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Dance provides youth with mind and body benefits

By Debra Strickland

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Many different types of dance classes are available for children, from modern dance, ballet, tap and jazz to dance that celebrates unique ethnic and cultural traditions. What's the most important thing for parents to keep in mind when choosing a dance class? It's that research has proven that dance provides physical, developmental and artistic benefits to your child.

Physical Benefits - Students build muscle strength while increasing flexibility. Young dancers develop a sense of balance and improve agility and coordination. Importantly, children also develop body awareness and learn correct posture.

These benefits extend beyond a student's involvement with dance, helping youth involved in other disciplines, such as sports and martial arts. Studies have shown that physical activity helps children relieve stress and feel relaxed. It also is a great way to help your child develop a positive lifelong attitude about staying active and healthy.

Developmental Benefits - Dance classes are fun and a great way to meet new friends. Young dancers develop essential social skills through interaction with other students. Group choreography fosters teamwork, communication, trust and cooperation. Dance also has been proven to nurture important life skills, such as discipline and focus. Dancers naturally display confidence, self-esteem and poise. These skills are developed through participating in dance performances.

Artistic Benefits – One of the greatest benefits of dance is that it sparks a child's imagination and nurtures individual creativity in a unique way. Dance classes share the joy of physical self-expression in a supportive and structured setting. This can have a positive impact on children who have limited physical abilities, who act out or who have a difficult time sitting still. Involving children in dance also teaches the basic elements of creative movement, such as time, space, rhythm and design.

While people may not be as familiar with modern dance as with ballet or jazz, modern

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dance in particular honors the creative spirit and celebrates the individual. Modern dance does not simply conform to conventional movements, shapes and patterns. Instead, it requires the young dancer to learn movement from the inside out, nurturing the body and focusing the mind. This form of dance especially is welcoming to children of all shapes, sizes and genders.

There is one final reason to get your child dancing. Research proves there is a strong link between involvement in the arts and increased educational achievement. In fact, one study showed that “students who participate in the arts are not only more likely to participate in a math and science fair, but also out-perform their peers on the SATs by 87 points” (www.artsusa.org). These educational benefits are gained by students regardless of their socioeconomic status.

There’s sure to be a dance class that fits your child’s interests and your schedule, so why wait? Enroll your child in a dance class. The lessons she or he learns will last a lifetime.

Debra Strickland is the executive director of Wellspring/Cori Terry & Dancers, southwest Michigan’s only professional modern dance company. Debra holds a Master of Public Administration degree from Western Michigan University and has been passionate about working in the arts and women’s issues for nearly a decade.