

Why can dancing be a useful development tool for children?

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There is quite a lot of research showing the power of music in areas such as shifting arousal, changing heart rates and memory formation however a quick google scholar search provides little research on the usefulness of dancing for children. Yet there are plenty of websites, books and government articles which talk about the usefulness of dancing in child development just without the research base. We work hard in our service to involve children in motivating group dancing experiences and we find it very useful for a whole range of purposes. It is important the dancing experiences are intrinsically motivating for the child rather than forced, so we use a wide range of approaches to do this. But is dancing useful for development? Let's have a look at some research.

Mimicry is a "social glue"- Doing non-verbal actions together at the same time appears to bond groups more strongly. During groups we are often challenging children's social and emotional skills and it is important that the group bonds as quickly as possible so there is safety for children to challenge themselves within the group. Most of the research into group bonding has focussed on non-conscious methods of imitation between social partners (i.e. subtle body position changes you do without thinking to match your social partner). This has been termed the chameleon effect and has been shown to promote liking and rapport in interpersonal interactions. Some recent research though has begun to show that moving together more obviously strengthens a child's feelings of belonging to a group. For example, Tunçgenç and Cohen (2016) found that when they got 7-8 year old children to move in time to a beat, those children who had synchronising movements produced stronger group bonding.

Imitation has a significant role in social development – "Dance, as a human art form, can be seen as a representation of the imitation and pattern that we find pleasurable in social interactions." (Michalowski et al (2007). Why imitation is important is still a theory but it is best described by Meltzoff (2007) who sees imitation as the opportunity for children to test "you are like me, you are different than me." Social imitation occurs when a child copies another person purely for social purposes, i.e. to relate, connect with or be similar to another person. In other words, the child will receive nothing more than social attention and a sense of connectedness resulting from the act of imitating. "Imitation might serve, through development, as an automatic way of interpreting the behaviours of others in terms of their underlying intentions and desires" (Decety et al 2002). All of a sudden the child is taking into account actions that are outside what they have in their own minds.

Imitation fosters prosocial behaviour – When children dance together, it is important to allow children to have the opportunity to lead and demonstrate an action that other people copy. It turns out that being copied may actually result in children being more likely to help others. In 2013, a study found that 18 month old infants were more likely to help an adult if that adult had mimicked them during play (Carpenter, et al 2013). This helping behaviour was also displayed by the children to a different adult than the one who had mimicked them. The results of this study indicates that being mimicked promotes prosocial behaviour towards others, even at such an early age (infancy). What also is exciting is that Agnetta and Rochat found in 2004 that 18month old infants preferentially reference people who copy them rather than those who don't. So having opportunities in dance to not only copy but be copied by others might be a better way of getting a bigger social bang for your buck.

Referencing others for timing and pacing- We want children to enjoy shared experiences with their peers at every opportunity. The advantage of dancing is that it is a heavily/very structured activity that

provides children with external rhythm and structure in order to move in sync with another person. Both self-synchrony (rhythmic matching of movements and vocalizations) and interactional synchrony are important for normal human-human interaction. As children watch and pace themselves with their partner, this synchronicity mimics somewhat the rhythm of natural social interactions which require coordinated non-verbal communication between partners.

Having children moving in rhythmical ways is good for coordination- Often children we work with have coordination difficulties. Using dancing provides opportunities for the children to connect external rhythm to their own body actions. In fact many theorists believe that music itself is informed by the movements of the body such as rhythm, cadence points, timing and dynamics. Care needs to be taken to ensure the pacing of the music and the simplicity of the actions combine to allow the child to have success. Over time the complexity of the actions can be graded up further challenging the child's coordination.

Dancing is a good physical outlet- Physical exercise is has health benefits for children (Janssen and Le Blanc 2010) and executive function benefits (Davis et al 2011). Physical exercise can also improve people's mood, boost energy levels, improve sleep patterns and combat disease. Dancing is a great source of physical activity for everyone and is of a high intensity which has also been shown to have benefits.

Actually kids just love it. Let's be honest we can talk about how music and dance can calm or excite arousal levels, is great for social referencing, is good for coordination or links with interesting memory and emotion storage capacities in the brain (see <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/02/090223221230.htm>), however, for many children (and adults), they just connect to music and dance. It's not really research based.....it just what we see. Many TV groups have got this for years and through their songs, dances and tv programs intended for children they have millions of little fans and have made millions of dollars. We love to see children wanting to do things with other people and dancing for so many kids stimulates an intrinsic desire and enjoyment of participating we just want to foster.

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