

Position Statement:
Practitioner Role in Risk Reduction of Eating Disorders within Ballet Training:
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POSITION STATEMENT

EATING DISORDERS WITHIN BALLET TRAINING

Long-term individualized nutrition instruction needs to become a priority focus within ballet training programs, to both faculty and students. Adolescent aged children face increased a risk of general eating disorders, in addition to the increased risk factors of the demands of ballet. Starting at a young age, children in ballet should be given information on proper nutrition and encouragement to eat for fuel and strength. Long term, individualized plans should become part of the curriculum for ballet training. Faculty should be properly equipped to guide students to a path of good health and strength through participation in their individual plans and environmental and perspective adjustments. Often the topic of nutrition, eating, food, and weight become unspoken of in the ballet world. Children grow up being afraid of them, even before they know what they are, because of the enormous cloud of impeding silence and darkness that swarms the room whenever it is discussed. By providing nutrition and health guidance to students from an early age and to faculty for use in guiding students, we could build strong, healthy dancers, prevent injury, and increase motivation and enjoyment and passion for the art.

DEFINITION AND PREVALANCE/RISK OF EATING DISORDERS

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 2.7% of teens, ages 13-18 years old battle an eating disorder (Merikangas 2010, cited by eatingdisorderhope.com). Eating disorders are medical illnesses capitalized by a severe disturbance to eating behaviors, characterized by obsessions regarding food and body weight (NIH 2018). Eating disorders can affect people of all ages, races, weights, and genders, often appearing turn young adulthood or even childhood (NIH 2018).

Ballet as a visual sport, has an increased risk with the prevalence of eating disorders rising. According to reports from DanceMagazine, following the first international conference on eating disorders in the ballet world, with Dance UK in London, changes have been put into place within companies around the world to address the issue from a professional level (Kelly 2016). Company on-site nutritionists are now employed with specific focus in psychology and nutrition for dance (Kelly 2016). However, there is little official recognition of the origins of this rising epidemic, the training pressures and demands of late childhood and adolescents.

RATIONALE

An increasing rate of eating disorders has been shown in response to media-exposure highlighting the western beauty-ideal (Smink et al., 2012). Girls outside of ballet are faced with implied societal pressures to be thin. Within the constraints of ballet, this demand is amplified within the face of pressures to maintain the “ideal ballet body.” For girls who begin dancing at a young age, their future career is put at risk by the threat of physical development. This increased pressure leads to drastic measures and a lack of proper knowledge. By providing young dancers with proper nutrition and cross training, we could lower the risk of developing disordered eating.

If ballet institutions could teach their children from a young age healthy eating habits and start conditioning exercises at young ages, large amounts of destruction caused through the eating disorders of ballet could be prevented. NY Times magazine published an article in 1997 entitled “Eating Disorders Haunt Ballerinas.” The article states dance as “a highly competitive, high-pressure and physically demanding profession” where the pressure to maintain the stereotypical ballet body overpowers young minds (Dunning, 1997). Dunning writes: “Women begin their ballet training at around age 7, and the crucial point in that training, when they are judged to have the talent and perseverance to become a professional, generally occurs during the already troubled years of puberty” (Dunning 1997).

Currently, students of ballet are given little to no nutritional advice outside of the guidelines of family norms. Students around the age of 13 will be called into the director’s office and told that they have gained weight and needed to lose 5-10 pounds. No direction, no advice. This is not an uncommon story, told time and time again, by nearly every dancer. Why wait until the student has gone through puberty to tell them to lose weight when they could instead be taught nutrition and positive healthy habits at a young age, increasing the information and guidance through the time of puberty. When a dancer feels trapped she no longer is in a position to make positive decisions and healthy choices, nor is she working to fuel her body from a place of love and care. Instead, her motivation and passion for dance dwindles as does her self-care in the effort to watch the numbers on the scale move down.

RECOMMENDATION FOR CHILD-CENTERED INTERVENTION

Many schools have attempted to address this issue on the surface level. One company affiliated studio has addressed this topic with added occasional nutrition seminars for older dancers and “positive body image” seminars for adolescents, but when the coaching and environment does not align with these outside surface level talks, there is little resulting affect (pbt.org).

Professional companies have company nutritionists, but these are for company members, excluding the development of the children within the school. In the attempt to create a more in depth and holistic approach, this could be approached from all four perspectives on the purpose of youth sport, motor development, sport psychology, exercise physiology, and sport sociology as a partnership between student and teacher.

Motor Development. Motor development perspective importance can be defined as setting the foundation for motor development, developing motor faculties of the individual in order to contribute to activities of daily living and well-being as people (Clark 2005). From this perspective, we capitalize on the importance ballet training from a young age has on the motor development of a child into adolescence and emerging adulthood.

- By setting the groundwork for important motor skills, young dancers have an increased motor capacity for a future active life.
- By introducing children to conditioning exercises, we can increase their capabilities and motivation for a healthy life style.

