

Southwest Classical Dance Institute

How To Find THE BEST Dance School for Your Dancer

A Free Report by Southwest Classical Dance Institute

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Finding the right dance studio or school can become a difficult process. What begins as a seemingly simple question of looking through the Yellow Pages for the closest studio with the biggest advertisement soon turns into an endless list of questions and concerns:

- Will my child have fun?
- What about safety?
- Will my child receive training that compliments his/her goals?
- Will I pay a fair price?
- What is good training?
- How do I tell if I have found a good teacher?
- What are the criteria for a good facility?
- Will my child have an enriching experience?
- and the list goes on.....

These are all valid questions, and parents are justified in their concerns about the dance school they choose for their children. After all, dance teachers have the potential to play a pivotal role in the physical and emotional development of their students, and with that should come a feeling of great responsibility. In addition, the dance teachers of today are directly responsible for the face of the dance world of tomorrow---they are creating the dancers, teachers and artists who will continue to develop this art form in the future.

How will I know if a particular dance studio/school is right for me/my child?

First of all, talk with your child and find out what their goals, dreams or desires are with respect to their dance activities. If they are in it for amusement and friends, with no serious aspirations, then a more recreational studio, or a school that has that kind of program available is probably a good fit. However, if your child absolutely loves to dance---eats, thinks, sleeps and dreams dance---and has aspirations of a professional career, either on stage, as a teacher or choreographer, then a more professional training program would be necessary to help them achieve these goals.

Will my child have fun?

"Fun" can be a matter of perspective: momentary satisfaction can be had from running, dancing, jumping, with no real structure or training involved---just for the joy of it. But a longer term sense of achievement, fulfillment, and freedom can be had through disciplined training of the body and mind. Hard work, focused attention, and continuing progress fills a need in us all for the satisfaction of a job well-done. Achieving goals which seem unattainable at first, through steady training and commitment gives a feeling of great personal fulfillment. As a parent, you must guide your child to see the difference between instant gratification and long-term achievement. You can't eat fast food all the time, even though it tastes good and is convenient, quick & easy; in order to stay healthy, a well rounded diet with vegetables and fiber is required. And so it is with dance training: you will have to help steer your child in the right direction to stay on the path to their goals.

What about injury prevention?

The two most important factors in injury prevention are proper instruction with a qualified and experienced professional, and the dance floor. We will address the issue of finding the right teacher a little later on. Quality dance floors are "sprung" and covered with Marley. A sprung dance floor does not actually have springs in the floor, but rather high density foam incorporated into its design. Usually the sub floor is the concrete foundation, above that lie sections of the high density foam. High grade plywood is then laid over the foam to spread out the impact. Marley covering is then put on top of the plywood to prevent slipping and even out the dance surface.

The high density foam absorbs the shock of landing from high jumps and repeated impact on the body. This relieves the majority of pressure and the impact on joints, ligaments and muscles. In addition to absorbing the energy of the impact, the high grade plywood floor also relieves stress on the body by not rebounding back immediately. This prevents a counter force on the body after landing. It also makes the dancer use their own power to push off the floor rather than using the spring of the floor. This aids in creating muscle strength and control.

Southwest Classical Dance Institute

Without a sprung floor, the types of injuries that are prevalent include: Achilles tendonitis, plantar fasciitis, stress fractures of all bones of the lower legs, feet and ankles, knee cartilage damage, lower back pain, hip pain. Also, a myriad of other injuries occur that are not directly related, such as sprained ankles, shin splints or heel/ankle spurs, because of tight muscles in the legs created from dancing on a floor that is too hard.

If a floor does not have Marley covering, floors should be wood that is not coated with varnish or polyurethane to keep the floor surface from being too slippery. Usually rosin is allowed on wood floors in order to prevent slipping. Some studios who do have Marley do not allow rosin on the floor in order to prolong the life of the Marley. However, if the studio temperature is too cold, the pores in the Marley surface shrink creating a very slippery surface. As a result, most professional training schools do allow a small amount of rosin on the Marley floors.

Without a proper dance floor surface, injuries such as chronically pulled or strained inner thigh muscles, calves and muscles of the feet are common due to the body's efforts to keep from slipping. Injuries such as strained shin/peroneal muscles or sprained ankles can be common due to slipping.

Dance studio flooring should never be tile, concrete, Pergo, linoleum or asphalt tile. No dance floor should be directly on a concrete sub floor.

