
Children Who Dance

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A Handbook for Teachers of
Elementary School Children

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My gratitude and thanks are extended to the people who helped in various ways to shape this book;

Dr. Joyce Boorman from whom I learned much about children and dancing over many years.

Carol McNeil who looked upon my drawings of music as a challenge and found a way to make the computer spit them out looking sensible.

Diane Coulthard for her lovely photographs of the children dancing - a difficult task in a room full of moving children.

My mother, Pamela Matthews, who corrected my grammar and Jackie Best who corrected my explanations of teaching process.

The hundred or so children we work with every Saturday and the children I work with in school, who continue to teach me.

DEDICATION

*This book is dedicated to the Joeys, Jens, Ginas and Jackies,
and all children who dance.*

FOREWORD

A dance lesson

. a good dance lesson has variety. The children need to experience a range of actions so that different body parts and muscles are worked. They need to work sometimes intensely at great speed and with power, sometimes slowly and gently. They need to use lots of space, and to learn to work in a crowd, developing their peripheral vision, ability to spot an open space, when to dodge and when to come to an abrupt halt. They need to dance alone at times, at other times sorting out their ideas with a partner or in a small group.

Children need to dance “about@ many things - real and imaginary, funny, happy and sad.

Mostly they need to develop their ideas over time to let things gel physically and mentally - and to change their minds.

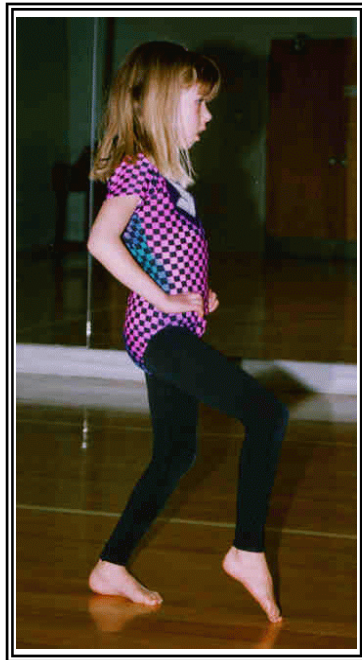
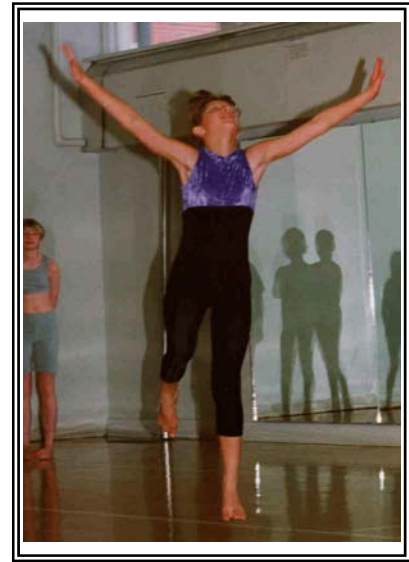
Teachers can provide variety and continuity by working on several ideas within one lesson, carrying material into the next lesson to be reviewed and developed, or completed and another idea started. By having one dance lesson each week throughout the year, the teacher can provide appropriate challenges as the children grow and develop. Ideas from Language Arts, Social Studies, Art, Music and Science may be used in dance to increase the way in which the children come to know about things.

One lesson could start with a few vigorous minutes of an introductory activity to music, followed by work on perhaps an action phrase or poem, then the development of part of a dance with story and music. By varying the stimuli and pace, the teacher not only provides variety, but also allows for the different ways in which children learn.

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES

When children enter the gym space, they want to “go”, to move quickly. The activities that take place at the start of the class set the pace for the rest of the lesson, and help to “channel” the children’s energy and focus them on some of the action vocabulary of the lesson - in this instance, dance. If the teacher wastes no time in starting the activity, the children become accustomed to being active immediately. One method of doing this is to start with a rhythmical travelling pattern: selecting a travelling action appropriate for the age-group and gradually developing it by exploring a spatial or dynamic aspect and possibly adding a partner relationship.

This is one time in teaching when I tend to have the children travelling from one end of the space to the other. One reason for this is to allow enough room to repeat an action (at speed) several times in order to establish a rhythm. Another reason is that many of the travelling actions involve exploring new floor patterns, which need a clear space. This method of working also allows for “timing” to be developed. Gradually, with practice and “age” the children learn to be ready to set off eight or four or two beats after the child(ren) ahead. This kind of work helps them musically, which is a benefit to the development of dances with complex pieces of music in another part of the lesson.



