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Wellness for Dancers

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**Risks that Last a Lifetime**

In this paper, I will be examining the harmful effects of starting pointe training too early in a dancers’ life. Far too many dancers that I know who started pointe training prematurely now live with issues ranging from bone damage to tendonitis. This has left them unable to continue and withstand their pointe training, and unfortunately many of them have had to let go of it. In the long run, the deciding factor of when one should start en pointe should not be determined based solely upon age. What should be taken into thorough consideration on an individual basis is the strength and amount of proper technique training that has been endured by a dancer. While proper training may seem like a pain, it is crucial to maximizing a long and healthy dance career.

I have always been taught that technique training is the foundation to having a long and successful career in the dance world. It was not until when I started en pointe training myself that I had gained an understanding for what this truly meant. Growing up, one of my favorite things to do during the holiday season was to watch the Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre’s rendition of *The Nutcracker*. I would watch in awe and amazement as ballerinas danced effortlessly en pointe in my favorite part of the entire ballet, *Waltz of the Snowflakes*. Ballerinas danced daintily on the tips of their toes while performing with that of elegant stage presence. Breath and life in their performance was beautiful in addition to the scenery of a winter snowfall on stage. All I ever wanted was to dance en pointe like those ballerinas. In an ideal world, I would have loved to start training the minute that performance ended. However, I look back from where I am today, and I am grateful for the years of pre-pointe training teachers had put me through. Those years of waiting for my first pair of pointe shoes were far more rewarding than an early start that could result in a lifetime of regrets and consequences for what was only a dream in a moment in time.

Pointe is a form of ballet technique training in which a dancer supports their entire body weight by the tips of their toes. The classical form of ballet that originated in France over four hundred years ago has evolved greatly overtime. Introduced during the Italian Renaissance, the first official ballet, *The Comic Ballet of The Queen*, was performed for the court of the queen of France in in 1581. From what was once considered to be male dominant to what could now be considered a predominantly female style of dance, this is just one of the many transitions that classical ballet has undergone. With transitions that have occurred also came a change in the artistic style of ballet. “The aesthetic also changed from a more grounded style to the airy, ethereal quality of the Romantic era, and it is this aesthetic, at its peak, that gave rise to the idea of pointe shoes.” (Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology & the Ancient World at Brown University para. 2) As time went on, cultural values shifted and thus impacted the world of ballet. The style began to change in order to continue appealing to the interests of society. Soon enough pointe shoes came to be, providing the ballet world with a means to grow and flourish as the times continued to spark new interests and evolve.

The problem that lies at hand in the dance community is that young dancers are being put on pointe far before they are truly ready. Many dancers that experience such a consequential decision face problems later down the road because they have yet to fully develop. This is a recurring theme in the dance world for even those who do not practice the art of pointe technique. As you grow, a tendency is for your balance to be off due to a changing center of gravity. When the factor of supporting your body weight in pointe shoes is added to the scenario, the risk of potential injury skyrockets.

Even dancers that may possess the ideal body type for pointe work can experience the harmful effects of prematurely starting en pointe practice. I spoke with Grace Junker, a dear friend of mine, about the long-term injury she has been dealing with after ending her pointe training over three years ago now. To this day she must wear ankle braces on both ankles in order to compensate for ankle pain that pointe shoes brought to her.

“I have to wear the ankle braces because I have chronic hyper mobility which puts me at a high risk for rolls and sprains. The braces have a bar on either side of my ankle to keep them in place. I’ve always been hyper mobile, but when I started pointe, that increased it to the point where more problems were being caused, leading me to needing braces.” (Junker)

The decisions that are made early in a dancer’s life can wind up affecting them for the rest of time, impacting their ability to keep up with intensive dance training later down the road. Diana states “if a dancer’s ankles and feet aren’t strong enough, tendonitis can occur as the tendons struggle to hold everything in place, and she will also be prone to muscle strains.” (para. 6) Other common and serious injuries that form as a result can include but are not limited to bunions, the formation of tendonitis, bone damage, blisters, ingrown toenails and much more. While these injuries might not sound intimidating on some levels, they can impact a dance in many negative ways.

Bunions are bony protrusions that develop at the base of the big toe (and sometimes your little toe), and they form when bones in your foot shift out of place. When wearing pointe shoes, because they are so narrow and tight, this typically worsens the severity of bunions and causes more pain for dancers. Many dancers who have bunions typically must get them removed surgically at one point in their life. When a dancer who is still developing “physically”, this escalates the issue further. If the dancer does not yet have the strength to dance on pointe and is compensating by curling over the toes and knuckles in the pointe shoe, this could wind up resulting in severe bone damage. “The bones of the feet do not fully develop and harden until approximately 13-15 years old.” (Washington University Physicians para. 1) Decisions should be made carefully, for deciding to place a dancer on pointe before they are ready could mean the end of their career.

While the requirements have been ever changing throughout the decades, there have been suggestions as to when the “right time” to go on pointe is for a dancer. Essentially, the “right time” should be personalized to each individual and the level they are at. However, guidelines that include skills that the dancer should be able to complete successfully exist for the purpose to be referred to when a decision must be made. “Ideally, the basis of going en pointe is the ability to solidly perform all the techniques in demi-pointe before proceeding to full pointe.” (Lin para. 7) At least two days a week dedicated to ballet training of a certain level should be included in the dancer’s practice. In the seventh paragraph, Lin writes “this is to develop strength, range of motion (ROM) and technique, so that there is “good trunk/abdominal/pelvic control, correct alignment of legs, and sufficient ankle/plantarflexion ROM.” When a dancer excels in the realms of stability of the core while dancing, holding of turnout, strength of the ankles, being able to hold their own body weight and much more, this can all help to ensure that a dancer has been well prepared and is soon ready to start their own journey with pointe training.

Even if you have had proper technique training and you have the strength to support yourself in pointe shoes, that does not mean you are not prone to injury as well. The amount of ingrown toenails that I have had to get removed over the years, due to the buildup of pressure being placed on my feet, is too many to count. This goes to show that pointe training is a very intense and physically demanding style of dance. All factors must be taken into consideration when deciding when a dancer is ready to begin training. Suitable preparation is key in order to avoid body damage that is irreversible.

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