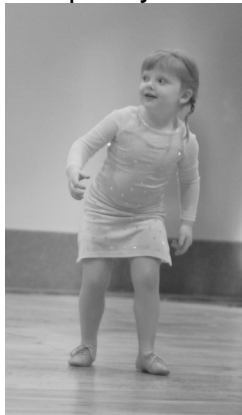


“My Three-Year-Old Loves to Dance...” (When Should My Child Start Dance Class?)

All children love to dance as they discover new, creative ways to move their bodies. Dancing has many benefits for children of all ages. Listening to music affects developing brains, helps calm and redirect negative behavior, and sparks curiosity in different cultures. Moving to the beat improves coordination and awareness of the body in its physical surroundings. Dance is the ultimate creative expression! It builds confidence and encourages physical fitness.

Starting children at the right age can be the key to success in any lesson. Many people think “the sooner the better,” but this method can backfire. A child of any age who is put into lessons too soon or pushed to participate beyond their readiness may feel overwhelmed. Frustration may cause the child to quit and refuse to try again when she is older. Waiting a year or more may allow a child to progress more quickly.



My own daughter loved to dance, doing pliés, relevés, and arm positions when she could barely walk. However, when I put her in lessons at age three we spent most of the half-hour class sending her back into the room. The first time I taught a class of four-year-olds, it seemed to be going wonderfully, until one little dancer asked “When do we get to dance?” I realized that preschoolers really just want to move in their own creative way!

Preschoolers are only beginning to understand same and different and learning how to follow commands. They are not ready to have a teacher make them move a certain way. They need a little more maturity and physical control to follow instructions. To better fit their development, preschoolers should have opportunities to discover how their own body moves.

Preschoolers are content to fill their day with fantasy and role-playing. Give them a wand to dance like a fairy princess. Give them a pair of wings (imaginary or real) to move like a bird or butterfly. Find a variety of music at the public library and move however the music “tells” you to move. You do not have to be in a dance class to wear a leotard or tutu; we have all seen a child in her pink dance outfit at the mall!

Preschoolers do enjoy the companionship of playmates. If you are looking for socialization, join a playgroup. Or sign up for a Kindermusik or Creative Movement class where your child can be imaginative in a class setting. Try one with a limited time commitment; if your child likes it, you can sign up again. You can also allow your child to try a variety of activities before choosing a longer commitment when he is older.

School-age children are better equipped to succeed in formal lessons. They show more independence, allowing parents to leave the practice area. The children are able to focus on the instruction instead of checking with their parent

for approval or comfort. They understand the concept of time while preschoolers often ask when class is done.

The high school dance team that I coached held three clinics per year. Early on, we occasionally gave in to a parent's insistence and allowed a pre-kindergarten child to attend. I vividly recall the dancers trying to reign in one child as she *ran* around the gym. More often, they ended up sitting by the wall watching their group and asking for their mother.



Most experts recommend waiting until age five or six to join organized, adult-directed activities that involve less spontaneity. School-agers are more likely to follow rules and take turns which are essential in a group setting. They are generally better able to tolerate frustration and demonstrate self control when faced with a challenging new skill. School-agers are able to communicate in longer sentences allowing them to interact more effectively with their instructors.

Older children have better large motor skills allowing them to progress in their chosen activity. They have the body awareness and coordination to learn specific placement and dance movements.

Of course, all children develop physically, socially, and emotionally at different rates. Be realistic about what your child is ready for. She will reap the benefits of dance when *she* is motivated to take lessons. Don't be surprised if your Kindergartener is too tired to go anywhere, particularly somewhere that involves physical activity. He just finished a long, busy day in school! Please ignore the neighbor who started her child in dance class at age three or four.

Most dancers really begin to grasp and execute skills properly around first to third grade. However, if you join later, your child will catch on to the movements and terminology very quickly. One benefit of starting dance before adolescence is that pre-teens often become self-conscious about how their body looks, making them hesitant to perform new physical skills. However, with encouragement and emphasis on effort and improvement, they too can be successful.

General coordination and a strong work ethic can be just as valuable as years of experience. In fact, arguably the best dancer our high school team *ever* had took only *one* dance class before making Varsity as a freshman. One of the most dedicated dancers I coached joined the team her Junior year. She did wish she had joined earlier, but two years was certainly better than not dancing at all. Of course, there were dozens of others that benefited from dance lessons growing up, but don't worry that your child will never dance if she does not start now.

Begin lessons for your child when he is ready. Honestly evaluate your individual child's readiness then trust your judgment. It is never too late to start dancing, but it could be too early!