

The goals

By involving the total being, dance can develop the potentials of body, mind, and spirit. To help children find and grow in these potentials is our broad goal in children's dance classes. Although dance technique aims primarily at physical goals, a good teacher can make a technique class serve to develop the mind and spirit as well.

Goals for the body

The primary physical goals of dance are

1. Efficient static and dynamic body mechanics
2. Awareness and control of movement
3. Increased flexibility, strength, coordination, and endurance, all of which extend the body's movement capabilities

These overall goals, however, need to be broken down into specific goals, or techniques.

Recently I watched a group of second-year dance students (fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-graders) take a class from a guest teacher. As I watched, I noted the kind of specific techniques the children lacked. They serve me now as a list of ten basic physical skills for children to master, and they are the techniques that will be presented in Chapters 1 through 10 of this book.

1. Elongation of the back
2. Moving from the center
3. Use of energy
4. Alignment of hips, knees, and ankles
5. Perception of movement
6. Perception of rhythm
7. Lift and placement
8. Articulation
9. Opposition
10. Basic locomotor steps

Goals for the mind

Dance stimulates the mind to perceive, understand, and remember. Goals for the mind are

1. Perceiving time intervals, counting
2. Perceiving space intervals, direction, design, and relationship of bodies
3. Understanding the physical laws of motion—momentum, inertia, gravity, and action and reaction (absorption of force)

4. Concentrating, remembering, verbalizing, imagining
5. Solving problems

Goals for the spirit

10 Dance enlivens the spirit to joy, fulfillment of self, and integration of self with others. Goals for the spirit are

1. Involvement, self-inspiration
2. Enjoyment, fulfillment
3. Release of tension
4. Feeling and expressiveness
5. Socialization—meeting challenges; taking risks; self-discipline; working with others; respecting others and self

The method

In order to accomplish all the goals simultaneously, so that children realize the totality of dance technique, I suggest that you start with the body goals and then incorporate the other areas. Without the larger picture, children see physical technique as boring.

Aim for a goal

Be direct. Tell the children the goal. Ask them for the *result* you want. Keep driving for this result. The total picture is easier for a child to achieve than several parts put together. More children stretch their legs and feet when they are told to “jump for the ceiling but leave your toe tips on the floor” than when they are told to “jump with stretched legs and feet.” Their bodies know how to get results.

The next step is awareness. “How did I do it?” “What did it feel like?” “Can I do it again?” Then comes control and, finally, increase in range.

So tell the children the goal of the technique you want to teach them. Draw from them or show them how to do it. Have them use that technique, making it part of their knowledge and skill. As weeks go by, demands from you can become more detailed and exacting depending upon the age of the children.

When the children have conquered a technique, tell them so. Write it on the board or add it to a chart. Let them know what they have accomplished, and let them know also that they must continue to use what they have learned.

Expand the technique

While teaching a body technique, expand on it by involving the mind and spirit. For instance, imagine you are working on jumps. Instead of limiting your teaching to the efficient use of the body, expand the technique:

1. Let the children know that when they jump they are flowing with the laws of motion. Why, without gravity, they would never come back down! (Physical laws of motion.)
2. Challenge them to discover what makes a soft and quiet landing. (Solving problems.) How does the body absorb force? (Action/reaction.)
3. Let them guess how many jumps it will take to get from one point to another. (Perceiving space.)
4. Demand a limited number of jumps, or change the direction or the rhythm. (Perceiving time intervals, counting.)
5. Have them jump as if on a trampoline, or in unison facing a friend. Use imagery! (Imagining.)

Expanding the technique leads to involvement and self-inspiration and makes the difference between exercise and dance!

Ingredients for success

Two ingredients basic to the success of any children's class are play and achievement. We motivate through pleasure and accomplishment.

Play

Play is present whenever the activity is so challenging, so interesting, or so much fun that the children feel they are doing it because they want to. Play is present when children feel a sense of freedom . . . freedom to dance their own way, freedom to explore, freedom to risk. It can even mean freedom to "work" at something, to practice higher extensions, higher elevations, faster turns. Whenever the thin line between work and play is crossed, then even a strict ballet class can be in the realm of "play" for that particular person. Focus is narrowed and concentration is sure.

I discovered that children actually improve faster technically when the spirit of play is present. One day as they lined up to go into the dance room, I said, "No exercises today!" I was amazed at the big cheer from the whole class.

There were three stations in the room. One was a balance beam, the second was a ballet *barre*, and the third was the wall. Groups proceeded from one station to the next. On the balance beam they were to walk toe first with legs turned out. From the beam to the *barre* they were to walk on the floor with stretched feet. At the *barre* they were to jump in parallel position with stretched feet. From the *barre* to the wall they were to jump, hop, or skip, stretching feet. At the wall, they were to bend their knees and press their backs to the wall. From the wall to the beam they were to roll, pressing back to floor.

I had watched gymnasts practicing on the balance beam and was impressed with the concentration. Concentration, the focus of intent, the desire to succeed . . . these are basic necessities for the dancer. Why not borrow from gymnastics? On the

beam, the slight elevation provided a balance problem sufficient to invoke concentration. It also gave the foot space to stretch before the next step. The short width prevented the foot from being overly turned out. The challenge and controls were there.

Children love to jump. They also love to use equipment. We had worked previously with knee bends and rises to the ball of the foot. We had also worked on stretching the knees and feet. They knew what parallel leg position was. They each worked alone and called me over when they thought they could jump with stretched legs and feet.

At the wall, they worked on abdominal contractions, pressing the lower back against the wall. They then did the same thing on the floor.

They enjoyed the freedom and were stimulated by the challenge. The technical improvement of the class and their eagerness for new challenges caused me to stop and analyze what was happening. I came to these conclusions:

1. Children learn better when the goal is isolated and clarified and when the route to it is direct.
2. Children improve faster when given a challenge and allowed to work at their own speed. A piece of equipment helps to focus concentration.
3. Children do best when the spirit of play is present.

Play calls up a joyous kind of energy! Jumps get higher, bodies become more open, and children discover a love for work!

Achievement

I learned as a student teacher to teach the children something on the first day that they could show their parents, and to this day I teach all beginners the skip step (page 163). The skip step is a soaring skip, lifting the first knee forward and extending the other backward, with arms paralleling the legs. It's a wonderful combination of a natural swinging elevation with just enough challenge to be enticing. It can be accomplished to some extent by all elementary children the first day. Thus they go home with a sense of achievement, and return to the next class eager to dance the skip step again and again!

As teachers we must be able to set the level of activities just right, so that achievement is high and everyone can do almost everything, but with always that next challenge beckoning. If there are challenges with no achievement, the sense of enjoyment is lacking and children will no longer participate.

Children in technique classes need not always be learning something. They also need to repeat and perform what they already know. The doing of it, the dancing it is the joyous part. It is at this point that children feel the satisfying sense of achievement.

An integral part of achievement is measurement. Children need to know what they are trying to accomplish, and they need to know when they have achieved it. That means there need to be established measurements for the children to do casually, and for you and the children to do formally.