



# Encouraging Continued Participation in Dance at Adolescence

## Tips for Dance Educators and Parents

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### Introduction

The period of adolescence has a tremendous impact on all aspects of development: physical, psychosocial, emotional, as well as cognitive. In the midst of all these changes, participation in sport and the performing arts often decreases during adolescence<sup>7</sup>. Nurturing the sources that motivate engagement and avoiding behaviours, environments, and pressures associated with dropout can encourage teenagers to pursue their participation in dance. This resource paper will outline the factors that enhance dancers' continued engagement throughout the developmental changes of adolescence and will offer strategies to help educators and parents provide appropriate support and guidance for these young artists.

### Definition of Adolescence

The term adolescence comes from the Latin word *adolescere* meaning "to grow into maturity". Adolescence is generally thought to start at 10 years old and continue into the early 20's<sup>22</sup>. The term "adolescence" is defined by social and cultural notions of what it means to be an "adult". While physical development (e.g., puberty) is based within the teenage years, other aspects of development such as cognitive skills (e.g., problem-solving) are associated with our experiences and continue to develop long after sexual and physical maturation<sup>22</sup>.

### Dropout from Physical Activity at Adolescence

During adolescence, many developmental factors may serve to draw young people away from continued engagement in physical activity. Among these factors, the physical changes of puberty, such as breast growth and increased fat mass, may make participation in sport less comfortable or less appealing to young women<sup>15</sup>. Changes in the locus of motivation that occur during psychological and social development can also influence a young person's choice to participate.



Gender is also a factor to take into consideration. Most teenage girls do not achieve sufficient physical activity levels for health, particularly when compared to boys of the same age<sup>9</sup>. Equally, the cultural feminization of dance may make participation in dance more challenging for young men<sup>3</sup>.

Cognitive and psychosocial development during adolescence may also increase risk of dropout. In order to provide adequate support for young dancers, it is important to understand the factors that heighten the risk of dropout. At each of these developmental stages, different types of risk are present. As shown in the table below, understanding these developmental milestones can help dance teachers direct their efforts to reduce the risk of dropout <sup>2, 8</sup>.

### Early adolescence (10-14 yrs.)

At this age, young people have difficulty understanding the vital role of regular practice or training, in their future dance success. In addition, peer comparison and concern over perceived physical differences become very important to them.

### Mid-Adolescence (14-16 yrs.)

Mid-teens gain independence and are drawn towards more risk-taking behaviours. They develop emotional reactivity and sensitivity and their self-awareness increases. They rely more often on peers than on their parents, as a frame of reference for setting goals and rules of conduct.

### Late adolescence (16-24 yrs.)

At this age, youths are able to set more realistic goals about their artistic abilities and the role of dance in their lives. Decision making tends to be future oriented and competing priorities, such as academics, may become more important than dance participation.

## Dropout in Dance

Research on dancer participation is scarce, but existing findings suggest that the dropout rate is high compared to other forms of physical activity. Evidence from ballet and contemporary dance shows a dropout rate of around 50%<sup>12, 21</sup>. Reported reasons for dropping out reflect the high selectivity, the competitive nature, and the aesthetic bias of professional dance training. Puberty also appears to be a key event as well as an inevitable challenge that young dancers have to negotiate.



Several other reasons for leaving dance have been suggested by contemporary dancers<sup>1,21</sup>, such as:

- conflicting demands,
- difficulty making friends,
- loss of passion,
- course content,
- a change in aspirations,
- physical injury,
- low perceived competence
- social environment (e.g., feedback from teacher, ego-involving climates).

Dancers involved in pre-professional ballet who did not complete training were reported to have particular characteristics<sup>12</sup>:

- early to average age of menarche (first period),
- higher number of injuries,
- lack of strength,
- reduced flexibility,
- preoccupation with the aesthetic standards of ballet,
- higher scores on measures of deviant eating behaviours,
- closs of menstrual bleeding (i.e. secondary amenorrhea),
- poorer body image,
- and a clinical eating disorder profile.

While maturation timing may be linked with drop-out in ballet dancers, a recent study suggests that this was not the case for a sample of contemporary dancers, suggesting that dance genre may also play an important role

Research into gender and dropout specific to dance is limited. In ballet, social perceptions surrounding the feminization of dance and their implications for young male ballet dancers are factors to consider. Dance teachers have identified a number of strategies for engaging and retaining boys in ballet such as parental support, privileging boys within the dance studio and improving opportunities to dance in schools<sup>3</sup>.

