

HEALTHY OR HARMFUL CHILDREN'S DANCE

How can parents or concerned adults know if their child's dance studio teaches healthy, educational dance or unhealthy, sexualized dance? Educate yourself and take action:

- The new trend in children's dance
- How to pick a healthy dance studio
- How to avoid a harmful dance studio
- Hypersexualization: How to educate a dance studio with the DA:NCE Toolkit



Introduction



Educational research shows that dance benefits children with creativity, problem solving, risk taking, communication, social awareness, emotional maturity and higher ordered thinking. It integrates the mind, body and soul. However, in some dance classes around the nation, children are learning to dance using adult costumes, choreography and music that hypersexualizes them and their bodies. Our youngest citizens have become covert victims of sexual exploitation in what used to be a safe place—the dance studio. Children’s dance is being distorted and the art form of dance is being hijacked.

As awareness grows, more and more dance educators, parents and concerned citizens are speaking out against the cultural shift toward normalizing the hypersexualization of children in dance. The following articles provide clear steps adults can take to understand the difference between healthy and harmful dance.

We’d love to have you join the DA:NCE team to receive a **free newsletter** and help us spread this message. For more information, including actionable templates and videos you can share with friends and family, visit our website at ►danceawareness.com.

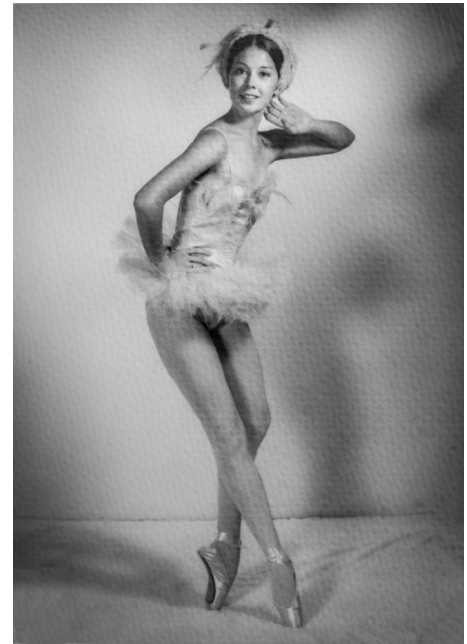
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The new trend in children's dance

Have you bought flowers for that 'special dancer'? Each year I enjoy the dance recital of my two granddaughters at the **Dance Foundation**. At their most recent recital, their dances were titled 'Whispering Wind' (ballet), 'Enchanted Rain' (ballet), and 'Trumpets and Horns' (tap). It was a wonderful time to celebrate how the positive aspects of dance have affected them. Research shows that dance classes develop advanced skills in creativity, problem solving, communication, risk taking, high ordered thinking, and social awareness.

Then nostalgia. I'm taken back to personal memories about MY June dance recitals. One year I was a '4th of July' dancer; the next year I was a 'Nightingale' and later, I even appeared as 'Mary Poppins'. Each week I went to dance class and each week I fell more in love with movement. During those years, I was fortunate enough to learn the craft of ballet from teachers Olga Fricker and Sheila Darby. They founded **Cecchetti USA**. Ms. Darby was the one who encouraged me to pursue dance professionally. But she didn't need to emphasize the importance of dance to me. Movement classes reached into my heart throughout adolescence & adulthood. In a changing world, dance class was a positive, safe adventure. And I always wanted more. That's why my love of dance took me beyond childhood memories.



A young Mary Bawden

Poster Child For Dance

As an adult, I received a BA in modern dance from the University of California Riverside, a MA in worship (with an emphasis in dance) from Hope International University in Fullerton CA, and a California secondary teaching credential. I am also the founder of Soul to Sole Choreography and **DA:NCE** (Dance Awareness: No Child Exploited). Beyond that, I've led a dance ministry at my church for over 20 years and **I've written a book on that subject.**

In 2016, I fell in love with 'LaLaLand' as well as the new documentary on Misty Copeland, the first black dancer chosen to be a prima ballerina for the American Ballet Theater. ***It's safe to say that I am the poster child for a good experience in dance.***

But I need to pause here. Because our culture is inundated with children involved in dance and because I am a dance educator, lean in.

I care about maintaining the artistry of dance, and I care about nurturing children from an educational perspective. So here goes. ***In some dance studios around the nation, there has been an increase in sexualized, objectified movement for children under 12.*** These studios/teachers often unknowingly model their movement choices on what they see in the media culture. I'll label this cultural shift the difference between healthy, age-appropriate dance versus unhealthy, age-inappropriate dance.

