

GUIDE TO CHOOSING A DANCE STUDIO

presented by Etudes Ballet School



*So your child wants to
dance...*

AND YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHERE TO START!

The options can seem confusing. Where should you go? Who can you ask? What should you be looking for? How do you know your child will receive the best instruction? Here are a few tips to point you to the best choice for your family.

Know what your dancer wants - and what's good for them.

Do you know what sort of dance style your child is interested in trying? Do you know what classes are appropriate for your child's age and stage of development? (Read on!)

Does the studio reflect your personal values and your goals for your family? Take a look at the pictures and other content posted on their website and social media accounts to get an idea of how they approach choreography and costuming. Does it line up with your family's values?



Guidelines for Class Content

WHAT TO LOOK FOR - AND AVOID

3 and Under: Children this young do best in classes where a parent or adult caretaker can participate with them. Class content should be primarily rhythms, fun songs, and simple, easy-to-imitate actions. 30-45 minutes is sufficient, and the younger the child, the shorter the class should be.

Age 4-6: This age group is old enough to enter class independently and should be encouraged to do so. Their class may include very basic rudiments of tap or ballet, but should still mainly be about creativity and mastering social and locomotor skills. Avoid any studio professing to teach serious technique to children this young. 30-45 minutes is an appropriate class length, and can either be based in a single style of dance, or a combo class where two or more styles are introduced.

Age 7-9: This age group begins to focus on one dance style at a time. Combo classes are no longer appropriate once a child reaches this age. Technique should remain basic, to build a strong foundation. In ballet, two hands on the barre and most movements deriving from first position. In tap, _____. In jazz, basic patterns like grapevines and squares. Classes should be 45-60 minutes long.

Age 9-10: At this age, students build on the basics they learned earlier, though late beginners can still pick things up fairly easily with a little time. This is when most ballet students should be in class more than once a week, especially those who want to dance en pointe one day. Children this age should NOT be in pointe shoes yet (*see the sidebar about pointe readiness*). Students this age are ready to work from fifth position and learn more complicated techniques like spotting for turns. This age is also ready for the fundamentals of modern dance. Classes should be 60-75 minutes long for students this age, and ballet should be offered twice a week.

Age 11-12: This is the age when most ballet students are ready to begin pointe, if they have been in ballet for several years, although this is a very individual process and not all will be on the same timeline. Avoid any studio that automatically puts children en pointe based on their age. Students this age should be beyond the basics in jazz, tap, and modern, though again, late beginners can definitely catch up with a little commitment. Appropriate class lengths are 75-90 minutes for ballet, 2-3 times a week, and 60 minutes for other styles.

Age 13 and up: These students are mastering their art! They should be given challenging content and encouraged to continually raise the bar for themselves. Most if not all should be proficient enough en pointe to confidently perform exercises in the center. Late beginners would do best to seek out a class that is geared toward their skill level in order to get the basics before jumping in with their more-experienced peers. Students of all dance styles should be able to perform choreography that is complex and evocative, either in a group or alone. However, teenagers are still children, and should never be given choreography or costuming that is overtly sexual or depicts heavy adult themes. Students this age should be in ballet for 90 minutes at a time, at least 3 times a week, 60 minutes for all other styles.

About Pointe Readiness...

It's a mark of achievement that most young ballet students aspire to. Following are some tips for identifying a good quality program:

- **Age is not the only factor.** Age is important, because starting pointe work too young can lead to lifelong problems, but there is no magic threshold age where all students will be ready for pointe shoes. Avoid any studio that puts children en pointe before age 11, and any studio that automatically puts children en pointe when they reach a certain age. There is no maximum age to begin; older teens who were late beginners and even adults can begin pointe work, provided they meet the given criteria. Readiness should be assessed by strength and technique.
- **It takes several years** to gain the strength and proficiency necessary to begin pointework successfully. On average, three years of focused training (age 9 and up), although this time could be shorter or longer, depending on the student's weekly class load. Higher frequency will achieve this goal faster, once the student has reached the appropriate potential age to begin.
- **Avoid programs that require all students to buy the same kind of pointe shoe.** All feet are different, and all pointe shoe models are different. It is almost impossible to have an entire class of dancers who are all correctly fitted with the exact same shoe.
- While pointe is often offered as a separate class, **it is NOT a separate style of dance.** No student should be allowed to take pointe classes without also taking an appropriate number of ballet technique classes per week.

