A young girl is captured in a dynamic dance pose, her body angled towards the right. She wears a dark, sleeveless leotard with a full skirt. Her right arm is extended upwards and slightly to the left, while her left leg is lifted and bent at the knee. The background is a solid, deep purple. The title text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

DANCE TECHNIQUE FOR CHILDREN

MARY JOYCE



Dance Technique for Children

Mary Joyce



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Preface

Recently I watched a class in which a 10-year-old was doing a creative dance study. She attempted a back extension, couldn't hold it, and toppled slightly forward. I wanted to call out, "Hold your back up! Lift your leg against your back. You can do it; you just have to know where to find the strength!"

Creativity and technique go hand in hand. An experience in creative dance or educational dance can open up the world of expression and communication, but unless there is growth in strength, flexibility, and command of the body, the sense of fulfillment will be short-lived and incomplete.

As children become more proficient in creative movement, they will find they need greater technical skill in order to fully express their ideas. *Dance Technique for Children* explains the fundamental principles of safe, efficient, aesthetic movement for children ages 5 and up. It can be used in school as part of the physical education program, in a studio, in a recreation setting, or wherever children are learning to dance.

The ten areas of technique described here are fundamental to dance and should be accomplished by beginners of all ages. Whether you are a novice teacher or a veteran, if you work with beginners you will find this book useful. For teachers new to the field, the detailed lessons will provide help in class organization and teaching method. Experienced teachers can use the ideas on analysis and progressions to supplement their work. All will find that beginning dancers are eager to learn how to jump higher, balance longer, leap farther in correct alignment, and extend the capabilities of their instrument—the body.

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M. J.

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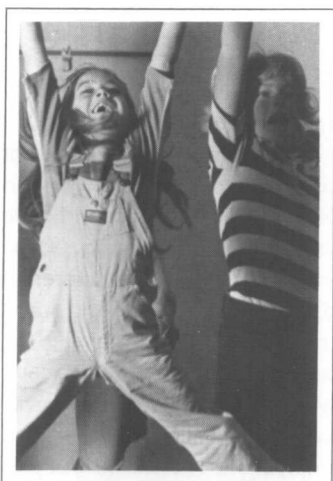
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Introduction

Teaching Dance Technique to Children



What is dance technique for children?

Technique comes from a Greek word meaning "skill." For a dancer, technique is the ability to use physical movements effectively. Dance technique for children is more elemental than technique for any particular form of dance. The goal is to teach the child to move safely and efficiently. Instruction focuses on principles, not on details of style. The instructor teaches children the primary, basic, fundamental uses of the body.

Vaslav Nijinsky, the great Russian dancer, showed in his dancing that the aim of dance technique is "essentially clarification; its first concerns [are] with balance, gravity, rhythm, proportion, not with turnout, toe shoes, and the eight positions of the body."* This concept of technique is especially true when you are dealing with

*Arlene Croce, "Dancing: News from the Muses," *The New Yorker* (September 11, 1978), p. 128.

children. What matters is not how high the leg will go, but how the leg goes; not the pointed toe, but the stretch from the center; not a specific use of the head, but the follow-through of the head from the line of the spine; not the ability to place the arms and legs in opposition, but the understanding of the torque of the body. The way in which the energy of the body is used is important, the way in which the contraction and release of muscles are used to stretch, bend, twist, circle, lift, fall, and step in time and space. Such uses of the body in relation to the physical laws of motion on earth, inertia, momentum, gravity, and reaction, are the basics that are clarified for children and by children in a technique class.

The children

I keep the following note from a 7-year-old because it reminds me that children come to class full of their own joys and pains. Cristina was twenty minutes late to class. As she took her place, she passed me this note:

Hi, Mrs. Joyce.
I have had a yucky time
putting on my leotard today.
I have a bump on my head
and somebody stepped on my leg when I
was doing pushups. that hurt.

Love Cristina

We teachers are full of ups and downs too. We learn to be with children and they learn to be with us. Together we find a mutual starting point of trust and wonder.

Children between the ages of 5 and 11 come to dance class for a number of reasons. Their parents want them to become better coordinated, to gain poise and grace. Some children dance constantly at home, so parents think they should have training. Perhaps their friends take lessons, so they want to take lessons too. Some want to be in shows, with costumes and makeup. Some parents send their children to dance class because they believe it is part of every child's basic education. And some children dance because it is required as part of the school curriculum.