A vigorous introductory activity, as well as focussing the children, gets their bodies thoroughly moving and their minds thoroughly awakened so that they are ready to work freely during the exploration that will take place in the body of the lesson following the introductory activity.

One way to develop an introductory activity is for the teacher to select a travelling action appropriate to the age and development of the children, and over time (a few minutes at the start of each class) add an aspect that will make it more complex, challenging and interesting. The trick is to do this gradually; first be sure that the children are fluent with the action itself before increasing the level of difficulty by adding, for example, a spatial aspect, such as a pathway. If the travelling action itself is performed with fluency, so the children know **what** they are doing, they can focus on **where** they are going. Next, a relationship aspect may be introduced. If the child is fluent with the action **and** has mastered a new pathway, she/he can focus on dealing with another person. These levels of difficulty need to be added over time - by working on a travelling action for a few minutes at the start of each class. The teacher can judge when to introduce the next stage. Of course, the extent to which any

travelling pattern may be developed depends on a number of factors, an important one being the age of the children. One would not, for example, expect five year olds to master a combination travelling pattern (e.g. run x4, bounce x4) in a consistent zigzag floor pattern while matching a partner! But, with appropriate experiences, the teacher can set the foundations for more complex ideas to be tried at a later (often a much later) date!

Quality music should be selected, with the right tempo for the travelling action in question, and for the size of the children. It is very difficult for a young child to adjust his/her speed of moving, in for instance a skip or gallop if the music is too fast or too slow. An older child can, at times, add height or distance to an action in order to stay with the rhythm. A younger child may not be able to adjust her/his natural travelling speed to an inappropriate tempo.

It is best for the children to practise the action individually at first, even if the activity will be done eventually with a partner. Practise the action first, remembering that any action (skip, gallop, bounce, run) is made more difficult with the addition of:

- a change of direction (backwards, sideways) }
- a focus on pathways (e.g. curves, zigzags) } SPACE
- a change in levels (e.g. high to low) }

- a change of time (sudden/sustained) }
- a change of weight (firm/fine tension) } EFFORT
- a change of flow (bound/free) }

- a combination of actions (e.g. run for 4, bounce for 4)

- a relationship (e.g. meeting and parting) } RELATIONSHIP

- a combination of any of the above (e.g. skip in a zigzag pathway while matching a partner).

Once the chosen action is fairly fluent, **one** of the complicating factors can be added if developmentally appropriate, then later, another. For example:

- skip (action)
- skip forwards and backwards (action and change of direction)
- skip with change of direction while meeting and parting with a partner (action, change of direction and relationship).

The children will learn better, and enjoy it more if a **short** but **vigorous** time is spent on an introductory activity at the start of each dance class, developing it when they are ready. The learning is cumulative, so spreading progressions over several lessons allows the children time to internalize, allows review time (a very important aspect of learning) and ensures that a child who is absent for a session does not miss out entirely the development of a complex pattern. In addition, too much time spent on one activity causes fatigue (physical and cognitive), possible frustration and a reduction in the quality of the movement (how well they do it). *Short, frequent attempts with maximum focus and energy leads to long-term learning.*

A teacher may work with the children on **one** travelling pattern at the start of several classes, then move to developing another one for a few classes, preferably involving a different action. The previously learned material can be revisited at a later date.

The children remember and look forward to practising the introductory activity they are currently exploring, and given the music, can be taught to enter the gym and **get going**. It is rewarding when, for example, children in a grade one class which has been working on skipping backwards, turn around as they cross the threshold of the gym and enter backwards! Likewise, a teacher can gauge the enjoyment of a grade four who rush to the end of the gym, find partners and start galloping, changing the "front" every 4 beats.



Note well: The following materials suggested for Introductory Activities are cumulative, and reflect what children **can** learn to do (physically, cognitively, socially) and find absorbing (affectively) during that particular year.

Each year new things become possible: sometimes a new action, sometimes a new way to use an old action. *Teachers should look at the ideas for the previous grade as well as his/her own.*

For example, in Kindergarten, the children start to be able to skip backwards. Later in the year they can use this new found skill in a meeting and parting partner relationship. This activity is not listed/described for Grade One, though it could be very appropriate at the start of the year. Listed and described activities for Grade One are those that **now become possible**, but were not previously.

Older, known skills/concepts can be explored in more open contexts - such as in the development of a dance. Notice that "Pattern to cure a Headache", a Grade One dance is **all** about backwards: stepping slowly, spinning quickly and bouncing to a rhythm. In Kindergarten, it was enough **just** going backwards!