

# Dance Your Heart Out!

by Nicole Marie

Let's begin with a story. It's a story about dance, about how it brings us joy and makes our souls sing. It's a story about a special day, a wedding day. And it's a story about Camilla.

Camilla has always been slow to warm up. I've known her her whole life, but still, at six years old, when I visit her house she hides away, only emerging when she's ready to say hello. In the story I'm about to recount she was younger and shyer than she is today.

What Camilla didn't know when she danced at my wedding is that I have dedicated my life to helping people feel more comfortable with dance. I am what you might call a dance revivalist. I actively conspire to convert people who fear dancing into wildly-moving dance floor maniacs. I want people to dance for the fun of it, to move their bodies with abandon. Every human being has the right to dance without feeling insecure about it. A society where people of all ages dance together socially is a joyful and connected place to live.



Photographs by Andrei Andreev

may not know how to perform the latest break-dancing steps, but the idea that a person who cannot move her body any way she wants to is madness.

Of course, when people say they can't dance, they're not speaking of an inability to move. They are referring to an insecurity that makes dancing uncomfortable. When we dance, we are the art. Our bodies in space are the paint on the canvas. If a person criticizes our dance, they are criticizing our physicality. While we can walk away from a painting, we cannot walk out of our own skin. A critical remark about the way we move might stay with us an entire lifetime, affecting the way we physically relate to the world — even when we are not dancing.

For example, before becoming a teacher, I worked with clients using dance and meditation. One client, a psychologist in her fifties, wanted to be able to enjoy

It's my wedding day and Camilla is three. My husband and I have decided to make dancing a large part of our ceremony. One hundred of our friends and relatives are moving through the space. The atmosphere is wild and free. Camilla is dancing through a sea of adult legs. When the band plays "Amazing Grace," a slow tune, the crowd unprompted sits down. But not Camilla, my shy little friend. Without permission or self-consciousness, she remains standing. She circles the room, arms raised to the sky. No one breathes or looks directly at her for fear of scaring her away. Tears stream down my face and I whisper to my husband that this is the best wedding present I could've received.



Nicole Marie is an educator, performer, and writer who's travelled the world studying dance. She is in her eighth year as a classroom teacher at Evergreen Community School. She also currently performs in Rachel Rosenthal's Tohubohu

Extreme Theater. With a degree in dance and anthropology from Scripps College, Nicole combines her passion for dance, culture, and teacher research to investigate the role of movement in the classroom. She's presented several years at NAEYC.

It's difficult being a dance revivalist in American culture. We are plagued here by what I call the "So you think you *can't* dance" attitude. It's that friend who tells you at the concert, "Oh, I can't dance!" Well, I don't agree! We all have bodies. We all can move to music. Sure, we

dancing. In one of our first sessions I asked her to raise her arms above her head while moving. To raise one's hands above one's head is an archetypal symbol of joy, gratitude, and triumph. She couldn't do it without feeling extremely vulnerable and uncomfortable. These inhibitions didn't just affect her dancing; she carried them in her body. They were with her all the time.

It is crucial to cultivate a positive relationship with movement. Through movement we are more able to experience and express exuberance, joy, and love. Many cultures of the world understand this.

We know from psychological and anthropological research that dance is our history. It is social bonding. It is our very biology. So how is it that the "So you think you *can't* dance" epidemic is so widespread?

As a preschool teacher, I've watched my students develop a fear of dancing. I loop with the children, spending three years with them. When I'm with the youngest group, the two- and three-year-olds, they'll dance any time. It's joyful! We move. We laugh. We dance. However, as the children age, things change. One spring morning, when I was working with the youngest group, the vast difference between our youngest and oldest children became apparent.

I am dancing with a few children when I notice a group of boys from the older classroom standing in the doorway, giggling. I invite them in, but they run away screaming. They repeat this again and again. It doesn't dawn on me why they are doing this until I have closed up the room and I find the boys mocking dance, pretending to be ballerinas. The message is clear; at five years old these boys are too embarrassed to dance. To them, dancing is equivalent to ballet, which is for girls. The next Friday I offer the dance again. This time a few of the boys venture inside. And I dance with them. All but one of the boys is standing with their hands behind their backs, pressed against the wall. I give them space. When I leave the room, they switch off the lights and dance earnestly and passionately. The message is clear: dancing is embarrassing, something to be done out of view, behind closed doors with the lights off. These boys needed and wanted to dance, but it was too scary to do in public.

What could account for the difference in attitude between our youngest and oldest students? After reflecting with fellow teachers, we concluded that adult insecurities affected children's feelings about dance. When we asked adults to dance, they either refused or moved self-consciously. The children then got the message that dance was something to be embarrassed of and avoided!