Sexualization/Objectification In Movement

Before I go further, I want to clarify what I mean by sexualization/objectification in movement by sharing some research you can read in detail. The **APA (American Psychological Association) report** on girls says that there are several components to unhealthy sexuality, and these components set it apart from healthy sexuality. When their criteria is applied to dance studio choreography, it's important to identify negative movement patterns: booty pops, lip-licking, finger licking/sucking, breast or groin stroking, patting or pointing towards breast or genitalia, crotch-grabbing, obscene gestures, suggestive grinding, and seductive props and looks. And the sexual menu continues to increase.



This is not the art form of dance. It does not promote artistry or creativity. Actually, it is hypersexualization, and it is hurting the perception of dance when a wide-ranging cultural audience watch it in media, model after it, and move in it. More importantly, it normalizes unhealthy sexuality as defined by the APA report. Because there are many people who love dance as well as dance educators who are concerned about this cultural trend just like me, I have released several materials

to provide a solution for dance education, particularly focusing on children under 12, under the title of DA:NCE (Dance Awareness: No Child Exploited) on my website ► danceawareness.com I've described them below:

1. A **5 minute video exploring the problem of sexualization in children's dance**. Please share it on Facebook.
2. An **R-rated, research-based 30 minute video or a PG rated research-based 17 minute video** that has been designed to bring awareness and education in dance (with experts in the field) so that children are not exploited.
3. **An educational PowerPoint presentation** anyone can download to make a presentation in their local community on this topic.
4. Look for a **YPAD Certified Dance Studio**. YPAD is a national organization that is working to certify dance studios with healthy movement criteria (and a lot more).
5. A national movement, "**Share Your DA:NCE Story**" which collects and listens to the voices of adults who had unhealthy dance experiences as children.

If you love dance, please share the educational materials above with other parents and grandparents. The website is easy to remember: ► danceawareness.com. While I support the art of dance 100%, I do not support its inappropriate use. There are appropriate, creative, wonderful ways to use choreography in this culture, and unfortunately, inappropriate ways to distort movement as well (so, like many other areas, choice is the issue). Please join me to bring awareness to dance trends that distort the art form, as well as the cultural acceptance of dance that normalizes the hypersexualization of children. Let's make healthy movement choices in what we support in the arts as well as what we allow our children to participate in. I feel a responsibility to protect children, educate adults, and encourage the art of age-appropriate dance in the current media culture.

Now I'm off. I've got to pick up a bouquet of flowers. I wouldn't miss the joy of another dance recital in Redlands. I can hardly wait to see the show! Join the healthy movement cause and help me to be a poster child for the art of dance, not the objectification of children!

How to pick a healthy dance studio

Once a year most studios plan a dance recital to celebrate a year of student maturity, growth, and technique in their dance classes. It's a lot of fun when children present the joy of what they have learned coupled with wonderful music, artistic costumes and age-appropriate choreography! Woo-hoo! I just got back from Alabama where I enjoyed the dances that my 2 grandchildren participated in. I'm bustin' with pride.



Yes, it's recital time and because I get lots of questions about end-of-the-year presentations, I thought that I'd share some pointers on what to look for in a healthy, age-appropriate studio versus what to observe about a studio that is unhealthy. When I use the word unhealthy, let me clarify. I am referring to dances for children that are hypersexualized with adult costumes, choreography and music. To further understand this issue, see the [APA report on the sexualization of girls](#).

Healthy dance studios do the obvious. As a young dancer takes classes, children engage in an age-appropriate curriculum and develop more advanced technical skill year by year. Adult sexualized movement content is nowhere to be seen. Many excellent studios, educational institutions, and recreational dance facilities have technical goals that serve to advance a child to the next level. Of course, the best studios have a written educational curriculum with intentional, defined outcomes for each year of class.

At healthy dance studios, dance educators have a lot of knowledge to share with students and they also have a wonderful passion to share it in the lessons they teach. Age-appropriate dance studios don't focus on having a certain body type; they don't compare children negatively and they don't value winning a competition above nurturing each student for their individual strengths. I would also look for teachers who talk with their students about trends like 'losing weight' for external purposes versus the value of eating a balanced diet. Teachers should also verbalize why their particular studio doesn't choose adult costumes, choreography and music for

their students. Children need to be aware of why hypersexualization hurts them. Of course all dance educators teach external technical movement but they also greatly influence the growth of internal values and self-esteem. With clear educational outcomes defined, children are released to have a wonderful time learning about the wonder of moving their bodies. In a dance studio, the atmosphere should be loving and the communication to parents should be consistent and open. As a parent, you should be able to ask questions about any aspect of a dance class without feeling awkward. The environment should be welcoming!



