

# DANCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD



## INTRODUCTION

Humans have an innate need for a collective bond. We are interdependent and our safety and well-being is predicated on a social pact of trust. While perhaps more obvious in the days when it took a village to bring down the boar than it is today as we go about our daily lives each holding our own technological device connecting us to unlimited information, humans are still reliant on the collective goodwill of their community.

“There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than  
the way in which it treats its children.”  
(Nelson Mandela)

How would the soul of our society be measured? The recent vibrant and dynamic push for universal preschool has revealed a tremendous amount of data evidencing the importance of preschool education to student achievement, graduation rates and success later in life. In fact, the U.S. Department of Education's 2015 budget plan brings much needed resources toward providing preschool for all four year olds; extending our commitment to helping families out of poverty through early Head Start programs; and supporting our most vulnerable families through home-visiting support. It is an exciting time as policy-makers are finally coming to recognize what educators have known all along; that is, by investing resources in children, especially when they are very young, we are investing in society. The benefits will be generational; and the oppressive cloak of poverty and violence stand a better chance of being lifted.

Given our nation's track record in educational policy, however, the desire for early learning for all does not guarantee that the programs delivered will result in confident children, engaged in learning and life. A quick glance back to the sad results of poorly implemented programs based on literal and unimaginative interpretations of No Child Left Behind provide a cautionary tale. Oakland public schools, for example, continue to fail children at an alarming rate. We do not have to repeat this in Early Childhood Education.



## LEARNING IN ECE

*I have been working with children and families for almost fifty years, and children still develop in the same way and at the same pace.*

--David Elkind

Currently, at Luna Dance Institute, we are interested in continuing our research, theory-building and practice of how dance is at the convergence of all processes of learning. We know that children learn through play, in relationship and in motion. Neuroscience and creativity studies support this premise. This paper addresses the role dance and movement plays in the organic synthesis of relationship, play, and language and brain development in early childhood. When we talk about dance, we are talking about the ability to move one's body through space with energy and effort for purposes of expression and communication.

### Neuroscience – brain development

Life begins with movement. Movement directs perception and perception directs movement. Pre-birth embryos and infants use constant motion to organize and cope. "The body acts and reacts in a continuing process of perception" with sensory perception as "mode of relatedness" between perceiver and world around him. "As the body moves, perception changes." (Gerhardt 1973) Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, the leading expert on early development movement has written extensively about the development patterns that begin in utero and continue through the first two years of life. For centuries and across cultures, many dance and movement forms have organized their techniques around these patterns: breath, tactile, core/distal, homologous (upper/lower), homolateral (body/half), cross-lateral and vestibular. Since the MRI was developed, neuroscientists are increasingly becoming aware of what dancers have intuitively known; that is, there is a strong and obvious connection between body and brain.

Early Childhood Dance curriculum is centered on these patterns. Dancing children have a chance to practice, repair, understand and use these patterns. Anne Green-Gilbert developed The Brain Dance™ that has proven effective for engaging youngsters in the understanding of their bodies in motion; to providing tools for self-soothing for children with sensory-stimulation issues; and to helping fill gaps in development for children who may have had insufficient time for exploring the world on their bellies, slithering or crawling.

Luna Dance Institute has taught hundreds of dance educators to use variations of the Brain Dance effectively in their classroom. The developmental patterns have become a cornerstone of an embodied parent education curriculum that allows parents to repair gaps in their own early movement as they gain empathy for their children's growing perception of a widening world.

## PLAY

*Play is the answer to the question, how does anything new ever come about?*

--Jean Piaget

Evolution depended on adaptation. Evolution scientists call this Variability Selection Theory. Humans have huge brains, a database of sort; we also have the capacity to improvise off of that database. Play allows children to practice improvisation—playing, “riffing” off immediate ideas, ideas of peers and judicious prompts from parents, teachers and other helpful adults.

