



# Dance Education in Practice

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/udep20>

## Practical Resources for Dance Educators!

Navigating the Competition Dance Model

Heather Harrington

To cite this article: Heather Harrington (2021) Practical Resources for Dance Educators!, *Dance Education in Practice*, 7:3, 28-32, DOI: [10.1080/23734833.2021.1954851](https://doi.org/10.1080/23734833.2021.1954851)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23734833.2021.1954851>



Published online: 17 Sep 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 71



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Practical Resources for Dance Educators!



Amy Werner, DPT, who is part of the Portland Bridge Dance Project chapter.

## Navigating the Competition Dance Model

By  
Heather Harrington

Competition dance is popular in the United States, with social media and televised dance shows amplifying its visibility. If young people are learning dance, they are most likely enrolled in a private-sector studio that is involved with the competition circuit (Weisbrod 2010). This article presents a reflexive practice for dancers, parents, and teachers to contemplate what it means to be a part of the competitive dance model, along with introducing a newly formed group, the Bridge Dance Project (BDP), that aims to close the gap between competition dance and dance medicine. I hope this article is just the beginning of an examination of how teachers and parents can help young dancers navigate the competition model in ways that can lead to a healthy mind and body. Straddling the worlds of ice skating and dance, I tap into my skating circles to shed light on the interconnection

between competitive ice skating and competitive dance, both aesthetic disciplines that turn the subjective into the objective for scoring purposes.

### ADDRESSING THE BODY

Involvement in the competition circuit can lead to real-world outcomes: for studio owners, increased income, and for dancers, college scholarships or professional connections to commercial dance (Harrington 2020; Schupp 2020). According to IBIS World (2019), the dance studio industry experienced growth from 2014 through 2019, with industry revenue increasing at an annualized rate of 3.8 percent to \$4.0 billion. These real-world benefits along with commercial exposure are increasing participation and requiring

technical achievements that seem to rise every year. Scholar and educator Karen Schupp (2020), who had been a competition dancer in the 1980s, spoke about these increased technical demands:

This advancement in technique requires additional time spent in the dance studio and a more deliberate mindset towards improvement. Whereas in my era a triple pirouette attained through 10–12 hours a week of training by age 14 was thought to demonstrate above average technique, some of today's competition dancers are achieving that and more before age eight. (480)

What might have once been seen as an afterschool activity has turned almost into a profession (Schupp 2020). However, “Young dancers are not simply miniature professional dancers but instead are growing and developing children” (Wilson et al. 2015, 451). A young person is forming his or her identity. Their bodies will go through puberty. Could excessive training and pressure to win lead to a higher incidence of injuries, burnout, and body dysmorphia? There is no research to date, only anecdotal responses. Jeff Russell, director of Science and Health in Artistic Performance (SHAPe) at Ohio University, explained:

It is clear from research data that dancers are going to experience injuries. Knowing this, then, the proper focus is to reduce the risk of injuries happening rather than pushing the body to its limits and beyond. There is not a performance in this world worth the cost of the physical and emotional toll brought about by dancers, dance teachers, and choreographers not respecting what the body can and cannot do. (personal communication, January 19, 2021)

Erika Mayall, a registered physiotherapist with a special interest in dance medicine told me this in an e-mail exchange:

From my experience in clinical practice, I can definitely say that I see higher injury rates in competitive dancers than recreational dancers; and different types of injuries in competitive dancers than dancers who are in more conservatory type pre-professional programs. In competitive dancers I see more injuries related to muscle imbalances (i.e., functional scoliosis); injuries related to unsafe overstretching practices (especially hip injuries and back injuries), and injuries related to overtraining/inadequate recovery. (personal communication, January 11, 2021)

Dr. Nick Cutri, who has his Doctorate of Physical Therapy, began seeing a pattern of “very high mobility and poor stability” in injured young dancers in Los Angeles over the past seven years (Sandall 2020). He expressed his concern: “An 8-year-old should never have orthopedic pain. We are seeing 8- to 15-year-olds who have neurologically oriented back pain and spine compression that will never get better” (Sandall 2020). Cutri believes young dancers are encouraged to overstretch for aes-

thetic and technical demands. Reporter Jordan Levin (2016) interviewed Kathleen Bower, a Miami physical therapist specializing in dance medicine, about the increase in injuries in competition dance: “We’re seeing a lot more chronic and overuse injuries in these dancers ... that we didn’t used to see until much later” (Levin 2016). Writer and dancer Lizzie Feidelson (2017) wrote an article for *The New York Times* about the competition circuit. Feidelson (2017) stated, “The children who enter these competitions train up to 30 hours per week, primarily on weekends and after school.” How much training is too much for a young, growing body? According to Jayanthi et al. (2013), adolescents who spend more hours per week than their age playing one sport are 70 percent more likely to experience overuse injuries than other injuries. Levin (2016) reported, “American Orthopedic Society of Sports Medicine has recommended that the number of hours children train each week should match a child’s age, so a 9-year-old, for instance, would train nine hours a week.”

