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theory & practice

Kid-Friendly Modern Classes

Creative movement's natural next step

BY JEN PETERS

Parents enter their children in dance class with visions of pink ballet slippers or cool tap shoes. But bare feet? Modern dance? Not necessarily the dream they had in mind. Young students often jump from creative movement—the perfect introduction to any modern technique—straight into ballet, bypassing modern until high school or even college.

Yet teaching modern to children shapes future well-rounded, adventure-seeking dancers—students who are not afraid to really run, slide on the floor or create movement. “Children in modern are able to express themselves using their entire body, and they can break the rules of ballet by finding freedom in movement,” says Tiffany Barnes, director of the Junior Division at The Ailey School in New York City. Learning technique is undeniably important, but through improvisation and developing expansive movement, modern adds another dimension to young students’ dance vocabulary. Here, Barnes and other experienced teachers share how they tailor fun, constructive classes for children.

Imaginative Technique

Modern techniques come with a wide array of movement vocabularies, some better equipped for children than others. The Ailey School dives into Horton technique between ages 7 and 10 for boys and 11 and 12 for girls. Unlike more contemporary fusion classes, Horton has a very defined progression of warm-ups, exercises and fortifications. The technique’s clarity of shape grabs young students’

attention immediately, but it is challenging. “I’ve realized that students don’t have to learn everything right away,” says Barnes. Rather than teach an entire overwhelming phrase, break off small chunks at a time—just feet and legs, or just arms. Students will build strength slowly without getting frustrated.

Teaching language should remain fun, peppered with detailed imagery. Barnes suggests scaffolding imagery by starting simply with one idea, then building upon that image. For example, with the Horton side hip push, she asks students to pretend they have a rock tied to one leg. How does it feel? How does it affect the movement? Students act out the action first, then return to technical terms and drag the rock in a straight line across the floor, with the working leg straight and pointed.

While a traditional modern class may not be suitable until later for most students, both Lydia Hance from Hope Stone Kids in Houston, Texas, and Tanya Bello from the ODC School in San Francisco interweave basic modern principles into their classes as early as 5 or 6 years old. “I focus on the spine as the base of all movement,” says Bello. “I teach head-tail connection, roll-downs, curves and spirals from the spine.”

When Hance approaches elements like drop swings, she has students imagine they are on a roller coaster ride, or that they have a hiccup at the top of the swing. With pliés into over-curves or side curves, she asks them to “pour hot chocolate into mugs on the floor.” Imagery works wonders for all ages, but



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—Tiffany Barnes

it is especially effective when tackling alignment issues or tricky steps that are difficult for young students to grasp.

Music Matters

Music should be very different from that of ballet class, even if you have a piano accompanist. Integrating atypical meters, such as 5- or 7-count phrases, can really shake things up for students used to counting in 8s. The Ailey School’s Horton classes use drums, with a lot of 6/8, swing-like rhythms. “Percussion, with different beats and rhythms, really turns their world upside down (or sideways!),” says Barnes. “Kids see it as a chance to break out and really dance.”

Photo by Eduardo Palino, courtesy of The Ailey School



Tiffany Barnes, The Ailey School's Junior Division director, teaching Horton technique

No live musicians? No problem. Hance enjoys mixing up her class playlist with various artists ranging from Paul Simon to Bach, again using a mixture of meters. She prefers dynamic songs, but if students have trouble focusing, she'll begin with something more calming before working up to more energetic tracks.

Explore, Discover and Get Moving

Whatever the technique, modern has the ability to unlock creative possibilities. As Hope Stone's education director, Hance gives students as young as 4 creative control of choreographic elements like tempo, shape, spatial patterns and level variation.

"I give them opportunities to think critically about movement and be empowered to make their own decisions," says Hance. "Kids just need to dance sometimes without being told exactly what to do." Barnes agrees, saying that young students enter the studio with such personality and "an innate performance quality that we don't want to stifle." The Ailey School's First Steps and Bounding Boys programs, for ages 3–6 and 4–6, incorporate an improvisational

free dance during each class.

ODC starts with creative movement at age 4 and introduces technique around ages 8 and 9. Improvisation remains an integral part of the class, increasing in complexity as students mature. Bello says her students really look forward to it. "Many dancers are scared to do anything beyond what they are told. With modern experience they are more vulnerable and excited about trying new ideas."

Game-like structures like freeze dances, follow the leader and mirroring a partner are great for breaking improvisation. Be mindful of letting the little ones run amok, though. Provide structure and direction to free dances. Suggesting level changes, mood changes and various movement qualities or tempos—round, smooth, sharp, fast, slow, straight, wiggly, loose, tight, etc.—will keep young minds on track while challenging them to think outside the movement box. **DT**

Jen Peters is a former dancer with Jennifer Muller/The Works.