In teaching basic dance technique to children, we are not training future dancers. What happens in a dance class must relate immediately to the child's life. The activity must involve the child fully, mentally and spiritually as well as physically.

No child will continue to dance unless he or she is enjoying it. The element of play must be there. Play in the broad sense means doing an activity for its intrinsic enjoyment with deep involvement in the moment. The novelty, the challenge, and the wonder of dance together with the child's capability to cope with it and the positive feedback derived from this accomplishment create the feeling of enjoyment.

To jump higher, to balance longer, to leap farther, to spin—these are all things

children long to do, and they will be motivated to gain the skills that lead toward these goals.

What is dancing?

On the first day children want to hear the exciting possibilities contained in a dance course and the goals for which they will be striving, in addition to the clothing, attendance, and behavior requirements. It gives children a feeling of pride and a sense of commitment to know that dancers dress a certain way for the best possible use of their bodies, that dancers arrive on time and don't chew gum, that the floor is kept clear and clean and the mirrors are never touched. The children, having a clear understanding of dance rules and etiquette, are now ready. But for what?

Sometimes teachers just rush ahead and start, never thinking to explain why we do what we do. Why are we exercising? Do children really need to warm up? Can't they just get on with the dancing? How many of us have had a young student ask, "But when do we dance?"

A 7-year-old once told me that dancing was "Mexican." A 4-year-old kept asking me during the first class when the lights would go out. She was expecting a show! To most children, however, dancing means moving through space to music. So, especially at the very beginning, each technique must be brought to this culmination or the children will not feel they are dancing.

What does dancing mean to your children? What aspect of dance will they learn in your class: Entertainment? Communication? Expression? Fun? Skill? As you teach the craft of dance, you will also be teaching your concept of dance.

Teach skills that are appropriate for the age, that relate to the children's understanding of their bodies and their concept of dance. The method used should keep the children aware that technique *is* dancing.

How children learn

I was interested in discovering how children themselves feel about dance technique and the act of learning, so I asked some young dancers between the ages of 10 and 16, "At what age were you first aware of feeling your muscles working correctly or incorrectly?" Without exception they all told me it was at the age of 9 or 10, in the fourth grade. At that time they first understood what a teacher meant by a "straight back" or "turn out from the hips." Before that, they said, they imitated the teacher and did what they thought was right. They danced because they thought it was fun. The important thing for teachers, then, especially with children younger than 9 or 10, is to *demonstrate* well, to keep the learning of technique fun, and to teach the children what they should feel, as well as what they should do.

When I asked these children what kinds of things best helped them to learn and to improve, they answered:

1. *Manipulation.* They liked a teacher to actually move their bodies into a correct shape and, by touching, help them do a movement correctly.
2. *Working until they feel it.* They liked working a muscle until they actually felt it.

3. *Use of mirror, floor, or object.* They felt they improved when they saw how they looked in a mirror, or when the floor or some object was used as a help (such as feeling their backs against the floor or picking up socks with their toes).
4. *Demonstration.* They liked to be shown, not told, how to do a movement. They wanted to see it first.
5. *Imagery.* They liked teachers who used word pictures.

The children said that repetition without the above was useless. Finally, they said they liked to learn a technique or combination first, and then be told the right way to do it. They told me that they learn by imitation first, by dancing first, then later by feeling muscular states and learning to work correctly.

The teacher

After the children themselves, the most important factor in a technique class is the teacher. The teacher is more important than the material presented, for it is not just *what* children learn in dance, it is also *how*.

The two most important attributes of an effective teacher are a dynamic personality and the ability to motivate.

Personality and motivation

A teacher must have the power to attract attention, must constantly interest the students, and must know how to "put it across." I have seen teachers with attractive personalities teach rather mediocre classes. For the children, however, the class was far from mediocre. The attention, the enthusiasm, and the achievement of the students soared.

The teacher must have the ability to motivate and to inspire. Students must be made to feel that dance technique is important in relation to their growing knowledge of self and of the world. Words are the connecting link. Through words a teacher puts across imagery and philosophy and so connects the physical to the mental and spiritual. Words, sounds, descriptions, images, stories, demonstrations, and imitations help students understand a movement. Then more words, images, poetry, drama, music, pictures, and descriptions help them to make that movement dance.

This book will help develop dancing bodies in a safe, enjoyable way, but you are the teacher and you must somehow make the children believe they couldn't live another week without their class with you.

