

Why Should Every Child Study Dance?

By: Mimi Liu

Picture a group of children dancing together! Their hands are held side by side, forming a circle that looks like a giant bubble in the room. The bubble will then contract and expand, in and out, based on the directions given by the dance teacher. The boys and girls shrink into a tight circle, and then the teacher calls out "Freeze!" They stop the breath of the bubble by sensing each other's impulses, listening closely to one another's bodies as they hold themselves very still in a united moment in space. Some students are giggling because they are having so much fun while others are seriously invested in the freeze. Every ounce of their fibers is working hard to fight for stillness. And during this time, their bodies are slowly building strength while they concentrate on achieving a common goal. After a short pause, the teacher goes, "And let's inflate our bubble! Bigger! And BIGGER...". Then it bursts. The children laugh joyfully. "Now spin on your feet!" Every child in this room now is spinning like the stars in the sky, dispersed randomly in space from the momentum of the busted bubble.



Let's peek into another dance teacher's class and see how the children are learning there.

Children in this dance class are paired up in trios. And their dance assignment is to carry an orange across the room without using their hands. The challenge is to not drop the orange during their journey from point A to point B, and they must pick another body part to utilize for the mission. The teams are strategically thinking of ways to transfer the orange using other reliable body parts, like the back, forearm, even the shoulders. The children negotiate with each other verbally and physically in order to carry out a successful travel. They test things out, using the method of trial and error to scan for the most strategic choice in anatomy.

A group of students are ready to go! Looks like they picked their foreheads. They begin

carefully at first by activating all their senses in the body. One of the group members is keeping a close eye on the orange so far. Another is watching her team closely so she can readjust her steps as needed. The boy on the team is gazing below eye level to keep a steady pace for the team. The orange now seems to be comfortably pressed against their foreheads in a balancing act. Everyone in the room is holding their breath and cheering with excitement as they watch the team locomotes through the nervous room!



So what is happening in these scenarios?

The answer: The students are not just taking a dance class! ***They are forming a highly creative quality of life with others!***

Dancing will create experiences that could not be duplicated in a traditional classroom setting. It is a learning vehicle where every part of the child is benefiting from the activity of moving! Dance education is an integral part of [whole-child education](#). By being engrossed in the physical aspect of dance and dance making, children learn how their physical fitness will help them become better learners. When a school is built with spaces for dance and movement, children can spread their wings, stretch out their legs, and allow their imaginations to soar. Learning dance can also fulfill the need for children to socialize with others in cooperative ways, sometimes developing friendships that will last a lifetime. These and other benefits of studying dance will help meet [the essential needs of a child's](#) overall development and wellbeing.

IMPROVEMENT OF PHYSICAL HEALTH

Dance is an aerobic activity that enhances both muscle and bone strengths. When the children were spinning on their feet in the first dance scenario, they were [building stronger muscles in their arches and toes](#). Our feet provide the full support of our body weight, so it is important to develop strong and flexible feet to keep the rest of our body healthy. When children do any jumping movement, they are partnered up with Mr. Gravity to help [develop stronger bone mass](#). These reasons alone make the study of dance vitally important for a child's physical growth. Moreover, when a dance teacher gives a verbal cue along the lines of "stand up nice and tall" or "Shoulders back and chin up", it fixes poor postures almost immediately in a student. And with a consistent study of dance, a student will remember good posture as a habit, in a way, naturally becomes his or her own teacher of posture and poise. And for the passionate students, because dance training helps improve postural alignment and a person's form so much, they often may

volunteer to correct the people in their lives' postures outside of a dance classroom. It's adorable. Another benefit of dance is to improve a person's balance. In the orange scenario, the three students balanced the fruit together and maintained their own centers of balance while moving strategically in space. At some point in a typical dance class, you will often see children balancing on one foot. This action is building stability in the rest of the body by engaging all the larger muscle groups to hold oneself up in place. And balance leads us to coordination, which is [the efficient combination of body part](#). A standard exercise that many great jazz dance teachers' use to help students improve coordination is called "the isolations" i.e. moving only one body part while keeping the rest of the body still, during warm-up. Coordination through dance exercises like the isolations, will help a dance student become more aware of where and how a movement is happening in his or her body. When the student becomes more aware of the concept of coordination, he or she will feel more comfortable moving the body in more expressive ways. In addition, excellent coordination will also help students become more versatile dancers for later studies. Indeed, the physical benefits of dancing are common knowledge, however, it is only the tip of the iceberg of the reasons why every child needs dance.

SHARPENS THE BRAIN FOR ACADEMICS

Dance enhances memory retention because the act of physicalizing an idea will help your child learn and remember. According to The Active Living Research, [regular participation in physical activity have been linked to improved academic performance and brain functions](#), such as memory and attention. These findings make dance education an additional facilitator to learning other subjects in academics. Because dancing is contextualizing information in the body and mind, subjects like Science, History, and Math can all be embodied! Imagine how the study of earth science can be translated as dance? The arms waving in the sky can serve as the wind, and the flow of the bodies rippling through a line can represent water. And if a child is learning about the concept of "resistance" in English class, for example, dancing about "resistance" by exploring how it feels in the body will help a child remember what resistance means on a more meaningful level. Moreover, these scenarios cause children to think more critically as they try to synthesize information through kinesthetic means.

In order for a child to perform successfully in a dance class, focus is key. By paying attention to the teacher's directions, dance students will also apply this level of focus in other areas of their lives too. Students will demonstrate the understanding of a dance concept by kinesthetically answering back to a dance teacher. The teacher can then, clearly track a student's progress in the moment. Both the student and the teacher are benefiting cognitively from this relationship. The student can learn to apply the teacher's corrections immediately, reserving more time to learn and grow. And the dance teacher can track his or her teaching methods more effectively, and improve as a teacher with the students as they dance together.