Research the injury rate at the school. If it is high it means the training and/or the dance floors are inadequate.

Will my child receives training that compliments his/her goals?

When choosing a dance school, make sure that you research the different training programs they have available and that they coincide with you and your child's expectations of what you are looking for. There are hundreds of small dance studios all over the United States who offer recreational type programs, some who also offer participation in annual "dance-sport" competitions. However, there are precious few schools who offer professional level training programs or who have qualified teachers capable of equipping their students with the level of mastery required by the professional arena.

Regardless of what your child's goals are, however, high level instruction is always a top priority. Quality education in dance is the basis for a fulfilling experience on any level.

Will I pay a fair price for the training my child receives?

Make sure that you research all of the fees associated with attending a particular studio. Most places allow for a pre-determined number of classes per week depending on the classes for which you have registered. Try to find a studio that has recreational classes offered on punch cards for set amount of classes that you prepay for. That way you pay for only the classes your child takes, and you don't have to worry about makeup classes. Many have set tuition rates that include all required classes for their more advanced/professional training programs.

However, tuition often does not include fees associated with performing: costume fees/rental, prop fees, production fees, rehearsal fees, company fees, can all be costs associated with participating in a competition or yearly recital. Depending on how many pieces your child is required or has been invited to dance, these amounts can quickly add up to thousands of dollars a year. Some schools, however, include all tuition fees and all performing/competing costs rolled into one monthly rate for their more serious professional program students.

What is good training? What's the difference between a technique and a style?

Well rounded dance programs should offer an array of classes with the main focus on classical ballet: ballet technique, pointe, variations/repertoire, pas de deux, character, mime, choreography, modern, stretch/strength, Pilates, modern, jazz or even music lessons. All of these classes contribute to some aspect of training a well rounded, well informed dancer.

Some schools also incorporate an end of program performance, so rehearsals in preparation for that would also be a part of the schedule. Performing should not be the focal point, however; learning and increasing knowledge should be the main objective, as there will be plenty of time for performing later.

Basic hallmarks of good training are:

Southwest Classical Dance Institute

- proper placement and focus on correct fundamentals
- emphasis on correct execution of steps, with focus on clean lines, strength and stability, rather than high kicks and flashy tricks (They will come in time with proper coaching).
- Technical proficiency of a majority of students in the school, not just a select few
- Students' low occurrence of injury
- Success of graduating students in the professional arena or university scholarship awards. Ask around and research how many (if any) graduates of the school have succeeded in the professional dance world, and where they are dancing now. The caliber of company to which they go will also tell you about the level of accomplishment the school's students are able to achieve.
- Age appropriate level placement. Make sure that the level placement is in accordance with the scope of a full training program---they usually encompass the ages of 10-18. For example, if your 13-year old child auditions and is immediately placed in the school's highest level class out of 5 levels, there is probably very little else that school can provide your child for future improvement. It is good to be at the top of your class at that age, but not at the top of the school.

"Dance is all the same...ballet is just ballet, right?" Contrary to what most people believe about dance, specifically ballet, there are many different styles and techniques. So what is the difference between a style and a technique? A style of ballet refers to the specific way in which the material is danced. For example, the style of arms used for Swan Lake is very different from that used for Giselle or Balanchine's "Who Cares?", each a distinct style. The technique, however, is the way in which a dancer is trained to do the basic steps which make up all ballet, regardless of style. The best way to determine which technique to study under is one of versatility---ask "if I train in this certain way, will I still be able to dance other styles as well?"

Be careful of buzz words like "Professional Career", "Russian Training", "Balanchine Method"...

The Vaganova methodology of training classical dance is the strongest base from which a dancer can springboard into other avenues if they so choose. All of the truly great ballerinas and premier danseurs of the last century have come from this training. Dancers of this caliber have been able to dance in any company across the globe, no matter what was asked of them by the choreography. The Vaganova method uses a very specific, detailed and scientific approach to training the muscles and bodies of students to accomplish clean and graceful lines, and great technical fireworks. It also incorporates a philosophy in the training of giving of oneself, which develops the student in body, mind and spirit. It is a method which provides a true mastery, within which lies the ability of connection through individual expression. Finding schools and teachers who accurately and successfully train students in the Vaganova method can be a challenge. Many schools claim to teach the Vaganova method, though do not have the necessary class levels or well-trained teachers to accommodate the method's training.