Instructor Qualifications

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A DANCE TEACHER'S BIO

In order to teach a dance style correctly, safely, and in a way that is appropriate for the age of the child, a teacher must have some experience in that dance style, and in working with children. This can come in several ways.

Time as a student. Some, especially teachers who are young, may simply have experience of seriously studying their style of dance. This is acceptable, though minimal. An instructor with this qualification should have at least 5-6 years of dedicated study behind them. A few notable achievements, such as summer intensive programs and student performance troupes, are also a good indicator that this instructor knows their art quite well. A younger instructor will likely go on to gain other qualifications.

Higher Education Degree. Earning a degree in dance involves the same level of commitment as earning a degree in other fields. Most university dance programs are audition-only, and involve a performance requirement as well as other aspects. Many include elements such as anatomy and kinesiology, which are very useful in teaching young dancers. Some degrees are even aimed specifically at dance education or dance pedagogy.

Professional Experience. An instructor having spent time in a professional show or company, especially if their experience is recent, is a valuable contribution to their teaching knowledge. This teacher will understand the landscape of the dance industry and be equipped to prepare students to venture outside their home studio for summer intensives, college programs, and even their own professional contracts.

Experience in other related fields. Some dance teachers have special experience in other fields that add depth and value to their teaching. Academic education or early childhood development help a dance teacher understand what to reasonably expect from certain ages and how to help them learn best. Special certifications in other types of movement systems like Pilates or yoga are also quite useful, as they give the teacher a wider range of knowledge in how body systems work and how to help students solve specific problems or achieve specific goals.



RED FLAGS

Underage Instructors. Minors should NOT be left in sole charge of a class of young children! Any solo teacher needs to be at least 18 years old.

No experience. If a teacher has no credible experience in the dance style they are teaching, how can they be a safe, effective teacher?

Lesson plans with youtube. A competent instructor should be able to come up with their own class content and choreography on a regular basis. (Note: Many dance styles have a universally-accepted syllabus - or eight - and teaching from a syllabus is not the same as copying another teacher or choreographer's work from the internet.)

Padded Resume. If they need to list every single summer program or master class they have ever taken with someone famous, every role danced in every production for the last 15 years, their high school color guard, or seventeen different dance styles that were studied for a year or less each, it's



What should a dance studio look like?

A quality dance studio should have its own location, which includes wall-mounted barres, full-length mirrors, and a sprung floor. A sprung floor has an underlayer of high-density foam blocks, or a grid system of boards, beneath the subfloor for proper shock absorption. Dance is a high-impact physical activity, and appropriate flooring is vital for preventing joint problems in dancers. Dance studio floors should never be carpeted or concrete. The floor surface is as important as the under layers, and should be either be unfinished wood or marley, which is a special, rubberized surface for dance, normally black or grey, and is ideal for preventing slipping, especially in pointe shoes. Tile or laminate flooring are not appropriate dance surfaces. No outdoor shoes should be allowed on the dance floor, to keep it clean and free of debris that could embed in a bare foot.

There should be at least a basic uniform of leotards and tights for girls, plain-colored t-shirts and jazz pants for boys. Long hair should be tied back, and should be in a bun for ballet classes over age 9. Some studios ask for a certain style of leotard, or a certain color, for a more consistent look. Students should wear shoes that are appropriate for their age and the style of dance they are studying. No jazz shoes, socks, or bare feet for ballet. Styles that are traditionally performed barefoot should not practice in shoes or socks.

What Should It Cost?

Everyone does, of course, enjoy saving money. When faced with various options for pursuing an activity, the cost may well be a factor to consider. Is the cheapest option the best one? Is the most expensive option the best?

It is helpful to consider what you and your child expect to get from their experience with dance. If you are looking for a low-commitment, option for a child who is unsure or who has many interests to pursue, a shorter session with no performance commitment may be for you. Many gyms or YMCAs may offer short session programs at a low cost.

If your child is sure about studying dance, if you want a program in a traditional setting (barres, mirrors, etc), if you want to see appreciable progress from the beginning of the term to the end, if long-term commitment is not intimidating and a year-end recital is something to get excited about, these programs do tend to cost a little more. There is more overhead with renting a large enough space, purchasing adequate equipment, and paying qualified instructors. In the end, you will get what you pay for.