Dance students are constantly practicing these skills in life every time they step into the dance studio. And on their way out, they leap away with these transferable skills in their pockets.

SOCIALIZING AND SELF-MAKING

Connecting with other people is at the root of dance. Dance has been passed down as an oral tradition, not a written one. The learning of dance is the act of transferring a person's experience to another. This is a special relationship, where the teacher passes down the art form to the ones who receive them. It is like being read to by Franklin, Adams, Jefferson et al. when reading *The Declaration of Independence*. Pretty exciting! But the act of dance acquisition is more than just the steps. Often times, a dance teacher's character, quality of movement and creativity will also be passed down along with the dance steps. Now this gets interesting, because something happens miraculously when one shares his or her whole self with someone else through dance. When this happens, the dance teacher is enhancing a student's life in memorable ways, making the role of a dance teacher very influential in a child's life. They encourage children to do something they love doing naturally, and that is to move and dance!

In the orange scenario, cooperation was a key social concept achieved by the three students. Points of views were shared, and mutual understandings were formed before they succeeded in traveling across the room with the orange. If one of the students didn't agree with the other two on using their foreheads, the orange would have fell on the floor, creating a small disaster. No, not really. The children probably would be laughing really hard on the floor with the orange. In all seriousness, without communicating beforehand and reaching an agreement to how the orange will be transferred, the students would not have been dancing in harmony. Through working with others in a dance class, students will be given the opportunity to foster relationships and develop their social skills for the future.

Students are making sense of who they are by building confidence through moving with intention. They are developing themselves by dancing with others, and dancing with others in a group helps children understand their need to belong. Being with other dance students can improve self-awareness, perception and helps with forming the ingredients of their own character and values. Also, when children are dancing with other children, they become very observant and connected. For instance, when a child is excited about a dance assignment, he or she will jump for joy. This student's joy will soon trigger other students to also feel joyful, making the benefits of dance a domino effect.

EXPRESSION OF FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS

Dance is an emotional outlet for children to express their joys, thoughts, and feelings when words cannot yet be articulated or are simply inadequate. Dance is another avenue of expression for them, in addition to other ways of communication such as writing or painting. A dance teacher's goal is to create a safe space for children to express themselves freely amongst their peers. This kind of nurturing, learning environment will help children explore their inner feelings about things or ideas through honest movement choices.

Students often observe one another during a dance class, both to learn from each other, and to better understand one another. They respond to each other's works with empathy.

This human connection can transition into adulthood as the ability to empathize more with others, especially performing artists or public speakers.

Taking dance classes can be therapeutic also. The American Dance Therapy Association published an article that mentioned teachers and parents of a group of children who took dance or movement therapy twice a week reported [an increase in healthier verbal communication of needs, appropriate use of touch/boundaries with peers, and a decrease in behavioral and emotional outbursts](#). Children have an abundance of energy, so having an appropriate place to release all that exuberance can be very beneficial towards their overall happiness—and their parents' as well.

AS A PART OF OUR CULTURE

In our fast-paced visual culture, it is important to learn dance in order to enhance our ability to better understand body language and appreciate other cultures. [Dance is everywhere!](#) Especially in New York City where dance never sleeps! New Yorkers are well nourished in dance; because a variety of dance performances are available year round for families to enjoy. A great dance education will help a child become more dance literate in a city that embraces the artistry of dancers and performers. Wouldn't it be a dream come true if every child knew the story of *Swan Lake*?

Furthermore, dance has diplomatic powers. Members of a Brazilian samba school recently danced their way across Rio de Janeiro [as protest for budget cuts from their annual Carnival celebration](#). Another dance troupe from New York City also recently jived [their way to closer ties between the United States and Ethiopia](#). Examples of these usages of dance tell us dance is an international bridge for all people to connect, no matter the language barriers or cultural differences.

In other places of the world, dance can represent an entire culture. For example, the recognizable Tango symbolically captures Argentina as a dance for two. Think about it now, dance is like a culture's shoes. So let's wear it more.

DANCE AND THE 4 Cs OF 21ST CENTURY SKILLS!

When a child is taking a dance class, he or she is directly applying [The 4 Cs of 21st Century](#), which are: Cooperation, Creativity, Critical Thinking, and Communication.

- “Cooperation”: Studying dance helps students follow directions of a dance teacher and encourage positive behaviors towards others e.g. show support for their peers.
- “Creativity”: Students learn complex dance concepts via imagination and analogy. They are also given chances to explore dance tasks with others creatively.
- “Critical Thinking” is applied when students solve spatial problems, learn choreography or repeat a step to figure out how to make improvements.

- “Communication” is utilized when a dance student articulates his or her thoughts and feelings with others by ways of moving and speaking.

In sum, dancing will help children shape up their [21st Century Minds](#) for a more successful adult life.

SO LET’S DANCE!

Children take dance classes to enjoy themselves, to discover new skills and to make more friends. While having fun, they are also learning a tremendous amount of life skills such as teamwork, productivity, empathizing with others, and respect. Often dance ignites feelings of inspiration. And students can take this positive feeling to generate more positive outcomes in their lives! The benefits of dance education are here to cultivate our children’s bodies, minds, and spirits. Dance needs them, and they need dance. So let’s make dance the forefront of a child’s day.

Hyperlinks of Sources:

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Regular participation in physical activity have been linked to improved academic performance and brain functions: http://activelivingresearch.org/sites/default/files/ALR_Brief_ActiveEducation_Jan2015.pdf

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