Most importantly, look at the finished choreography for older girls (and sometimes younger grades) that is shown during the end of the year dance recitals or at competitions. That will give you a clear visual understanding of the philosophy of that particular studio. Are you seeing hypersexualized movements/costumes/music anywhere in the choreography curriculum? Look at this [example](#). Because the culture is normalizing hypersexualization, you can't. It's important to understand that, as the years pass, your child will eventually be influenced by the dance studio culture that they are a part of. Your child will also be seasoned by the older dance students and the leadership that they exercise.

Don't be afraid to set an appointment and directly ask a particular dance studio owner about hypersexualization. There's nothing wrong with this question: "What is your philosophy about the use of adult costumes, choreography and music for children enrolled at this dance studio?" Next, I'll define what unhealthy, age-inappropriate choreography means as it relates to children's dance. Last, I'll give you some tips that you can use to educate a dance studio owner that you are concerned about. They might not know about the negative outcomes of choreography, music and costumes that hypersexualize children. Remember that [▶danceawareness.com](#) has free research and suggestions for you to share.

If you have any questions, feel free to email me and ask them at mary@danceawareness.com. I hope that you enjoy the beauty of dance and the well-researched benefits of dance that most children enjoy. Just be careful to choose the right studio so that your child does not experience negative outcomes!

How to avoid a harmful dance studio

In the last article, I described what to look for in a healthy, age-appropriate dance studio. Now I'd like to travel in the other direction and discuss what defines dance that harms children. Let me refresh your memory. When I use the words harmful dance, I am referring to dances for children that are hypersexualized with adult costumes, choreography and music. It's unhealthy dance. Now, take a minute to read the [APA report on the sexualization of girls](#) to discover the negative outcomes that accompany sexualized movement for children.

First, it should be obvious that all dance studios are not created equal. You, the parent or concerned adult, must investigate a particular studio and determine if it promotes healthy, **age-appropriate** movement with defined, educational goals versus unhealthy, age-inappropriate movement. To help you assess what is harmful, look at the following definition of age-appropriate dance movement from the definition developed by **Y.P.A.D.** (youth protection advocates in dance) in a booklet entitled 'Tools Not Rules.'

Movement and choreography for children is 'Age-Appropriate' ***if it doesn't.***

- Contain sexually suggestive moves such as twerking, sexualized 'booty pops', lip-licking, finger licking/sucking, breast or groin stroking, patting or pointing towards breast or genitalia, or lip pouting that promotes a sexual tone.
- Mimic obscene gestures, drug or alcohol use, or gang activity (ie flashing 'gang' symbols, middle finger, licking the hand and grabbing the crotch).



- Include sexually suggestive grinding, humping the floor, sexually straddling a prop (like a chair), back arches with bottoms to the audience in a suggestive manner.
- Use props that are sexually suggestive or meant to depict violence (whips, chains, guns or knives) unless they are part of age-appropriate story-telling (Pirates of the Caribbean etc).
- Stage the dancers in a row touching each other and then rolling their bottoms or gyrating their hips in a sexually suggestive way.
- Spanking themselves or another dancer on the bottom or running their hands up another dancer's body in a seductive manner.
- Crotch drops in a deep plie with knees and feet turned out, either by itself or multiple bouncing while engaged low on the floor.
- Contain artistic concepts or themes with sexual connotations or references to drug or alcohol use (such as 'partying at the club')
- Contain expressions that connote an 'invitation' on the part of the audience to view the dancer as a sexual target (ie 'come hither' looks, winks, long gazes and provocative stares directly into the eyes of the judges or audience members).