Injuries due to improper body mechanics, overtraining, imbalance of strength and flexibility (lacking core strength), mental stress, improper warmup, lack of foundational skills, hypermobility and hyperextension, and disordered eating can be birthed out of aesthetic and technical demands coming from the competitive circuit. In 2019, a conversation between Jan Dunn, a dance medicine specialist who spent 29 years with the International Association of Dance Medicine and Science (IADMS) and Kaycee Cope Jones, dancer and COO of Apolla performance footwear, birthed The Bridge Dance Project (BDP 2021), which aims to “build a bridge between the current realm of dance medicine and science and the commercial/competition areas of dance.” BDP is a grassroots organization that is establishing chapters throughout the United States that support “whole-person health and wellness of competition and commercial dancers and teachers.” The focus of BDP is to meet dancers where they are and provide them with accessible, practical information that they can incorporate into their training whether it be directed toward the body (e.g., exercises to aid in hypermobility) or the mind, to deal with the stress of competing. I am currently a BDP team leader in northern New Jersey.

## ADDRESSING THE MIND

The person engaging with the competitive dance model is most likely beginning as a young child, who is guided by their parents and teachers. Sociologist Hilary Levey Friedman (2013) examined competition in children’s chess, dance, and soccer in *Playing to Win*. Exploring the motivation for participation in the dance category, Friedman said, “Elite dancers told me they wanted to please their teachers and perform better at each competition” (165). Two-time world competitor in ice dancing, coach, and dance movement therapist Eve Chalom also examined motivation:

Often it is for the parents' egos, the teachers' egos, and the kids' ego because they learn what is valuable. It matters so much about what it looks like on the outside when it is about ego, but it does not matter about what it feels like on the inside. That is sad because it is not for you anymore but for other people. The person starts to feel really distant from themselves because they are doing it for others. (personal communication, December 11, 2020)

When the egos of others are too involved, the student is lost. The teacher does not see a student, but a possible first place win along with attention for their teaching and studio. The parent does not see their child, but a trophy that validates their ego. The dancer does not see a person, but a deficient version of the ideal dancer. Students are a reflection of a teacher; children are a reflection of their parents; the medal around the neck is a reflection of one's worth. The reflection in the mirror tells the dancers how worthy or unworthy they are.

A sense of identity, structure, accomplishment, and community are strong reasons to participate in a competitive model of dance. However, can pressures to look a certain way negatively affect a child's sense of self? Dance scholar and former dancer Susan Foster (2019) considered:

Dancers sacrifice their desires to eat certain foods or to socialize, and they endure pain, disappointment, or even humiliation, all to come closer to the ideal. Teachers pursue a pedagogy based in upholding standards of excellence, always assuming the inadequacy or insufficiency of their students. Everyone needs to try harder and do more and better, with the limited talent, time, and energy that are available. (152)

With the looming question of why? An endeavor, once begun, can generate a momentum that carries a person along in participation even when the initial reason for the person's involvement is lost. Asking oneself questions might disrupt the flow, identity, and structure that has been established, but without reflection, negative patterns might go unrecognized. Former figure skating coach and Laban analyst Jaya Kanal believes if participation has too many negative aspects, the student has to "possess the confidence to quit" (personal communication December 15, 2020). Reflection is imperative to build that confidence.

## PERFECTION AND PERSONHOOD: PRODUCT AND PROCESS

Young people are trying to figure out who they are. Being a competition dancer will play a role in how they see themselves and how they relate to others. When training in the competitive model, the student might be subsumed under the drive to win, affecting their interpersonal relationships. Chalom explained:

Competitive mindset tends to make relationships superficial, because you can't be vulnerable because you are trying to be perfect, you are trying to be the one on top. You are not going to have authentic relationships. The coach may treat the student like a product rather than a person. (personal communication, December 11, 2020)

A product implies predictability. When a product is the goal in learning dance, pressures to display mastery and produce specific, repeatable results could produce stress, usurp feeling, and create unrealistic goals of perfection. Foster (2019) explained when dance is about exchanging a product, "teachers, choreographers, and dancers, must learn to disengage or muffle the sensory experience of dancing and one's experiences of the complexities of physicality during dancing, in order to emphasize mastery" (52). The body becomes an object instead of a living, growing, sensing part of the self. An object engenders feelings of alienation and dissociation. Former gymnast Jennifer Sey (2008) spoke about her drive to be the best and how it colored her search for a coach: "I don't want someone who considers me as a person. I want someone who can make me a winner" (122). What does a dancer sacrifice to be a "winner"? Might it be personhood? Might it be not engaging in a process that involves unpredictability, taking time, or discovery?