- Very few studios have the programs in place, or teachers with enough knowledge and experience to adequately train their students for professional careers---check out the success of the school's previous graduates.
- Not all "Russian training" or "Soviet training" is the same, and not all is Vaganova-based. There are several major schools in the former USSR that teach seemingly similar methods, but slight differences in style and basic principles make them distinct from Vaganova's system of training.
- The Balanchine style has become a well-respected and popular style of classical ballet. The basic technique on which this style was developed is the Vaganova training. However, Balanchine's choreography, like Vaganova's training system, is very specific. Only those licensed by the Balanchine Trust are allowed legally to teach Balanchine's choreography.

Schools who claim to teach a combination of different techniques indicates they may not really know what style or technique they are teaching, and are and they are using buzz words as marketing tools. It also indicates that they are experimenting with their teaching methods, which can be dangerous to the physical well-being of the students. Also, learning more than one technique at the same time, especially in the early formative years, can be confusing for the student, as well as create thick and bulky muscles because of the differences in the training methods.

What is the difference between a dance school and a commercial studio?

Southwest Classical Dance Institute

Classical dance training is based on the study of classical ballet, which is the basis for the other styles of classical dance. Other types of "classical" dance training include jazz, tap, modern, flamenco, and character/folk/national dance. Schools of classical dance focus on proficiency, artistry and good taste, offering only one or two performances annually. Most of these kinds of schools are non-profit organizations that show a clear vision and mission for their charitable purpose and artistic philosophy.

Commercial dance generally consists of "Las Vegas" or "Los Angeles" style jazz---the kind you see in music videos, hip-hop, popping, and break dancing. They often offer low-quality classes in the classical dance styles listed above. These studios focus on producing multiple pieces for several competition performances a year, as well as a yearly recital. Very often (not always), these studios allow inappropriate costumes, music content or unsuitable choreography. These kinds of studios are most often for-profit entities that do not focus on public works or their impact on community culture.

How do I tell if I have found a good teacher?

When deciding on a dance school, make sure to do research on the faculty who will be teaching your child. It is probably safe to assume the bigger schools will have reputable teachers who will undoubtedly have had professional level training in dance, a professional performing career, and sometimes university schooling and/or teacher training. However, these credentials do not guarantee a teacher teaches well. *Reputation and the success of former students are the biggest factors in evaluating teachers.* It is of utmost importance for teachers to have themselves been schooled in the methodology they teach.

Good teachers will have reputations that speak to the quality of training they provide their students. Reputable teachers also will not be shy about telling you/your child what is in their best interest, be it about specific training corrections, or advice about a particular event, school or program, whether you/your child like the answer they give you or not. Sometimes it is necessary as the teacher to relay unpleasant information, if it is in the student's best interests. Ask around---other parents and students are very good sources of this kind of information.

Do teachers give correction during classes? Do they walk around and physically make corrections on students (especially younger classes)? Or do they simply give combinations and leave it at that? Make sure to observe several classes to see how the instructor interacts with the students, and how involved and hands on they are when they teach.

Are private lessons necessary?

Generally speaking, private lessons should only be necessary in preparation for a specific event, i.e. an audition video or final finishing rehearsals for a performance or competition, or to catch a student up to where they need to be for their age level if they have started late. Excellent training and a teacher's keen eye during technique and pointe classes should adequately prepare students for the challenges they face during their exams, repertoire/choreography rehearsals and performances.

What are the criteria for a good dance facility?

The most important factors for a good dance facility are those that directly impact the quality of dance the training:

- Foam Sprung floors with Marley flooring in all studios
- High ceiling clearance (for high jumps and lifts)
- Studios large enough to accommodate the training, as well as class size
- Mirrors on one long wall of the studio
- Secure and sturdy barres
- Access to rosin if needed

Other amenities that help make the studio a more comfortable place to study are:

- Boys/Girls changing areas
- Bathrooms
- Lounge/kitchen area
- Reception desk
- Director's office/consultation & meeting area
- Study area/library
- In-house wardrobe/costume room
- Additional workout room with free weights, Pilates/Total Gym equipment etc.

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Will my child have an enriching experience?

If you have weighed all of the criteria, and you have done your research on the topics discussed in this article, you should find the right match for you and your child. Remember, that an enriching experience expands your horizons, opens your mind to other possibilities, and expands your view of yourself and the world around you. The fine arts, and dance in particular, can do just that in a very personal way through its innately physical nature, especially if you involve yourself and your child in a school or dance institution that has that kind of philosophy and mission at its heart.

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