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Physical Sustainability in Dance Training (IP)

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Are Dance Competitions Breeding Grounds for Overuse Injuries?

The Dance Competition Industry and How Dancers Are Affected

For many young dancers, their first glance into the joys of the performing world is through enrolling in dance studios that celebrate a year of hard work with an annual recital. While not every student who enrolls in a single class will pursue dance as a lifelong career, there is a steady growth in the industry due to the many positive benefits of dance education on youth development. The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Competition recognizes the life skills by saying that “Training for and performing in dance competitions cultivates and calls for transferable proficiencies—skills that are not necessarily artistic or technical but are needed to successfully perform. Through the physical and emotional labor invested in their training and performance, competitors acquire resiliency, perseverance, time management, self-efficacy, and interpersonal awareness (Dodds, Sherril). Overall, there is an urgent call to educate our dancers on injury prevention; instead of, allowing them to reach the point of no return we need to teach them to communicate their pain physically and mentally.

The Dance Studio Industry has had steady growth at 3.1% per year since 2015, leading to a total of 54,627 registered dance studios in the United States for 2020, but this success and growth has not come without any shortcomings (“Industry Market Research, Reports, and Statistics”). Many dance studios offer pre-professional and competitive training programs that are both physically, mentally, and financially demanding on each dancer and their families. These competitive programs feed into the highly stressful and dramatized dance competition

world that generated \$486.6 million dollars in 2012 (Dance Competition Culture and Capitalism). Due to the high financial investment in a rigorous dance studio training schedule there has become a determined expectation on these underage dancers that has been defined by Karen Schupp in “Dance Competition Culture and Capitalism,”

The archetypal competition dancer is young, long and lean, hyper mobile yet toned; performs movements that demand great power and flexibility, primarily in the lower body, and a sense of muscular control; uses dance movements that are a combination of jazzy moves, balletic vocabulary, and acrobatic tricks, is able to convey a story primarily through facial expressions and musicality that mirrors the rhythmic structure of the music, and wears a dazzling costume that accentuates the body’s performance of gender and uniformity.

Due to this expectation determined in the scoring system of the competitions, and the dancer’s personal training, there is an unhealthy pursuit of perfection that has caused an increase in injury and emotional stress on these college-prep dancers. Competition season can bring much unwanted drama. Whether this drama can be internal for the dancer, stem from issues within the team and with other teams, or be based on conflicts with the teachers, choreographers or parents, the high intensity of the dance competition can create a high level of emotion and release dramatic reactions.

Most Common Injuries in Dancers

Increasingly demanding acrobatic skills, the great power and flexibility (primarily in the lower body), and a sense of muscular control are a necessity to try and walk away with a first-place trophy at any dance competition. While data on young, nonprofessional injured dancers is sparse, the US National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health in the Journal of Athletic Training conducted a research study on almost 600 female dancer aged 8 to 18 that found that, “The rigors of dance training lead to many overuse injuries common to dancers, such as chondromalacia patella and Achilles tendinopathy” (Steinberg, Nili et al.). There is no coincidence that the pressures of success and physical capability have led to increased injuries in

young dancers. Desperately, young dancers need to have their own agency and ownership of their training that includes meditation, Bartenieff Fundamentals movement, dialogue around injury and the difference between soreness and pain, education on the research of mental health issues, specifically for dancers including eating disorders, anxiety, and body dysphoria.

Due to the time commitment of a rigorous training program, studies have found that injuries from using your joints and muscles too much--overuse injuries--are the most common in dancers. John Hopkins Medicine's recent Sports Injury study has concluded the following about dance overuse injuries:

“the majority of these overuse injuries involve an ankle, leg, foot or lower back...including hip injuries: snapping hip syndrome, hip impingement, labral tears, hip flexor tendonitis, hip bursitis and sacroiliac joint dysfunction; foot and ankle injuries: Achilles tendonitis, trigger toe and ankle impingement, knee injuries, patellofemoral pain syndrome; stress fractures: metatarsals, tibia, sesamoids and lumbar spine; and dancers are also likely to develop arthritis in the knee, hip, ankle and foot” (“Overuse Injuries.”)

While these injuries sound serious, and they most definitely are, the good news is that children can often recover quickly from overuse injuries when there is importance is placed on “the activity restrictions and/or stretching and strengthening rehabilitation programs to prevent reinjury” (“Overuse Injuries.”) This is where safe dance education, and respect for the dancer comes into play.

Often times in the dance competition space, like many other team sports, commitment and winning is placed above the individual's own value creating anxieties out of fear of letting down the team, financial stress from those who pay tuition, and even emotional abuse from teachers attempting to vicariously live through their students. In a research theses conducted at University of Northern Colorado by Teresa Schmitt on “Dance Competitions, The Culture, The Training, and The Effects on Young Dancers,” one dancer in the study stated that she had “been injured from stress to complete a step and often the teacher can become very passionate and

angry if the results are not there” and she is not alone. These children are determined, motivated artists an entirely vulnerable to those in charge of them parents, teachers, and coaches included. The “Dance Moms” (as popularized by the television show) are blinded by lifestyle and “may view trophies as a sign of quality dance instruction, which is not necessarily the case. The emphasis on competition can also squelch the pure nature and artistic values of dance” (Cardinal, Marita K.).

Sustainability in the Dance Competition Industry

Getting tunnel vision on physical capabilities of stunningly powerful acrobatics and gracefully executed ballet vocabulary that goes into the award-winning competition routines truly detaches a person’s identity from their body and pushes these young dancers to places they should not always go. Instead of telling dancers to push themselves to the absolute maximum for dance competitions, we need to approach a person’s introduction to dance training with the idea of sustainability to turn childhood talent into a lifelong career. Due to the physical, mental, and emotional requirements of dance as a sport and art form, it is important to approach sustainability from all these angles. Yiannis Koutedakis writes that “The ever-increasing demands for more and better performances have forced preparation for successful dance to become a virtually year-round endeavor...causing ‘burnout’ or ‘overtraining’” (Koutedakis, Yiannis). While there is no direct data on burnout and children published as of yet Yiannis shares that:

Given the aesthetic nature of elite dance with its stereotype of the ideal shape, it is not surprising that young dancers, particularly females, tend to be of average height but well below average weight. This emphasis on leanness, especially when accompanied by intensive physical efforts, may contribute to known medical complications in young dancers. Therefore, particular attention should be paid to control volumes of physical work during the period of adolescence when the pace of change within the human body is at its most rapid and the consequences of growth and maturation for dance at their most acute (Koutedakis, Yiannis).

We need to be educating our dancers on injury prevention instead of allowing them to reach the point of no return. We need to teach our dancers to communicate this us, and if they are feeling hurt, it is more than okay to stop dancing. Empowering students to speak up when they are injured or need a break an let it be known that their health physical and mental comes first.

Works Cited

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