

All about... dance in the early years

Young children's experimentation with movements is linked to what we later recognise as 'dance', say *Anne O'Connor* and *Anna Daly*, directors of Primed for Life Training Associates



JUSTIN THOMAS: PHOTO AT REFLECTIONS NURSERY, WORTHING

Dance is an art form. It can be studied and learned and at a certain level requires technique and skill. Yet, to dance is also instinctively human. Dance expresses feelings, tells stories, demonstrates strength and power, connects people, creates ritual and celebration and, like art and music, it communicates individual and collective experience in a way that words sometimes can't. It is intrinsically linked to our early physical development, as young children experiment with movement responses to the stimulus of the world around them.

The craft and skill of dance includes three main elements:

- Creating,
- Performing, and
- Appreciation.

These three elements are the same whether you are a child in a nursery or a professional dancer. Thinking about dance in the early years through these elements enables us to see not just what is important in early dance, but also how young children's movements and experimentation are linked to what we later recognise as 'dance' in all its different forms.

CREATING: IMPROVISING, REFINING AND COMPOSING

Improvising is a fundamental part of dance. It involves exploring, discovering and creating our own movements.

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Then comes refining – this is where we practise, repeat, extend and add to those movements, trying one with another. Finally, just like composing a piece of music, composing dance involves selecting and sequencing chosen movements and memorising them in that form.

Children in the early years are moving constantly and building their physical literacy. They acquire a 'vocabulary' of movements through experimentation and watching others. Improvisation is a individual way of investigating movement by responding and reacting spontaneously in the moment, interpreting stimulation from our feelings, our environment and our imagination. ➤

EYFS BEST PRACTICE

Professional dancers and choreographers use improvisation to begin working on a theme or devising a new dance. Young children will explore a common dance vocabulary and find their own ways of moving too. Some of the movements you might see include: wriggling, rolling, balancing, jumping, skipping, twirling, turning, spinning, hopping, swaying, stamping, rocking, clapping, bouncing, kicking, twisting, sliding, hanging upside down, starting, stopping and falling.

These are all regular everyday activities but also important and valid movements in building a child's early dance skills.

PERFORMING: REHEARSAL, PERFORMANCE, REFLECTION

Performance includes the important aspect of rehearsing – repeating, practising and developing the movements. This includes working on skills and technique, as well as accuracy and perfecting the quality of movement.

Performing comes later and involves sharing the practised movements, by presenting and 'performing' the dances in a variety of ways.

Reflection involves adapting the dance to suit a range of factors – changes in environment, numbers, or events as well as improving quality of performance.

It is important to stress that 'performing' does not need to be in front of a huge, invited audience. It might just be the 'watch me!' moment that is one movement that delights a child. It might be inspired by hearing music playing or by watching others dance. It might be a group collaboration or it can be done alone with intention.

That 'intention' is the difference between the exploring, improvising and rehearsing of improvisation and the moment that they 'perform' it for themselves, perhaps imagining an audience. Performance can be impromptu on the spot, or planned for in a space created to be visible to others. Performance is about seeing and being seen and displaying a conscious attention to this, even if the audience is oneself.

We can recognise the formal vocabulary of dance performance in the way that children play together, particularly when they respond to familiar music and songs.

Ring games and copying or 'follow

my leader' games explore a 'call and response' structure. Teaching each other *sequences* or *routines* to perform together in *unison*, a skill and experience in itself, involves working as part of an *ensemble* to practise and present dance performance. Marking out a space or *stage* for performance also defines who is *dancer* and who makes up the *audience*.

APPRECIATION: WATCHING, ENJOYING, CRITIQUING

Fundamental to appreciation is the opportunity to see and watch others dancing, as well as joining in yourself, seeing all sorts of people as well as trained and professional dancers, dancing alone and together, with and without music. Observing different styles, different music and noticing how it affects you, how it makes you feel and what you enjoy watching and what you enjoy less. With lots of early experience of this, you can then begin to judge and critique the technique, the artistic nature and quality of the dance. In the early years this includes:

- Watching and dancing with others, to familiar music as well as to music that is less familiar and culturally diverse. Think about the wide range of music styles that are linked with dance, for example, classical, pop, Chinese and Asian, folk and traditional music from across the UK and Ireland,



African and Caribbean and other European.

- Awareness of different dance styles. This could be from TV and film, books about dance, as well as local community and professional dancers, for example, ballet, Bhangra, Irish, Morris, street dance, tap, jazz and ballroom.