I asked 10- to 16-year-olds, "How does a teacher motivate you to dance your very best?" Their answers were:

1. *Enthusiasm.* The teacher must be excited about the activity.
2. *Friendliness.* Children thought this was so important that they wanted to call teachers by their first names.

3. *Caring and interest.* The teacher must sincerely care about each student. They liked teachers who asked students what they were working on or thinking about rather than teachers who only gave directions and didn't ask questions.
4. *Perception.* They liked teachers who could quickly see what was wrong and make corrections.
5. *Ability to break down a step.* A teacher must know how to make a step easier.
6. *Variety.*
7. *Humor.* They liked teachers who could imitate and exaggerate mistakes.
8. *Good selection of movement.*
9. *Good music.*
10. *Praise.*

These personality attributes and motivation skills are the very same ones that inspired us as students, yet we may never have stopped to name them. We just knew that "that teacher" had a way of making things come together, of putting an energy into the class that made things easier. Some of these qualities may come naturally and some may need to be developed, but an awareness of what is needed is where we all must start.

Enthusiasm

Being a teacher is like working with a two-way radio . . . no use talking if the receiver isn't turned on.

I heard of a touring speaker who gives his audiences red and green sheets of paper. As long as their interest is kindled, they hold up the green. When they become bored, they hold up the red. Children do the same thing, but without the papers! Children cannot stand to be bored, nor do they act in terms of preparing for the future. If they don't feel excited or motivated, they do not continue the activity. They either physically leave, or they exhibit behavior problems.

Come with great enthusiasm for what you plan to share. I remember once telling a class I wanted to try teaching them something that was very hard, and I didn't want to do it if they would rather not. I could not contain my enthusiasm and my eagerness! They responded favorably and their dedication to the task, their speed of learning amazed me. I must admit it has been hard not to use this as a ruse in trying to build motivation for other things.

Friendliness

Examine what you want to share. It may be your joy of movement, your skill in movement, or your pleasure in seeing new movements. It may be your dramatic skill, your fun-loving personality, your storytelling ability, your knack for words and poetry, or your flair for clothes and colors. I know a teacher who wears different color combinations to classes each week. One day she brought her 15-month-old baby similarly dressed in red leotard, blue skirt, and red leg warmers! The joy she shared was contagious!

Discover what children respond to in you. Is it your jokes? Your beauty? Your clothing? Your air of surprise? Your warmth? What do they like about you?

Use these things to help you teach, to communicate. And spend some minutes in light-hearted conversation, smiling and listening to the children. Share your friendliness. Don't be in a hurry!

Caring and interest

If you really care that the children use their feet correctly, and you communicate that feeling of caring and interest, they will respond. If you really care that they learn to work with the back safely, you will be able to make back exercises important, and they too will care. If you really care that a child releases shoulder tension, you will be able to teach her.

Sometimes young children do things that interrupt the class and draw attention and control away from you. They may want to leave, to go to the bathroom, to sit out, or to do just the opposite from what the class is doing. If one child sits out or leaves, others will want to follow and your class will become dispersed. When something goes wrong for one child, stop the class. Find out what is wrong, hold the troubled one, or talk to the whole class about bathroom breaks or misbehavior.

When children draw apart from the group, they want to tell you something. Care. Children need to talk with you. Fill this need and at the same time try to forestall errant behavior by establishing a conversation period before or after class. Let obstreperous children know you are there to help channel their energy. Children need structure, understanding, and love. Never be afraid to stop a class to take care of first things first.*

Perception

A good teacher never lets a student continue to do something wrong. What good eyes we must have! How do you look at your class? Whom do you look at? Usually we look at the best students. We want them all to look that good, so we tend to look at what we want to see. Teachers must train themselves to use their eyes. During the first few classes, look for the slower learners and teach at their speed. Try to discover why they are slower learners. As the class progresses, watch those just above the slowest and let them indicate class speed. Make general corrections at their level, and special corrections for those at a higher level.

Some teachers make corrections while the dancers are moving. Some wait until an exercise is finished and then make a series of corrections. Some do both. Some teachers make notes during an exercise. What system works best for you?

Tell the children the point of the exercise. See every single child. Correct the largest mistakes. This has to go very fast. The kind of energy you possess determines the way in which you can correct mistakes without stopping the class too long.

*See Chapter 3 of my *First Steps in Teaching Creative Dance to Children* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1980) for information on dealing with behavior problems.