

Dance and Movement for Children with Autism

Introduction

Dance and movement have both been found to be beneficial for all children, including children with autism. Because children with autism often have language deficits that limit their self-expression, dance and movement can be a great way for them to find alternative means of expression. Please note that during this module, we are not referring to dance and movement therapy, which requires a credentialed therapist and has specific therapy related goals.

Dance and movement also allow children to express emotions, develop their sense of balance and body awareness, as well as their sense of well-being. Dance has also been known to positively impact a child's attention span, memory, ability to follow instructions, understanding of patterns, social skills, and interest in communal activities. Studies on formal dance and movement therapy have corroborated these findings, and also reported increased social competence and the ability to distinguish between the self and others.

Today, Chelsea Sioxson, Founder and Creative Director of Magic Dance Arts, Inc., an inclusive dance and movement program shares in an interview format about how you can introduce dance and movement into your child's life.

Q) *Talk about benefits that you have seen from children who incorporate dance and movement in their lives.*

A) Whether your child has autism or not, dance and movement have multiple developmental benefits. Throughout my years of experience, I have seen progress in motor development, social interactions, and communication. Many students who first try a dance or movement activity are usually shy and timid about what is being asked of them. But as time goes on you definitely see an improvement in their confidence levels and their willingness to expressive themselves creatively. Dance and movement can also help to build a sense of

community, between both the students and the parents. In typical social settings, relationships require a lot of verbal interaction and intimate conversations. But in the dance studio, we express ourselves in more ways than just using our words, and many students with autism can relate to that.

Q) *How do we distinguish between dance and movement?*

A) Movement is pretty much anything your body can physically do, and dance can be described as purposeful movement. In traditional dance classes, there is a structure to everything. You have specific terminology, technique, and history. Generalized movement provides more room for interpretation, without having a particular sequence. For children with autism, both dance and general movement can be beneficial. And in fact, practicing both regularly will greatly help children to develop their creative selves.

Q) *What types of dance and movement are most beneficial to children with autism?*

A) It depends on the child! All dance classes have structure, routine, & sequencing, which are strategies that have been proven to benefit children with autism. In behavioral analysis, professionals develop what is called a "task analysis" to break down new skills into smaller, manageable steps. Although dance teachers don't use the term "task analysis," that's exactly what we do. So it's easy to understand why children with autism find dance classes so comforting. Different styles of dance can also be appealing based on what your child is interested in. For example, for those who are more oriented and attuned to sound and rhythm, tap would probably be a great dance style. For the movers who have trouble standing still, try hip hop! If your child prefers instrumentals or classical music over song with lyrics, ballet would probably be more fitting. If you're looking to development more motor

skills and spatial awareness, tumbling and gymnastics classes would be great! Regardless, all types of movements benefit children, whether or not they have autism. Acting out stories and nursery rhymes at home are a great way to embed movement into familiar activities too!

Q) *What is the best way to introduce dance and movement? Where do you begin?*

A) It depends on how comfortable you are as a parent. If you're not too familiar with dance and movement, it might be helpful to watch a class out in the community first. Dance classes are a more ideal setting for facilitating social interaction with peers, especially if you don't have any other children at home. If you're thinking of signing up for a new class, try contacting the teacher beforehand to see if your child can just observe first. It might also be a good idea to ask the teacher for common songs that he or she uses in classes so that you can play it at home before the dance class. Introducing something from class beforehand will provide your child with something to feel at ease with in an unfamiliar setting. And if you don't feel comfortable or don't have the time to bring your child to a class out in the community, practicing simple imitation skills and nursery rhymes are a great place to start at home! It's easy to take familiar songs like "Old MacDonald" and create a variety of movements to go with it. If you've had a long day, pull out all of your scarves, blast some of your favorite music, and just have a dance party with your child.

Q) *What are some things parents can do to include dance and movement at home? Are there specific techniques they can incorporate?*

A) Incorporate it into your daily routine! Just as brushing your teeth and doing your homework are part of your child's daily routine, music and dance can easily be embedded into your schedule. Maybe you can dance around the living room with ribbons and bubbles to work up an appetite before dinner every night. Or maybe you can do yoga with the family. Many kids benefit from sensory breaks after long periods of

focus, so an after-school movement session would definitely help to regulate their bodies. Most familiar nursery rhymes and popular songs can be interpreted with movement. Encourage your child to help you come up with "choreography." You can also incorporate some pretend play skills by using your child's favorite toys/dolls to imitate movement. Many children with autism prefer toys and objects to people and peers. For this reason, it may be hard to teach them new movements if they are not interested in interacting with you. But the use of props and other environmental manipulations can be a great tool to facilitate movement. I recommend scarves, maracas, ribbons, and even teddy bears.

When introducing a new skill, remember to implement different types of prompts for your child. Some children are able to learn a routine by just watching another model. Others prefer to hear someone verbalize the steps. And still others may require more intrusive physical prompting. Recognize your child's level of independence and give them the support they need based on where they are in the prompting hierarchy.

In regards to the environment, there are plenty of things to consider. Try to experiment with the lighting in the room. A darker room can elicit a different type of movement than a brightly lit room. Think of the surface you are dancing on. It's a lot easier to turn on hardwood or tile, but carpeted floors are great for jumping and rolling around. Do you have a room in your house that echoes more than the others? That will definitely change the experience. If your child is less mobile, there are plenty of fun movement activities that you can do on the floor or even on the couch! Play with the pace and volume of your music to express different types of emotions. The possibilities are endless!

Q) *What are some things parents should be aware of as they introduce dance?*

A) My biggest advice to parents about trying a dance class is don't quit after the first try! As

with all new settings, it may take a while for your child to get used to the setup. There are a lot of new people, sounds, and routines going on at the same time in a dance class, so it's easy to become overwhelmed. But many teachers are understanding and willing to accommodate. Celebrate small victories and encourage a little bit of participation at a time. Another thing I urge parents to do is learn to be open to your child's interpretation of things. Depending on their receptive communication, motor skills, and other factors, your child's movements won't always look like the teacher's. It's okay! Allow them to explore their bodies at their own pace.

Q) *How often should children dance and how much time is beneficial?*

A) I might be biased, but I think dance should be an everyday occurrence! The more you can integrate it into your daily routine, the better! It touches on so many important areas of development – communication, motor skills, social interactions, etc. Whether it's out in the community or within the walls of your own home, dance and movement are great ways for

children to regulate themselves. For many children with autism, their days are filled with school and various types of therapies or interventions. Taking a dance break can be a much needed reprieve. You don't have to be in a clinical setting to work on skill deficits, and not all work is done at a table! However you decide to incorporate dance and movement into your schedule, just remember to try to be as consistent as possible. Children with autism thrive with repetition and routine. The more you dance, the easier it becomes!

Conclusion

As we have discussed, dance and movement have a large number of potential benefits for children. We hope you have found this module useful and it has given you some ideas on how you can include dance and movement in your child's life. For information about Exercise or additional topics that may be of interest to you, please visit the Porchlight website.