

## **Dance for young children can provide so much more than physical exercise. Could Early Years practitioners be the key to extending this learning opportunity to more children?**

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Childhood obesity has now become the most prevalent nutritional disease in developed countries according to a recent statement by the Child Growth Foundation (CGF 2010). Obesity is understood to occur as a result of a long term positive energy balance, that is when energy intake consistently exceeds energy expenditure (NICE 2006).

As exercise is the means by which the body expends energy it plays a key role in reducing the risk of developing obesity (Reilly *et al.* 2006). Physical exercise is therefore an important element in any early years dance programme. Tam Fry, honorary chairman of the *Child Growth Foundation*, said: "Half an hour of physical activity should be a daily event for pre-school children".

Dance is clearly a candidate for such physical activity. However, in my experience, an effective early years dance programme is not one which focuses solely on the physical exercise element. It must not be exercise for exercise sake. It must be enjoyable. It must have variety. It must be creative and use imaginative ideas and movements appropriate for the stage of development and which engages and entertains young children, with music which complements and inspires.

A dance programme which incorporates these elements can also deliver on areas of Learning and Development in the *Early Years Foundation Stage* (DfES 2007) other than physical and creative development. A dance sequence featuring a caterpillar can demonstrate the life cycle of the butterfly. A dance sequence featuring a centipede in Africa making a journey to another country can provide information about the world. Using different shapes and colours as markers in a room to dance around can reinforce literacy and numeracy skills. In *Tuning into Children* (2000), Tina Bruce spoke about how movement helps in language development and how sounds in words and rhyme play an important part in learning to read. The use of action songs and rhyme can extend the knowledge of sounds and language. Parental

choice and affordability are two main factors in deciding whether children are able to attend an extra curricular dance class.

An audit commissioned by the Scottish Arts Council (2003) revealed that parents/guardians are the primary source of funding private dance classes and that the cost can amount to over £200 per year. It went on to say that the “Billy Elliott” effect – the tale of a boy coming from a family with a limited income to become a leading classical dancer – is far from reality and pre-selection already exists in favour of those children with the resources to fund dance training at an early age.

Many early years children from low socio economic groups are excluded and the benefits that an effective dance programme can bring are denied to them. This is an area which I feel needs to be addressed.

I have had the privilege of teaching an early years dance programme to both early years practitioners and dance teachers. This experience has led me to the following observations.

1. If more children are to enjoy the benefit of a dance learning experience it seems to me that early years practitioners are well placed to provide them with this opportunity within an early years setting.

*Dance in Devon* in conjunction with NHS South West is currently initiating a project to get under 5's moving through dance and movement with their parents and caregivers. A major part of this Dept of Health funded programme will use the *Lets Dance* with *Change4Life* as the hook to create awareness of the *Change4Life* campaign ‘Eat well, Move More, Live Longer’. Projects like this recognise the value of an early years dance experience being made available to more children and are exploring the means by which this can be achieved.

2. The skills required for teaching dance to early years are different to those required when teaching technical dance to older children and can be summarised as follows:

- A high level of technical dance performance is not necessary.
- Understanding the early years stage of development and/or an enjoyment and interest in working with the age group is essential.

All those experienced in working within an early years setting already possess a knowledge and understanding of young children and their learning. It may be a surprise to learn that many qualified dance teachers have either no experience or very limited experience of dealing with this age group.

In the workshops I run it is quite common for qualified dance teachers to say that they find teaching dance to pre-school children really difficult. The following are examples of words and phrases used to describe some of the attitudes towards teaching pre school classes:

- intimidating;
- being out of their depth;
- ill equipped to cope;
- a half hour trying to entertain children;
- tedious;
- boring;
- a nightmare;
- best avoided.

The dance technique learned during their teacher training (if any) has little application. An ability to teach advanced dance technique is not necessary and the purpose of the pre school dance class is often misunderstood. Many opt out altogether by handing over the teaching of the younger classes to a teaching assistant.

This is not to say that all dance professionals adopt this attitude but it does serve to illustrate that the professional expertise required for teaching technical dance to dancers is not much help when faced with a class of three-year-olds.

3. Teaching dance to young children is not about teaching dancers. It is about providing young children with an enjoyable foundation in the principles of dance movement and performance.

Early years practitioners have the distinct advantage of a working knowledge of the age group. They are good communicators with the age group and enjoy working with

them. I am convinced that this is the basis on which a good foundation can be built if in addition three factors are addressed:

- Confidence;
- The provision of a wholly dependable, reliable syllabus which can be used either prescriptively or creatively depending on the confidence of the practitioner;
- Inspiring, engaging music complementary to the syllabus content.

The confidence to teach dance is often lacking amongst those working in an early years setting because dance is considered to be a specialist subject and one which (incorrectly in my opinion) can only be taught by professionally trained and qualified dance teachers. However, early years children are not dancers: they are young children and the approach to teaching dance at this level is very different. If those working within the early years recognise and accept this difference, I feel sure that confidence in their own ability to teach dance would be increased. To improve confidence still further the importance of a dance resource on which a teacher can totally rely cannot be underestimated. The dance resource should contain material with complementary music that has already been proven to work for young children, i.e. material and music which is appropriate for the age group and which engages and holds their attention.

If these ideas were adopted, I am convinced that an effective dance programme could be delivered to the benefit of many children in a variety of early years settings by those working in the early childhood sector.

To take the idea a stage further, perhaps a dance specialism could be offered as an optional element when studying for an early years qualification. For those interested in entering the early childhood professions, who also have a particular interest in dance, this could prove to be an additional attraction and the outcome could be, for example, a teacher, playworker or nursery assistant who is also qualified to deliver a dance programme.

**We would be very interested to hear your comments.  
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## Background information

I have been teaching dance for over 35 years. Travelling abroad as a result of my husband's work has often meant establishing new dance academies in different locations (e.g. Ghana). As a consequence, my main focus and particular area of interest has been the teaching of dance to younger children. In 2006 I created Lafour Prima Dance Ltd.

The Lafour Prima 1 and 2 Dance Programme (3-5yrs) is a resource created specifically for early years. The syllabus includes eg action songs, warm up games, movement games, action rhymes, story dances, partner work, group work, characterisation, rhythm, music appreciation, sequencing, percussion, stage directions and mime. The resource package contains a printed syllabus, music CD, demonstration DVD, evaluation criteria, report and certificate. For further information please visit [www.lafourprimadance.com](http://www.lafourprimadance.com).