Gracie Gold, a U.S. figure skater who achieved great heights in the competitive world, has suffered from mental struggles including an eating disorder and suicidal thoughts. Gold told reporter Karen Crouse (2019), "The more weight I lost, the quicker and faster I felt on the ice. It was win-win, because I was skating better and people were saying, 'You look amazing.'" The dichotomy of what people (her coaches, judges, fellow skaters) saw and valued and what was actually happening to her as a person was stark. She did not matter; only the product that she had become. Gold spoke about this fabrication to Crouse (2019): "I wanted to be the most flawless, angelic, plastic, Barbie-doll-face human who just says all the right things and does all the right things and is sterling." If the external is winning, does it matter what is going on inside?

The aesthetic and the technical demands of competition dance favor a small, thin body. This desired and sanctioned body type might cause some dancers to engage in disordered eating. Depriving oneself of enough food could put the brakes on puberty and thus the onset of menstruation, which can have a negative effect on bone density and make a person more vulnerable to fractures; this pattern has been called the female athlete triad (Hoch et al. 2011; Witkoś and Wróbel 2019).

External validation in the competition model is strong because it is based on a scoring system. The competitive model taps into ego orientation that focuses on comparison with others, not personal growth (Robson 2004). Ego orientation and task orientation are found in achievement goal theory, "a social-cognitive theory of achievement motivation" (Tay 2020). Ego orientation has been associated with unfavorable effects on learning because

a student will see corrections as criticism and not an opportunity to grow and change. They might fear failure, believe that they will pick up a skill fast or not at all, and possess a tendency to internalize mistakes as a sign that they are not a good person (Quested and Duda 2011; Tay 2020). A task orientation encourages people to follow their own trajectory at their own pace without comparison, leading to a feeling of ownership; they are not an object to be molded and shaped (Quested and Duda 2009). This feeling of agency and autonomy increases motivation and mental well-being, evoking the self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci 2000). The dancers engage in a process of growing in dance, instead of producing a product.

Here are some questions for teachers, parents, and students to use in reflecting on what it means to be a part of the competitive dance model. With reflection, positives and negatives can surface, and shifts in practice can occur if needed. Questions can be asked to oneself and to one another, to clarify goals, attitudes, and behavior.

## QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS, PARENTS, AND DANCERS

1. How do you address body type and appearance? When is thin too thin?
2. Is dance feminine? Masculine? How might you disrupt socially constructed gender roles?
3. How do the judges know what is a good routine or not? Who are the judges? Who gives them authority?
4. Are there limits to the amount of practice and participation in competitions in which one engages?
5. What is valued in dance?
6. How do you define success or failure in dance?
7. Why engage in the competitive format?

### Questions for Teachers

1. Why do you teach dance?
2. How does winning or losing affect your teaching?
3. How much pressure do you feel for your students to do well at a competition? Where does this pressure come from?
4. Who is your student dancing for?
5. How do you encourage creativity in your students? How do you encourage agency and ownership of their movement?
6. How do you foster body awareness?
7. How do you encourage individuality?

### Questions for Parents

1. Why do you bring your child to dance class?
2. What does your child receive from their participation—positives and negatives? What do you receive?

3. Would you support your child if they wanted to quit dance?
4. Who is your child dancing for?

## Questions for Dancers

1. Why do you dance?
2. How much do you sacrifice to dance? Why is it worth it?
3. Is dance good for your body and mind? Any negatives?
4. What does the image in the mirror tell you?
5. Who are you dancing for?
6. How important is it to be correct?
7. Have you ever thought about quitting?
8. Are you under too much stress? How might you tell if you are under too much stress?
9. When can you say no—no to more rehearsals, no to more competitions, no to executing certain moves?
10. Do you have to transform your body?
11. Do you cover up pain to rehearse or perform?
12. Do you see yourself as more than a dancer?

