

Handout #3

National Dance Education Organization (NDEO)

Standards for Dance in Early Childhood

Dance embodies one of our most primal relationships to the universe. It is pre-verbal, beginning before words can be formed. It is innate in children before they possess command over language and is evoked when thoughts or emotions are too powerful for words to contain.

Children move naturally. They move to achieve mobility, they move to express a thought or feeling, and they move because it is joyful and feels wonderful. When their movement becomes consciously structured and is performed with awareness for its own sake, it becomes dance.

Just as all societies create forms of visual representation or organize sounds into music, all cultures organize movement and rhythm into one or more forms of dance. Children learn movement patterns as readily as they learn language. Yet, while our educational systems for early childhood include drawing and singing, they often neglect to include the organization of movement into the aesthetic experience of dance. These standards were developed to provide a guideline for the inclusion of a graduated, age-appropriate dance program, and to provide information about what children ages 2-5 should know and be able to do in dance.

The Benefits of Dance:

Dance is a powerful ally for developing many of the attributes of a growing child. Dance helps children mature physically, emotionally, socially, and cognitively. The physical benefits of dance are widely accepted, but the emotional, social and cognitive attributes are only recently appreciated.

Physiological Development:

Dance involves a greater range of motion, coordination, strength and endurance than most other physical activities. This is accomplished through movement patterns that teach coordination and kinesthetic memory. Dancing utilizes the entire body and is an excellent form of exercise for total body fitness. Young children are naturally active, but dance offers an avenue to expand movement possibilities and skills.

Emotional Maturity:

Dance promotes psychological health and maturity. Children enjoy the opportunity to express their emotions and become aware of themselves and others through creative movement. A pre-school child enters a dance class or classroom with a history of emotional experiences. Movement within a class offers a structured outlet for physical release while gaining awareness and appreciation of oneself and others.

Social Integration:

Dance fosters social encounter, interaction, and cooperation. Children quickly learn to work within a group dynamic. Movement is communication. When children express ideas in body movement, they are communicating in a mode that is real and immediate.

As the ongoing and sometimes challenging process of cooperation evolves, children

learn to understand themselves in relation to others.

Cognitive Development:

Young children will create movement spontaneously when presented with movement ideas or problems that can be solved with a movement response. Movement provides the cognitive loop between the idea, problem, or intent and the outcome or solution. This teaches an infant, child and, ultimately, adult to function in and understand the world. The relationship of movement to intellectual development and education is an embryonic field of study that has only recently begun to be explored.

Educational Philosophy:

The arts are basic to learning, and movement is basic to life. Children learn most readily from experience. John Dewey understood this when he asserted, "Action is the test of comprehension" (Dewey, 1915). To learn by "doing" and to act on knowledge is the basis of kinesthetic learning. Kinesthetic learning is becoming more widely understood through the work of Jean Piaget (1896-1980), Howard Gardner (1944-), and other cognitive theorists. Dance instills learning.

To the young child, verbal language and movement are entwined. Preverbal movement expression does not cease when a child develops language. The road to literacy involves the translation of movement expression and communication into words. Language and dance are not separate threads, but are woven together and incorporated into a fabric of communication and understanding.

These Standards hold a vision that the arts help children to discover who they are and give meaning to their lives. They teach new ways of thinking and provide habits of mind that include creative problem-solving and higher level thought processes. Dance, in particular, integrates physical learning with understanding. When children are provided with creative movement problems that involve the selection of movement choices, they learn to think in the concrete reality of movement.

Preschool children do not conceptualize abstract processes (Piaget). They primarily learn through physical and sensory experiences. Learning the art of dance helps young children develop knowledge, skill and understanding about the world.

Dance for young children provides multiple perspectives. It is "a foundation of experience necessary for the future development of more advanced skills and as a way to affirm an inner life and alternate realities" (Stinson, 1990). Through dance, children develop enhanced sensory awareness, cognition and consciousness. It is this heightened state that creates the magic in movement that is dance.

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Standards are available online at: http://www.ndeo.org/Standards_Childhood.pdf

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