out from the hip is one of the major hurdles to achieve on the path to learn ballet and developing the strength to retain this during turns and jumps takes years. This all sounds like hard work and it is but it is enormously satisfying and from the first small successes to that feeling of elation that comes the first time a student manages a multiple pirouette, it can become addictive.

But is all this suitable for small children? The benefits for three to six year olds come from improved coordination, body awareness, rhythm and musicality, creativity (as long as they are allowed to have some input), developing self-confidence and learning to be part of a group. Technique focussed on straightening backs, strengthening feet and legs helps build stronger muscles while children are growing. This is not necessarily aided by turning the legs out; in fact doing so causes some young children to succumb to a hollow back and postural faults rather than the opposite as intended! Another element of a proper ballet class, standing at the barre, is likely to lose the attention of small children. So in

a class geared to young children where they are working with parallel feet, learning motor skills that will aid their development, is there a vast difference between what is termed 'ballet' or 'modern dance'? Tap dance is different but can young children whose coordination is still such that they occasionally fall over when running really stand on one leg for long enough to learn shuffles etc? I do not believe that it is necessary to learn several dance subjects until children have been at school for a few years. It will be unlikely to stand them in better stead later than children who have attended one class a week suited to their level.

However it is a different story for children who have been at school for a few years.

Now we're talking about children who are learning technical exercises, learning the French terminology of ballet and who are physically capable of achieving more. It is very likely they will be following the syllabus of an accepted dance organisation as most schools in the UK are affiliated to one or more of these and they will be entered for exams. Now their development is less predictable. Some children are fast developers, others are slow learners needing more time to achieve the same results. There is therefore more scope to change things; a few children can afford to be fast tracked, moving away from their peers, others will benefit from learning a new dance style.

Since it is likely whatever they do that they will be taking dance exams it is important that this

does not become the exclusive aim behind their dance classes. No syllabus is complete in itself as a means of training. It is necessary to balance syllabus work with 'free' work to quicken the pupils' responses to new work and to vary the diet. A purely syllabus fed dancer is less open to new impulses and restricted in what he or she can do to whatever is contained in the syllabus at the level they are studying. Another aspect to exams is that efforts become focussed on achieving higher results each time - than the last time, than the next student. Ballet is not a competitive sport. There are no medals, there is no rostrum. Exams are a useful way of providing a short-term goal and winning recognition but we must guard against them becoming the focal point of classes. In an audition or performance you are not given

points, you are perceived as being as good as your best efforts on the day. It may not be necessary for older students (secondary school level) to take all the grades foreseen by the dance organisation in question. There are now more divisions/ levels/ grades than there ever have been but we do not have to slavishly follow step by step if one grade can be omitted without pushing students too fast. This has to be assessed by the dance teacher who can advise what is best for each student.

So ballet means something different to pupils at different stages of their childhood and provides more of a challenge as they are capable of rising to it. Paramount is enjoyment however because no-one is willing to invest the effort required unless they are enjoying what they are doing.

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