Performance may be follow my leader in style ; or working on routines as part of an ensemble (top)



- Appreciation of the little dances and movement routines that are a regular part of the day, supporting daily routines or keeping momentum going, for example, ring games to reinforce concepts ('Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush'); 'Wake up Shake Up' routines to start the day; 'Follow

my Leader' or skipping into line.

- Specialist delivery of dance sessions offered in the setting. Where specialist dance teachers are well trained in understanding the needs and development of young children, they can inspire both staff and children through their enthusiasm, physicality and dance skills.
- Watching professional dancers – in the setting, on DVD or at dance performances. There is value in young children seeing the artistry, skill and technique of professional dancers, ideally within the setting, although this can be difficult as few settings have large enough performance areas. Trips to theatres, for example, have their value but bear in mind that venues for this age group 'benefit from careful staging and adaptation to create a welcoming, non-threatening environment that stimulates interest without arousing anxiety'. (Ludus Dance 2011)

Providing a wide range of dance experiences helps raise children's awareness that there is more than one way to dance and that no one way is necessarily better than the other. It enables children to see that it is something that anyone can do, but also equips them to understand and appreciate the role of technique and skill that is an integral part of the artistry of dance.

'Performance' doesn't have to be in front of a huge, invited audience

DANCE MYTHS

There are certain myths that have built up around dance that have prevented it from becoming universally understood and appreciated as something with a place in the early years curriculum.

Dance needs music

Haven't you ever danced to the music in your head? Or watched children spinning, hopping and skipping to a rhythm all of their own? Music can be a great inspiration and stimulus for movement and dance, but sometimes it can dictate a strong tempo that may override smaller, quieter more individual rhythms and patterns that need to be explored.

A lot of contemporary dance artists work in silence to listen to the nature of their movements and allow a more abstract interpretation to arise. A lot of professional performance work is done in silence to allow complete attention to the mechanics and reading of the body's movement.

Early years children, particularly, live in this state of primary attention to the senses and movement as their first way of understanding their world, their environment and themselves. Physical literacy and successful gross motor skills development requires a body to know the natural pace and rhythm of movements, such as throwing or spinning and particularly skipping.

There are natural rhythms ➤

CASE STUDIES

As part of a creative residencies project, Anna Daly was commissioned as a dance and movement play specialist to work in settings, providing CPD and exploring the value of dance and movement in children's play, learning and development

Noah's Ark Pre-School: Dance as communication – exploring movement as dialogue with turn taking, rhythm and repetition

Stefan did not speak English as a first language. He was particularly shy and struggling to actively engage and play with his peers. Knowing that

talking brought with it extra pressure and difficulty, Anna focused on movement as language to greet and 'chat' with him, observing potential play cues.

Initially, they played a stop/start game of peek-a-boo developed around a small house/hut structure open at both ends. As they explored how they could communicate and play together, his confidence, well-being and improvisation all increased. Through using hiding, chasing, circles and sounds the game grew into a simple dance, as they followed and copied each other and used voice to instruct or call attention.

This game/dance developed over 20 minutes or so and eventually the duet became a trio and a group structure as other children joined in and learned by watching what the 'steps' were. Despite the language difference, Stefan was able to use his own physicality and sounds to play with others and take the lead and voluntarily express his ideas and initiative.

Rufford Pre-School : Dance as part of daily routine

In a 'pack-away' setting that runs in a church hall, Anna chose to make the most of the space that was becoming

available as the staff packed away dividers, tables and toys. Moving into a 'Follow my leader' teaching style, she revisited the movements she had observed children making during the morning as they played inside and out.

Recalling children and their movements allowed reflection and appreciation as they copied the movements and made the most of the increasing space available around them. This lasted less than ten minutes, and once the staff had cleared all furniture, the children followed her easily as a group, ready to sit down and bring the morning session to a close.

EYFS BEST PRACTICE

and patterns to simple human movements that need plenty of time to be mastered. These also link with the phrasing of songs and language and the individual melodies of speaking.

A child who cannot understand or hear the rhythm or intonations of language may not have had time to feel in time or in tune with their own physicality. Ring games and nursery rhymes can offer a repeatable fun way to develop rhythm and musicality, as can creating your own songs and dances together.

Often a loud pop track becomes an external lead to move like everyone else rather than listen to their own creative explorations. Make sure there is plenty of opportunity for both and notice what different children may need. Just like all learning styles, there is no one size that fits all.

Dance is for girls

Dance and the fluidity and expression of movement that goes with it are often seen as feminine qualities, when in fact they are human skills that support communication, personal development and emotional resilience. Both masculine and feminine qualities are within all of us and the grace, co-ordination and architecture of ballet moves can be demonstrated by boys just as well as girls. Likewise, young girls can equally benefit from the power, strength and acrobatics of breakdance and other forms of street dance.