A dancer can navigate the competitive circuit with a healthy mind and body, but teachers and parents need to guide and encourage young dancers toward awareness, agency, and growth. As dance changes, let's move forward with a recognition of the developmental needs of young people both in mind and body. Dance in a competitive model can be about process over product. ✨

## ORCID

Heather Harrington  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7396-5642>

## REFERENCES

- Bridge Dance Project (BDP). 2021. Home page. <https://thebridgedanceproject.com/>.
- Crouse, Karen. 2019. "Gracie Gold's Battle for the Olympic Glory Ended in a Fight to Save Herself." *New York Times*, January 25. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/25/sports/gracie-gold-figure-skating-.html>.
- Feidelson, L. 2017. "Inside the High-Drama World of Youth Competition Dance." *New York Times*, December 21, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/21/magazine/inside-the-high-drama-world-of-youth-competition-dance.html>.
- Friedman, Hilary Levey. 2013. *Playing to win: Raising children in a competitive culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Foster, Susan. 2019. *Valuing dance: Commodities and gifts in motion*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/oso/97800190933975.001.0001.
- Harrington, Heather. 2020. "Consumer Dance Identity: The Intersection between Competition Dance, Televised Dance Shows and Social Media." *Research in Dance Education* 21 (2):169–87. doi:10.1080/14647893.2020.1798394.
- Hoch, Anne Z., Paula Papanek, Aniko Szabo, Michael E. Widlansky, Jane E. Schimke, and David D. Gutterman. 2011. "Association

- between the Female Athlete Triad and Endothelial Dysfunction in Dancers." *Clinical Journal of Sport Medicine* 21 (2):119–25.
- IBIS World. 2019. IBIS. Accessed November 23, 2020. <https://www.ibisworld.com/united-states/market-research-reports/dance-studios-industry/>.
- Jayanthi, N., Cynthia LaBella, Lara Dugas, Erin R. Feller, and Brittany Patrick. 2013. "Risks of Specialized Training and Growth for Injury in Young Athletes: A Prospective Cohort Study." Paper presented at the American Academy of Pediatrics National Conference and Exhibition, Orlando FL, October 28. <https://aap.confex.com/aap/2013/webprogram/Paper21503.html>.
- Levin, Jordan. 2016. "Today's Young Dancers Train Hard to Win Trophies. But What are They Losing?" *Miami Herald*, November 2016. <https://www.miamiherald.com/entertainment/article112397897.html>.
- Quested, E., and J. L. Duda. 2009. "Perceptions of the Motivational Climate, Need Satisfaction, and Indices of Well- and Ill-Being among Hip Hop Dancers." *Journal of Dance Medicine & Science: Official Publication of the International Association for Dance Medicine & Science* 13 (1):10–19.
- Quested, E., and J. L. Duda. 2011. "Perceived Autonomy Support, Motivation Regulations and the Self-Evaluative Tendencies of Student Dancers." *Journal of Dance Medicine & Science: Official Publication of the International Association for Dance Medicine & Science* 15 (1):3–14.
- Robson, Bonnie E. 2004. "Competition in Sport, Music, and Dance." *Medical Problems of Performing Artists* 19 (4):160–66. <https://doi.org/10.21091/mppa.2004.4026>.
- Ryan, R. M., and E. L. Deci. 2000. "Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being." *American Psychologist* 55 (1):68–78. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68>.
- Sandall, Emma. 2020. "Has the Push for Ever-More Flexibility Put Dancers at Risk?" *Dance Magazine*, January 27.
- Schupp, Karen. 2020. "I Can't. I Have Dance: Dance Competition Culture as Serious Leisure and Pre-Professional Training." *Leisure Studies* 39 (4):479–92. doi:10.1080/02614367.2019.1643902
- Sey, Jennifer. 2008. *Chalked up*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- Tay, Charmaine. 2020. "Are We Creating a Motivational Climate in Studios That Is Conducive for Learning?" *Scape*, June. [https://www.scape.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/22-June\\_Motivational-climate.pdf](https://www.scape.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/22-June_Motivational-climate.pdf).
- Weisbrod, A. 2010. "Competition Dance: Redefining Dance in the United States." Doctoral dissertation, University of California, Riverside.
- Wilson, Julie C., Bridget J. Quinn, Corinne W. Stratton, Heather Southwick, and James P. MacDonald. 2015. "Athletes Doing Arabesques: Important Considerations in the Care of Young Dancers." *Current Sports Medicine Reports* 14 (6):448–54. doi:10.1249/JSR.0000000000000208.
- Witkoś, J., and P. Wróbel. 2019. "Menstrual Disorders in Amateur Dancers." *BMC Women's Health* 19 (1):87. doi:10.1186/s12905-019-0779-1.



**Heather Harrington**

---

Address correspondence to Heather Harrington. E-mail: [✉ Heatherhah@gmail.com](mailto:Heatherhah@gmail.com)