Ballet creates a unique physical awareness of the body that will stay with an individual across their life. It is our job as ballet teachers to capitalize on the healthy aspect of this physical awareness, helping young children and adolescence learn to listen to their body and fuel it with all the nutrients it needs to be successful.

Sport Psychology. Martens highlights the importance of sport psychology in the creation of stimulating environments that help build athletes with important life skills (KIN 865 Module 1, 2018). This perspective emphasizes the missing link between current efforts towards offering nutritional guidance. In many professional company studios, nutritional counseling is offered only to company members, excluding the school, but pressures increase on the school students looking at the dangerously thin bodies of the company to emulate that image to become successful in ballet as well.

- *Faculty involvement.* Within the school late adolescence into the emerging adulthood students are offered the occasional nutritional seminar, during which time a one-time stranger comes in to tell us the same basic and general nutrition information that we have all heard a million times. No faculty attend these seminars nor discuss them with students. Students in this position are left feeling like this information does not matter to faculty but that it is merely a regulation that they must attend the yearly general information seminar.

Additionally, the nutritional journey of a dancer is so extremely uniquely designed that no general information seminar would ever prove effective in guiding an individual towards health and goals. Even for the late childhood/early adolescent ages, a “positive body image” seminar was given this year (pbt 2018). A representative from the office came to give this lecture, and again, no faculty attended. Perhaps even more severely detrimental is the realization that dancers leave their highly competitive days where they have spent hours being scrutinized in leotard and tights in front of their peers, put head to head for competing parts and castings that those last 5 pounds could actually make or break, to come to these distant lectures, and then return immediately to the same, unchanged world around them.

- *Active guidance and Changed environment.* If faculty were included, if information could be delegated on a long term, specific and more personal basis, and if the environment could change around them, these ideas could take root beyond the superficial limitations they current abide within. Developing a month long active nutrition and cross training session during which faculty members showed interest and care externally within the setting of classes and rehearsals, could help create individual and specific sets of progress.

Exercise Physiology. (Bar-Or, Module 1, 2018) Exercise physiology highlights the importance of promoting exercise and a physically active lifestyle, remembering that children are not adults. This is essential especially within the context of a school affiliated within a professional company. Ballet is a rigorous sport and training must begin at young ages, but when training young dancers, it is still important to remember that we are teaching children, not miniature adults.

- *Perspective.* A very small percentage of dancers a teacher will work with in the children’s division at a professional school will grow up to become a ballet dancer. This perspective reminds us that first and foremost is the importance of child development, inspiring of healthy lives and honest qualities of life skills. This adjustment of perspective on behalf of the faculty readjusts our motives as teachers, allowing us to create a healthier more positive space and environment for young dancers and people to grow and develop.

Sport Sociology. (Coakley, KIN 856 Module 1, 2018). This perspective takes into regard a child centered environment not overpowered by adult structures. Coakley idealizes that the purpose of youth sport should be determined by the child, not subjected to the full control of adults (Module 1, 2018).

- *Child determined progress.* No matter how much potential teachers may see in a student, if they do not allow that child to uncover it within her own timing, they risk over working and burning that child out. Allowing children boundaries within to explore their own faculties in a sport allows for child control over her own choices and life. Teachers can only guide, and by allowing the child control back, helping her to develop positive and healthy habits of self-motivation and determination.

THE ROLE OF PRACTITIONERS

The role of practitioners within the healthy development of children in ballet despite the risks of eating disorders as presented by the context of both external societal pressures, and those found internally in the visual art form of ballet falls within two specific directions, dance nutrition counselors and faculty.

Dance Nutrition Counselors. Dietitians and nutritionists are trained individuals in the area of nutritional health and wellness. These professionals can offer consults to form individualized performance goals and plans within a general goal of total health. A dietitian who specializes in ballet or dance nutrition will have information directly applicable to the demands of ballet and dance, as opposed to the different nutritional and physical demands of the general public or other sports.

Individualized dance nutrition counselors can offer guidance to:

- Maintain energy needed for improved athletic performance
- Manage weight and body composition
- Injury prevention and recovery
- Nutrition information aligned with food allergies or personal diet restrictions
- Improved self-perception and body image

Faculty. Faculty members play the second half of this crucial team for their dancers. Teachers who are in communication with dance nutritionists understand where their students are and can provide support thorough environment. Faculty should be made knowledgeable on ways to guide students to their goals, as opposed to the former tactic of directing weight loss, and rewarding the results regardless of the process. Students who feel supported from their environment will be more successful in following the direction of a nutritionist or dietitian in their field.

SUMMARY

Ballet is not exempt from the overarching purpose of youth sport. While professional ballet schools aim to train young dancers into next generation professionals, as children, they need a child-centered approach to their holistic growth and development as young people. In the studio, developing healthy habits and productive and positive life qualities should be equally as important, if not more so, than perfecting the art of ballet at a young age. Young children and adolescents are at an increased risk for unhealthy development of eating disorders, a risk that

become amplified with the added demands of ballet. By providing a network of support through dance dietitians and nutrition counselors in cooperation of faculty members, schools can reduce the risk for the development of eating disorders and instill a path of health centered positive life choices.

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