There are many theories about the play in early childhood: play as sensory learning from the infant’s early play with fingers and mouth to the Montessori Method of hands-on play as child’s work. Play is seen as both rehearsal—practicing actions to various real-life scenarios in a risk-free environment and as preparation for the working world. Piaget saw play as an important aspect of intellectual development as the child moves through assimilation and accommodation, learning to both have agency in the world and adapt to its realities. Play has been seen as therapeutic—both in formal psychoanalytic settings and generally to develop strategies for stressful events.

While there is not one common definition of play, developmental theorists value its importance. Children are losing their play-time and it is having negative impacts on their lives. David Elkind (2007) states, “Health problems resulting from the disappearance of play are already apparent: emotional, behavioral and development needs are not being met...there is little time for exercising the predisposition for fantasy, imagination and creativity—the mental tools required for success in higher-level math and science.” (preface) Vygotsky saw play as a formative activity directly related to higher order functioning that originates through the relationship between a child and primary caregiver and later moves to use of objects. “The child’s use of object substitutions in play serves an important role in the development of creativity, as well as the child’s development of the capacity for abstract thought.” (Saracho, p. 51).

Dance taught from a developmentally appropriate perspective provides opportunities for children to play with concepts directly related to moving their bodies through space and experimentation with various energy concepts. The National Core Arts Standards and the California Early Learning Foundations emphasize that dance in early childhood is to be taught conceptually using a Creative, Perform, Respond framework customized to clear developmental expectations of children at each age.

## RELATIONSHIPS

Human beings are biologically “hardwired” to create relationships. The process of attachment, first described by John Bowlby’s work in 1969, described the biological adaptation of the human child to engage in a series of behaviors that will draw in the primary caregiver so that he/she receives the nurturing needed to develop the first relationship. That first relationship, called primary attachment, is the foundation of the child’s ability to learn and to form subsequent health relationships throughout his/her life. Similarly, human adults are also biologically predisposed to respond to the cues of the infant. (Ainsworth, Kaplan, Bowlby) The trust built from these early endeavors affects how humans build relationships throughout their lifetime.

Through movement, humans move from complete dependence to relative independence. As an embryo and young infant, the child does not differentiate between internal and external space. The baby is moved from place to place by the adult caregiver. Soon, however, the baby begins to move, inviting a discovery first of itself; the body is the first point of reference for perception of space. The point of reference gradually shifts beyond the self to the world, making contact with objects, people and a widening notion of now measurable space supported by physical growth and development.

The trajectory of the baby moving through space mirrors the child’s healthy separation from parent. Initially, during the mutual cueing, children and parents mirror the other’s facial expressions. On the parent’s lap we see molding and stiffening. As the child begins to creep and crawl there is a constant checking back in to make sure the parent is still present. This using the primary adult as “safe base” continues as the child learns to walk, run and eventually take dance class with other toddlers and their parents. The powerful four year old takes class on his/her own, then shows or reports what was done alone. The now secure child goes forward to school with the agency to convey his original ideas using a growing understanding of the body in space and an evolving ability to manipulate energy and time for creative expression.



## TEACHING DANCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Luna Dance Institute suggests that the best way to support the young child's dance learning is to follow his/her natural inclination to learn through movement and extend that learning organically wherever possible. The following recommended structures are at the core of our professional development in early childhood dance.

In relationship with parent or primary caregiver. Children under the age of two learn most everything through their relationship with parents and primary caregivers. Adults can support babies' development by dancing with them to music, drumming and song; swaying, rocking, twirling and lightly bouncing them. Using the Brain Dance as a guideline, parents and primary caregivers can witness and get excited about their young child's progress through the developmental patterns: breath, tactile, core distal, head tail, upper/lower, body half, cross lateral and vestibular and reinforce the action through passive manipulation, ample "tummy time", naming what is happening with smiles and excitement, and copying the baby's actions. As the child moves into toddler age and is grappling with the separation side of attachment, the adult brings peek-a-boo, chase, hide 'n seek, shadowing and mirroring games into play. They might play games that involve connecting & disconnecting, moving toward & away, in front & behind, etc. to enhance individuation in a healthy way.