## Dropout in Sport

Many of the reasons for dropout cited in existing dance research align with well-documented findings in sport research. Research in sport is well developed with regard to dropout. There is much to learn from



# Healthy Dancer Canada Survey 2017

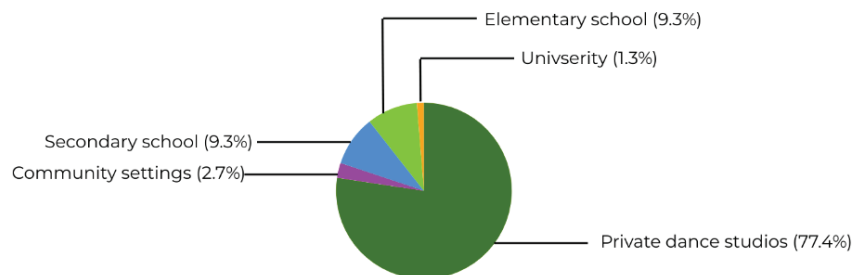
Seventy five dancers from across Canada responded to questions about their motivation to dance and what would (or has) stopped them from dancing.



Participants were between 9 and 48 years old

Starting age ranged from between 2 and 13 years old

Dancers came from a range of dance genres including ballet, tap, modern and Irish.



## Reasons for sustained participation in dance

- ★ Passion
- ★ Friends and social benefits
- ★ Development of non-dance related skills (e.g. teamwork, perseverance)
- ★ Enjoyment
- ★ Skill/performance improvement
- ★ Liking of the teacher
- ★ Opportunity for self-expression
- ★ Maintenance of health and fitness

## Reasons for choosing not to continue dance

- ★ Injury
- ★ Negative learning environment, teacher discouragement or teacher favouritism
- ★ Lack of time or prioritising other commitments
- ★ Pursuing other art or sport activities/career decision to move in another direction
- ★ Lack of parental support in both emotional and financial capacities
- ★ Overly competitive peers
- ★ Lack of challenge or improvement
- ★ Restriction of self-expression or individuality
- ★ Lack of confidence/not feeling good enough

reviewing this evidence that can be applied to drop-out in dance. Several factors have been highlighted as central to reduced participation in sport: lack of enjoyment, perceived competence, social pressures, competing priorities and physical factors such as maturation and injuries<sup>7</sup>.

The following section will more closely examine some of these factors and their relation to different developmental stages.

## Pressures and Priorities

Competing priorities such as school, work, friends, and sport/performing arts may be difficult to balance during adolescence. Teenagers may feel pressure to satisfy the needs of family and friends while meeting the demands of their sport or dance activity<sup>11</sup>. Only in late adolescence do most young people become better emotionally equipped to deal with pressure from parents, teachers, social expectations, and dance performance challenges<sup>2</sup>.

## Parental Involvement

While excessive pressure from parents may be detrimental, adequate parental involvement and support can be key to sustaining dance participation. In early to mid-adolescence, peer acceptance is important, but family approval and support remain substantial guiding forces<sup>2</sup>. Parental support without over-involvement has been associated with positive effects, while dropout is linked with teenagers' feeling that parents interfere too often, for example, videotaping or critiquing performances, offering rewards for achievements or sending them to too many summer schools/training events<sup>11</sup>.

## Maturation

Puberty presents both opportunity and challenge for young dancers. On the one hand, dancers benefit from improvements in strength, motor skills, and the development of intrinsic motivation. On the other, sudden changes in size and shape can disrupt flexibility and coordination, adversely impacting dance performance and increasing risk of injury<sup>17, 18, 19</sup>. "Growing out" of a sport has been noted in sports such as gymnastics where the timing of puberty influences selection and retention<sup>10, 14</sup>.

Dropout can be greater in contexts such as dance, due to pressures to conform to aesthetic body ideals, to wear form fitting attire and to adapt quickly to physical changes. With the onset of puberty, many dancers also become anxious and more self-conscious about their shape and appearance; placing them at greater risk of developing emotional disorders, specifically those related to physical attributes and performance (e.g., poor body esteem, eating disorders).



## Early Specialization

“Early specialization” refers to serious participation in a single activity from an early age, which usually takes place in a high-pressure, performance-focused environment. In contrast, “early diversification” involves taking part in a range of sports and activities during childhood and engaging in these activities in a playful way, without focussing on performance. Research in sport supports early diversification in childhood and specializing in one sport or activity later. Early specialization has been associated with greater incidence of injury, burnout, and less enjoyment. Early diversification and later specialization are linked with more positive psychological outcomes and continued sport participation.

Young people who drop out or cease serious involvement in sport are more likely to have reached several developmental milestones earlier when compared to athletes who continue participation. These milestones could include an earlier age at which they started summer schools or were top in their club or school<sup>11</sup>. Current recommendations advocate sampling sports during childhood and making decisions about specialization from age 13, with more highly specialised training from age 16 onwards<sup>4, 5, 6, 13, 16, 20</sup>.

## Conclusion

Given the many developmental changes that occur during the teenage years, young dancers may need support and guidance in order to maintain their artistic practice. Recognizing sources of motivation for adolescent dancers as well as the behaviours, environments and pressures associated with dropout can help teachers and parents influence their continued participation in dance.



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