

Physical activity just for the sheer pleasure of it pays off in skills and confidence.

By Nancy Dorman-Hickson

Creative Movement Classes for Kids

One chubby child stands a few feet to the side of a sea of pink leotards, black tights, and colorful hair ribbons eddying in front of the mirror. The pianist hits a few lively notes, and the lone child merges with the daintier bodies, now lapping like high tide around the teacher. "Pay attention, please," the teacher says, smiling. "Put on your good 'seeing eyes,' and watch me." The teacher tells and then shows the action she wants the tiny feet and limbs to copy: skipping.

In the room next door, mothers, nannies, and restless siblings peer through a one-way mirror that fools no one. A child presses her nose against the mirror and is rewarded with her mom's reassuring smile from the other side of the murky glass. When the pudgy child's name is called, she puts her hands on her hips, kicks her legs horse high, and cracks a dazzling smile of confidence. The peanut gallery of on-looking caretakers laughs, delighted at the child's showy display.



It's true, building confidence can be one of the by-products of a creative movement class for young children, says Evan Thayer, artistic director of the Children's Dance Foundation in Birmingham, Alabama. "It's a good class for developmentally delayed children, too, because we work on things that have therapeutic value but in an un-regimented way," he says. "It helps these children master steps that they need to

learn, like skipping and jumping. It is also very good for concentration and socialization." Other benefits include developing body awareness, learning how to count to music, and learning to work in groups.

"There is a long-range benefit as well," says Liz Oliver, owner of APEX, a physical fitness facility for children and adults in New York City. "Kids learn that physical activity's good for you, how to do it safely, and

best of all how to enjoy the sheer pleasure of it. And you should see how they learn to help one another," she adds. "If a child can't do an activity, often another child will say, 'Wait, look, try this.'"

Creative Movement Versus Dance

Creative movement classes shouldn't be confused with pre-ballet classes, however. "In the early years, children are thwarted if you force them into structure too soon," says Thayer. "Parents often rush their young child into formal dance training because the child loves to gyrate to music."

Teresa Solorio advises, "Children naturally react to sound by movement, and that love of dancing should be encouraged. But it isn't a sure indication of a budding ballerina." Solorio has been a dance instructor for 21 years and is now public relations manager for Ballet West in Salt Lake City, Utah.

What Makes a Good Class

"I look for some chaos in a good class, but I don't want pandemonium," says Thayer. Imagination is another important element.

No special physical abilities are required to benefit from creative movement, and there's neither an ideal number of students nor an ideal age. Thayer's classes have up to a dozen students, ages 2 through 5, with one instructor and a pianist. Solorio

believes eight students are enough with one instructor, and she thinks 4 years should be the minimum age. The child should be capable of paying attention and be able to be separated from the parent for the entire class period.

As for instructors, "I would rather have a teacher who loves children and has a creative mind than someone who has wonderful technique," Solorio says.

"Ideally, every child should have a moment of triumph in a class," Thayer says. What does triumph look like? Like a plump little child cavorting with confidence and wearing a gigantic smile. ■

By Nancy Dorman-Hickson, an Associate Editor with Progressive Farmer, a sister publication of Cooking Light.

Pointers for Parents

To locate classes, look in the Yellow Pages under "Dance" and "Gymnastics." Schools and community education centers may also offer creative movement classes.

■ Compare several classes so you can find one that fits your child's personality. Talk to other parents. Ask for a trial visit so you can observe your child in the class. Be wary of places that don't want you or other caretakers present, even in a separate room.

■ Keep in mind that your child will receive more individual attention in a smaller class. This is especially important if your child has trouble following instructions in a group.

■ Take note of the layout of the studio. It should be roomy, clutter free, and accessible to parents.

■ Live music tends to promote spontaneity better than recorded music.

■ Note the class age range. If it's too wide, the activities won't be appropriate for all the children.

■ Determine if the activities are short enough to keep your child's attention. Are they imaginative? Safe?

■ A dance background is desirable for the teacher, but being able to relate to children is even better. Make sure the teacher encourages each child and uses gentle control.



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