By exploring their environment. Since the early 1900's research findings document that humans learn by exploring our environment. Providing a clean, open space for children to move in safely is the best way parents and teachers can encourage the child's development. If there is ample space and time for the child to move freely, the role of the adult can be simply that of observer, narrator and guide. Providing safe, colorful balls and objects at floor level, eye level, sitting and standing levels will motivate the child to roll, scooch, crawl, walk, run, climb, reach and grasp--movements that activate the brain. Letting children achieve these milestones and then enthusiastically naming and acknowledging their efforts builds self-esteem and independence.

Through regular curricular structures such as circle or story time. As toddlers and preschoolers learn to sit with their peers to listen to stories and learn songs, the ECE teacher can easily incorporate dance and movement games.

Participating in dance class. Children under 3 do not benefit from dance classes outside of their known family or community. They need familiar adults in order to feel safe to explore the boundaries and freedom that define a creative dance class. Nonetheless, within an ECE dance center, older toddlers and preschoolers can benefit from a separate 20-30 minute dance class on a daily or weekly basis.

When we work with ECE educators, we help them set up their classroom to encourage spontaneous dance activities; we teach them about the developmental patterns and elements of dance so they can recognize, support and extend children's dance literacy; we model ways to incorporate dance into circle time; we practice the art of incorporating literature into dance and using dance to increase literacy; and we model age-appropriate stand-alone dance classes based on the elements of dance.

## ECE CLIENTS & PROJECTS

- Alameda Family Services, professional development to ECE faculty
- Asian Women's Shelter, San Francisco, professional development to shelter staff
- California Preschool Learning Foundations in the Arts, writer representing dance
- Embody MyBody, Vancouver, professional development to Reggio-Emilia based ECE centers
- Illinois Department of Education, dance consultant on Preschool Learning Foundations in the Arts
- MPACT (Moving Parents and Children Together), relationship-based dance offered to families in the child welfare system at Project Pride, the Solid Foundation, Lotus Bloom, Family Support Services of the Bay Area, Oakland Unity Council, Women's Daytime Drop-in Center and Oakland public libraries
- MPACT-Marin, relationship-based dance and early childhood professional development offered in Marin City-Sausalito
- MPACT-Southern California, professional development and program design of family dance programs in Los Angeles Unified School District and at the Wooden Floor, Santa Ana
- OUSD Balanced Literacy, facilitated year-long series of Professional Learning Community circles
- Oakland Early Headstart, professional development to ECE faculty
- Oakland Unified School District, 17 kindergarten classrooms (collaborative literacy & arts project with MOCHA)
- Siskiyou College Early Childhood Department, professional development to students and community educators
- Luna also offers onsite professional workshops in parent-child dance, dance in early childhood and a family dance institute.

## RESOURCES

- Published research on MPACT (2014) <http://www.ijea.org/v15n1/v15n1.pdf>
- Article on MPACT by Bonner Odell (2013) [http://lunadanceinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Dance-Studio-Life\\_Mpc\\_august13.pdf](http://lunadanceinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Dance-Studio-Life_Mpc_august13.pdf)
- Article on Attachment Theory and Dance by Patricia Reedy (2012) <http://dancersgroup.org/2012/05/the-first-steps-luna-dance-institute/>
- California Preschool Learning Foundations (2011) <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/re/documents/psfoundationsvol2.pdf>
- Blog on Dance in Early Childhood by Patricia Reedy (2015) <http://blog.lunadanceinstitute.org/2015/03/11/threes-and-me-reflecting-on-dance-in-early-childhood/>

Despite nearly 100 years of evidence and know-how, at the policy and practice level there remains confusion about what is right for children's development. Parents have a hunger to know about parenting, yet often ignore data when pitted against their own fears or values; often exaggerated through the media and a culture of consumerism. Now is the time to take a look at all that we know about early learning and have the courage to apply it. We have the chance, right now to create childcare that is really good for kids. Let's go for it. Let's raise a generation of children that know how to love, to imagine, to create, to problem-solve and to invest in their own lives and learning.

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