By the way, to help your investigation, use the internet to view videos on specific dance websites that you are considering. Evaluate the choreography, costumes and music. Look for clear visual evidence of healthy, age-appropriate movement experiences versus unhealthy, harmful dance. Another tip. Make sure and attend the June dance recital of a studio you are considering prior to enrolling your child. Do you see any of the sexualized movements that are described above or modeled [in this link](#)? If you recognize age-inappropriate dance, do you understand that what you are viewing is not the art of dance but the hypersexualization of children? Left unchallenged, hypersexualization normalizes movement trends that are not normal. Last, look on ► danceawareness.com and view the [30 minute R rated power-point video](#) that will give you in depth information from experts other than

me about this harmful context in dance. Now look below to read insightful comments from concerned adults to help you discern the difference between healthy and harmful dance:

"We switched studios when my 4 year old was expected to wear a 'hair fall' (a fake acrylic curly ponytail) for her dance numbers. I told the teacher "yeah, no.... I'll just curl her hair." But I was disturbed that we were expected to not only paint them up in makeup but also add fake hair."

"As a dance teacher myself, I feel it's mainly choosing the correct dance teacher for your children which parents shouldn't need to do as all teachers should be qualified. Unfortunately, there is an immense amount of unqualified dance teachers out there who don't know what they are doing. It gives dance teachers a bad reputation."

"Dance studios are utterly unregulated—teachers may not be trained at all and they may even be doing physical and emotional harm. Parents don't always understand how carefully they need to pay attention to what is going on....."

"I am dealing with this issue right now with my 6 YO daughter, who is taking a hip-hop class at a very large studio that offers all types of dance. I've been horrified to watch the costumes that are being pushed upon these young girls—Daisy Dukes, bare midriffs, etc. Even the recital book is horrifying—a catalog of little girls dressed like strippers in often provocative poses, available for purchase by anyone in the community for \$15."

"I feel it's important to not only ascertain the credentials of the instructor but also to determine the attitudes of the dance studio. I have, in the past, moved my family member from a studio where this was viewed as acceptable and specifically avoided another studio (which otherwise had strong instructors) for these reasons. Our children are exposed to sexualization far too early in their lives as it is. Please, let children be just that!"



Hey, dance team, let's stop the hypersexualization of children in dance so that children experience the beauty of body movement alongside the art of dance. Be courageous and care. To get more information, I encourage you to [visit our website](#). By the way, in the next article, I'll write about how you can approach a dance studio owner to educate them about this issue. Believe it or not, some dance studios have bought into this cultural trend without thinking it through; they may not know about the research behind this perspective.

Hypersexualization: How to educate a dance studio with the DA:NCE Toolkit

Time and time again I hear from concerned parents, grandparents, dancers and community leaders asking what they can do to raise education and awareness around the harmful effects of adult costumes, choreography and music for children. While many of you have probably seen children's dance that disturbs you, perhaps you didn't know what you could do about it. This ebook focuses on providing a solution to this challenge with the hope that you'll join me in educating dance studio owners and instructors about the harm hypersexualized dance imposes on children.



If you've been following along, this section is the last in a series designed to help you know how to find a healthy, age-appropriate dance studio for your child. Now, I want to empower you to make a change at your local level by sharing more about the dance studio toolkit. It's information that I have created to help you educate dance studios/owners about why the hypersexualization of young dancers is not a road to travel. You may think that a dance studio should know this information. However, many don't. They're caught up in the objectified cultural tide like many people are. Often, they seem oblivious to the issue. That's why the hypersexualization of young children is rampant in dance as well as a multitude of other arenas. Sometimes either parents or teachers think that this style of dance is appropriate. But it isn't. Actually, it's a trend that all of us need to be informed about and all of us on the DA:NCE Team need to share with others.

So how do you go about the task of educating yourself and sharing research information with a dance studio owner? I have a step by step process that works. First, read the articles below to become informed about the topic.

- Go to ► danceawareness.com and watch our free presentations to educate yourself on this issue
- Read 'Recital Revelations: When it Comes to the Over-Sexualization of Young Girls, We Are the Problem'

- Read the [APA report on the sexualization of girls](#)

Next, view the two sample videos below highlighting choreography, music and costumes that hypersexualize children and demonstrate why education and awareness around this issue is critically needed. Note: This content may be unsuitable for some viewers.

- [Watch our video that shares insight from experts throughout the industry related to how hypersexualized children's dance hurts children](#)
- [Group dance video](#)
- [Solo dance video](#)

We all need to reflect on the following question: Do these videos and others like it demonstrate a healthy view of both the art of dance AND what is good for young children?

The answer is no.

Third, consider starting a local dance petition. What is a local dance petition? It's simply signatures from other people that want to stop the hypersexualization of children in dance. In addition to you, the signed names will show a dance studio owner that many people are concerned about this issue and want it changed. Use the link below to do so.