Dance insecurity may get passed down from adult to child, but the origins of the insecurity are multifaceted and deeply rooted in history. In her book *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy*, Barbara Ehrenreich (2006) describes how historically dance has been an important spiritual, artistic, and recreational pastime. Her book then outlines a long history in the west in which social dancing was undermined by religious and political institutions. Sir Ken Robinson, a leader in the field of creativity and education, shares in his TED talk "Schools Kill Creativity" (2006) that there is no public education system in the world that teaches dance every day to children. He says that our schooling "progressively educates children from the waist up." It is no wonder then that people's fear around social dancing is so great.

Dance education has been part of the problem. This is because the majority of dance classes for children and adults are

technique classes in which the teacher stands in the front of the room demonstrating movement that is then copied by students. This is not inherently a bad thing. Learning to copy movement is a part of dance, but only a small part. Young children are very literal, and dance classes that focus on copying movement communicate false and limited ideas about dance. Let's look at an example.

After giving a presentation on this issue to the staff at my school, one of the teachers, Tanya, decided to put my theories to the test. She played classical 'ballet' music and danced fluidly around her classroom. Three girls physically stopped her. They told her that she wasn't allowed to dance to the music because she wasn't doing ballet. They proceeded to demonstrate the four ballet moves they could remember from their dance class, explaining that those were the only appropriate steps for the music. Tanya asked me to come to the classroom to hear what the girls had to say. I responded to their claims by telling them that I often play classical music at my house where I dance however I like. I asked if they ever danced freely. "No" the girls replied, "We only dance on Wednesdays."

These girls didn't know how to dance because of their ballet class. Their class was having the opposite effect.

## What Teachers Can Do

The good news is that inspiring children to dance is easy. We need no special program, no expensive materials. We only need our bodies and space — and music helps.

- **Try dancing every day for a week or a month.** If you are a shy dancer,

then practice dancing alone. You don't have to dance for long, start simply by choosing two of your favorite songs. Be goofy. Be dramatic.

- **Pay close attention to the sensations in your body and the emotions that arise while you are dancing.** If you feel uncomfortable, then you are probably doing it right. Stick with it. The discomfort will fade. Joy and fun await you on the other side. These first two steps are essential to making dance a successful part of a classroom.

- **Bring a few of your favorite dance tunes to your classroom when you feel brave enough.** Young children will dance to anything with a good beat. It's important to remember to play songs more than once. Just like adults, children form relationships to music. You know that exuberant feeling you get when the radio plays your favorite song? Children respond the same way.

I'd been exploring a new passion for bluegrass music, so I brought in a particularly good dance tune. My class immediately loved it, and I began to play it regularly. At first it was a free-for-all dance number. But as I played it more often, the children developed their own choreography by marching in a loose line around the classroom. I also taught them how to do-si-do. With repetition we developed our own simple folk dance.

- **Use dance and music to create a bridge between a child's home life and school life.**
- **Share with families the benefits of dancing with their children.** Keep in mind that dancing inside can be a

great way to have a physical experience when weather doesn't permit going outside.

A family in our class from Ethiopia brought us an Ethiopian New Year's song that's become a class favorite. Every time we play it, the Ethiopian child dances exuberantly, smiling as his classmates share in his favorite song.

## Challenges

Teachers often worry that free-form movement in the classroom will lead to chaos. This isn't the case. For the most part, free-form dance is a place where children release energy and bond as a group. They are then able to focus their attention more easily when the time for that comes. But, as with any activity, it is important to set ground rules and expectations. Children will, of course, gravitate towards dancing with the people they love. Dancing is a good time to make connections with people they don't normally play with. Children will often form circles by dancing and holding hands. Encourage children to make room in their circle for anyone who wants to join.

In the beginning, students will often try bumping into other students as a way to initiate a dance. If this happens, suggest other ways they can move with people, like making eye contact, holding hands, or trying to follow the movements of the person they want to dance with.

Free-form dancing may feel out of control and in some ways it should be. Dancing is a time to let loose and shake off the cares of the day. While dancing should always be safe, be careful that your own inhibitions don't create unnecessary rules; they can get masked as a need for control. Keep balance in mind.

## What Parents Can Do

Parents have an important role in creating a culture of dance. If movement is enjoyed in the family, it will become a valued part of a child's life. Growing up, my family always sang and danced while we cleaned the house. It's one of my favorite memories and is where my own passion for dance originated.

- **Create a dance time at home.** One three-year-old at our school is a very expressive dancer. Her whole family has dance parties in the kitchen every night after dinner.
- **Create environments of joy for children.** Young children in Cuba dance because it is a language they use to communicate with their family and friends.

So dance! You have nothing to lose but your own self-consciousness. And there is everything to gain: a culture where music and the body are sources of joy. As with all art forms, dance is a deep and complex language. It can be explored in a hundred different ways. The Native American Hopi Indians have a saying: "To watch us dance is to hear our hearts speak." Let us aim for nothing less.

## Reference

Ehrenreich, B. (2006). *Dancing in the streets. A history of collective joy.* New York. Metropolitan Books.

— ■ —

