



## Philosophy Underlying the Standards for Dance in Early Childhood

Dance embodies one of our most primal relationships to the universe. It is pre-verbal, beginning before words can be formed. It is innate in children before they possess command over language and is evoked when thoughts or emotions are too powerful for words to contain.

Children move naturally. They move to achieve mobility, they move to express a thought or feeling, and they move because it is joyful and feels wonderful. When their movement becomes consciously structured and is performed with awareness for its own sake, it becomes dance.

Dance is a natural method for learning and a basic form of cultural expression. Children learn movement patterns as readily as they learn language. Just as all societies create forms of visual representation or organize sounds into music, all cultures organize movement and rhythm into one or more forms of dance. Yet, while our educational systems for early childhood include drawing and singing, they often neglect to include dance. It is essential that education provide our children with the developmental benefits and unique learning opportunities that come from organizing movement into the aesthetic experience of dance.

## The Benefits of Dance

Dance is a powerful ally for developing many of the attributes of a growing child. Dance helps children mature physically, emotionally, socially, and cognitively. The physical benefits of dance are widely accepted, but the emotional, social and cognitive attributes have only recently begun to be appreciated.

### Physical Development

Dance involves a greater range of motion, coordination, strength and endurance than most other physical activities. This is accomplished through movement patterns that teach coordination and kinesthetic memory. Dancing utilizes the entire body and is an excellent form of exercise for total body fitness. Young children are naturally active, but dance offers an avenue to expand movement possibilities and skills.

## Emotional Maturity

Dance promotes psychological health and maturity. Children enjoy the opportunity to express their emotions and become aware of themselves and others through creative movement. A pre-school child enters a dance class or classroom with a history of emotional experiences. Movement within a class offers a structured outlet for physical release while gaining awareness and appreciation of oneself and others.

## Social Awareness

Dance fosters social encounter, interaction, and cooperation. Children learn to communicate ideas to others through the real and immediate mode of body movement. Children quickly learn to work within a group dynamic. As the ongoing and sometimes challenging process of cooperation evolves, children learn to understand themselves in relation to others.

## Cognitive Development

Young children will create movement spontaneously when presented with movement ideas or problems that can be solved with a movement response. Movement provides the cognitive loop between the idea, problem, or intent and the outcome or solution. This teaches an infant, child and, ultimately, adult to function in and understand the world. The relationship of movement to intellectual development and education is an embryonic field of study that has only recently begun to be explored.

# Educational Philosophy

Dance is basic to learning. Children learn most readily from experience. John Dewey understood this when he asserted, "Action is the test of comprehension" (Dewey, 1915). To learn by "doing" and to act on knowledge is the basis of kinesthetic learning. Kinesthetic learning is becoming more widely understood through the work of Jean Piaget (1896-1980), Howard Gardner (1944- ), and other cognitive theorists.

Dance, in particular, integrates kinesthetic learning with understanding. Preschool children do not conceptualize abstract processes (Piaget). They primarily learn through physical and sensory experiences. When children are provided with creative movement problems that involve the selection of movement choices, they learn to think in the concrete reality of movement. Thus, learning the art of dance helps young children develop knowledge, skill, and understanding about the world.

Dance helps children develop literacy. To the young child, verbal language and movement are entwined. Preverbal movement expression does not cease when a child develops language. The road to literacy involves the translation of movement expression and communication into words. Learning language and

learning dance are not separate threads, but are woven together and incorporated into a fabric of communication and understanding.

Dance provides young children multiple perspectives. It is “a foundation of experience necessary for the future development of more advanced skills and a way to affirm an inner life and alternate realities” (Stinson, 1990). Through dance, children develop enhanced sensory awareness, cognition, and consciousness. It is this heightened state that creates the magic of movement that is dance.

## Importance of Standards

The *Standards for Dance in Early Childhood* are important because they:

- Provide a scaffold outlining the breadth and scope of learning and teaching dance as an art upon which to design curricula and course syllabi. Standards are a guide, not a directive nor a curriculum. They offer constructive support, suggesting areas of curriculum but not defining it. Standards allow each district or school to develop an approach most suited to local or individual values.
- Serve as a springboard for creativity for the learning and teaching of dance making: improvisation, choreography, and composition. Standards suggest avenues of creative exploration in the arts-making processes of Performing, Creating, Responding to, and Interconnecting dance learning to knowledge of other disciplines and life skills.
- Define age-appropriate expectations and levels of achievement in the art of dance. Standards inform individual schools of dance and school districts what students should know and be able to do in the art of dance at certain benchmark levels when taught by a highly qualified dance teacher in a graduated curriculum.

Written by the National Dance Education Organization

8609 Second Ave, Suite #203B Silver Spring, MD 20910