[Local Dance Petition Download](#)

Now let's get practical and sum up the steps for the dance toolkit that you will need to take:

1. Discuss the local petition information you have downloaded (including 2 blank signature pages) with several other interested adults; try to involve at least two parents whose children attend a local dance studio. Make sure everyone reads the petition and the accompanying articles carefully. ***Set a tone of respect and education as you pursue involving others in this petition. Reactive communication does not produce positive change.***
2. Try to get at least 25 signatures on your local petition before you present it to a dance studio owner. Call the owner and set up a specific appointment time to talk about this petition. Tell them that you want to meet with them to share a concern you have about the hypersexualization of children in dance ***based on research.*** Offer to share articles and videos on ► danceawareness.com ahead of time.

3. If the dance studio owner does not have the time or the interest to read this material prior to the appointment, bring some printed material to the meeting. During the appointment time:
 - Start out the conversation with positive comments about the art of dance and appreciation for the dance studio that you are targeting.
 - Ask the studio owner if they have read the materials about hypersexualized dance that you are concerned about. If the answer is no, give them time to read them. If the answer is yes, ask them what they think about the articles and the research.
 - Engage in a personal conversation with them and ask if they would consider making sure that they do not allow children under 12 to present dances in adult costumes, music and choreography. Present the signed petition to them showing that others in the community support your effort. Refer them to the information on ► danceawareness.com.
 - Encourage and educate dance studio owners to join **YPAD** and request their studio certification. YPAD studio certification will provide age-appropriate standards for safety in children's dance.
 - Whether or not they agree with your viewpoint, listen to what they have to say. If they are not sure about what you have communicated or if they articulate a negative response, **give them the time to reflect**. Pursue a follow up meeting to answer questions. Sometimes all someone needs is time and education to change their mind.
4. Contact your local newspaper and ask them to write an article about the hypersexualization of children in dance; include the petition, the research on this issue, and the ► danceawareness.com website so that others can be educated on this issue. Make sure that the local article directs the readers' attention to the dance studios that agree with the petition. If it is hard to get a response from a reporter, submit a letter to the editor sharing this information.

5. Let **DA:NCE** know about what's happening in your town by emailing Mary Bawden at mary@danceawareness.com. Join the **Dance team** to receive free updates about the hypersexualization of children in dance. Together, we can make a difference! Let's put an end to the creation of adult, sexual choreography, lyrics and costumes for children under 12.

Before I leave you, remember this: When dance educators use age-appropriate skills, the **research** shows that children's dance affects motor, brain and creative development with incredibly positive results.



GET INVOLVED

We'd love to have you join our movement and help us spread the DA:NCE message! To learn more or access free resources to help educate other parents and dance studios about the harmful effects of hypersexualized children's dance, visit ► danceawareness.com, find Soul to Sole Choreography on **Facebook**, or utilize the following resources:

- **Share our 5-minute video**
- **Join the DA:NCE team as a volunteer**
- **Sign Up for our DA:NCE newsletter**
- **Educate using our DA:NCE resources**
- **Inform using our Dance Studio toolkit**
- **Look for a YPAD Certified Dance Studio**
- **Watch our 20-minute video which includes expert insights into how hypersexualized children's dance impacts our kids**
- **Have your own dance story? Share it as part of our Share Your DA:NCE Story campaign**

About the Author

Mary Bawden has a love for the medium of dance that transcends its visual beauty. She sees dance as a metaphor for the movement that we use to choreograph daily life. She founded Soul to Sole Choreography in 1994 and DA:NCE (Dance Awareness: No Child Exploited) in 2016, with the goal of protecting the art of dance and children from adult choreography, costumes and music that hypersexualize them and their bodies.

Her background includes a bachelor of arts degree in modern dance from the University of California-Riverside, as well as a master of arts in worship with an emphasis in dance from Hope International University. Mary authored the book, "Dance is Prayer in Motion," which is available for purchase on [Amazon](#). Supported by the [NCOSE \(National Center on Sexual Exploitation\)](#), Mary advocates for healthy, educational dance. Because of that, she finds herself on the front lines of raising awareness about the hypersexualization of children in dance.

She has spoken about this topic on a national stage including the [NDEO \(National Dance Educator's Organization\)](#) conference and the annual [NCOSE Summit](#), as well as state venues from [CDEA \(California Dance Educators Association\)](#) to [CAHPERD \(California Health Physical Education Recreation and Dance\)](#). She welcomes invitations to speak on this topic nationally and internationally.



DA:NCE is a program of