As very young children we dance freely... until we learn which form of dance our culture has decided is acceptable for us. We need to challenge our own prejudices and offer open-ended ideas that support both boys and girls to get the most out of all dance experiences.

Dance needs to be a routine, with a beginning and an end and needs to be watched and clapped

Dance can be entertainment and young children love to 'put on a show' for us yet we must never underestimate the power of the small dances that happen when no one is looking! We have all done them in our moments of frustration, joy or excitement, and children do it all the time.

Observe how a small greeting between friends with claps and hops becomes a brief duet or how a child uses their own body movement to understand the concept of a tree and its branches blowing in the wind.



Solo performance

Dance can be a child skipping along a path or a fleeting perfect step or two done with feeling, curiosity or intention.

Dance needs to be copied from someone who can teach you

Like all of the arts, we all have the ability to dance, paint and sing if we aren't limited by judgements or fear. The early years are the prime time to explore our own way of moving and dancing – and feeling good about it – before we learn particular techniques of dance from someone else.

Dance needs a costume

Dance can come from the inside as an expression of emotion or music. We don't always need to be in our best dress or a leotard or playing a part, we can just dance as ourselves in the buff or as we are – children know this! Costume can definitely support imagination, role play and performance and encourage timid movers, yet we already have all we need to dance anywhere, or anytime and you can always 'come as you are'.

ROLE OF THE PRACTITIONER

- The most important aspect of our role in supporting early dance is noticing, observing and sometimes getting out of the way. If interrupted, the dance and exploration may come to an abrupt halt. For some children, being seen, even from a distance, may be enough recognition, and for others they will want more space, music and props and maybe an audience.
- Never underestimate the value of your own physicality to respond, mirror or echo some of the movements you see children trying out. Probably not back flips or the splits, but a jiggle or a spin – let them see how you would try it and



REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- Performance based dance-in-education model for national early years sector with a focus on three- to five-year-olds year – Evaluation Report (Ludus Dance, 2011), http://www.ludusdance.org/downloads/cache/early_years_r&d_final_report.pdf
- For a video diary and further information – <http://vimeo.com/37103304>
- 'Small Steps Big Move' Early Years Dance Resource Pack - Dance 4, £35 including activity ideas and creative dance CD, <http://dance4.co.uk/about/project/services/about/services/teaching-resources>
- Jabadao - music CDs for creative movement and dancing from <http://www.jabadao.org/?p=music> (£8 each)
- *Everyday Dancing – Fun activities to stimulate movement and dance for all ages* (£6.50) and *Hopping Home Backwards* by Penny Greenland (£10.00), from <http://www.jabadao.org/?p=books>
- Bubbles Education Early Years Dance Resource pack - £60 lesson plans and CD, <http://www.bubbleseducation.co.uk/early-years-dance-resources.html>

that you are interested enough to see what it is like.

- Sometimes movement doesn't need to be discussed, just do it. If you mirror what a child does, this says, 'I hear you', just watching them attentively says, 'I am listening', and if you join in the conversation, then a dance has started. Explore this yourself and don't be tempted to ask, and talk about the movements or the dance, as the dance is enough.
- As in all areas of provision the dances and opportunities will come and go but as a larger and more advanced mover, consider your own physicality as one of your richest resources and feel the groove!

OTHER RESOURCES

Music

- Collect a wide variety of different styles
- Look out for bargain compilations of world music, classical, jazz, film soundtracks, etc.
- Take the music outdoors so you can play it loud and make the most of extra space
- Let children make their own selections of their favourites
- Encourage staff and parents to contribute too.

Props

Lycra, scarves, odds and ends of fabric, ribbons, percussion, bells – anything that encourages movement.

Books

- *Giraffes Can't Dance* by Giles Andreae and Guy Parker Rees
- *The Book Of Dance* published by Dorling Kindersley
- *Dancing Larry* by Daniel Manus Pinkwater (Benchmark Books). ■

Anne O'Connor and Anna Daly are directors of early years training company, Primed for Life. <http://www.primedforlife.co.uk>, offering support for dance and physical development in the early years and all aspects of the Prime areas in the EYFS. Anne is an independent early years consultant, trainer and writer. Anna Daly is a creative movement play specialist and dance development artist with Ludus Dance.

For more information about their training days and bespoke packages personalised for your setting or local authority, please contact info@primedforlife.co.uk