

# care to...

# dance



Regular opportunities to enjoy musical movement offer a host of benefits to children in the Foundation Stage, says **Mandy Fouracre...**



**D**ance is a broad term covering a variety of activities and definitions. It can be used equally to describe a baby bobbing up and down to music or Sylvie Guillem performing a triple pirouette. Most importantly, however, it's widely recognised as an enjoyable activity – and it's because of its inherent enjoyment factor that dance is a valuable learning medium for young children.

Psychologist Marcel Zentner discovered that the better children were able to synchronise their movements with music the more they smiled. I'm not a psychologist, but in my experience as a dance practitioner of more than 35 years experience – and as a mother of four – I've learned that young children are unstintingly honest in response to activities they like or dislike. They wear their interest and pleasure, or disinterest and displeasure, on their faces. If they find an activity enjoyable their focus and attention is immediately engaged. Retaining and sustaining this natural enthusiasm is the key to stimulating an interest for learning and is the mark of every effective teacher.

## The right steps

I firmly believe that in order to maximise the educational benefits of dance movement in the early years (and, of course, the fun!) it needs to be harnessed to a structured programme with defined aims and objectives. To do this, it's important to:

- identify the fundamental areas of skill which need to be included in an age-appropriate foundation in dance
- infuse the learning of the basic principles of movement with creativity and imagination
- source inspiring and engaging music which fully complements and enhances the movement actions
- provide a progression and development of the identified skills.

"That's all very well," I hear some of you say, "but how can I implement all of this if I'm not a dance teacher, have little (or no) dance training and lack confidence in my own physical demonstration?"

These commonly held concerns need not present a barrier. It's important not to confuse the requirements for teaching dance to young children with those necessary to

teach dance technique at a more advanced level, in a specific dance genre. 'Dance' is an accurate description for both, but the level of physical expertise required and the learning outcomes are vastly different for both teacher and pupil!

Indeed, in the first instance there are only two skills that those working in an early years setting need to get children dancing:

1. an ability to perform simple movements, e.g. walk, hop, skip.
2. an ability to communicate effectively with the age group.

A more valid concern is that practitioners' workloads can be such that it may be difficult to find the time necessary to research and devise a programme suitable for 2–5-year-olds, and to source appropriate music. However, for those discouraged by this aspect, there are comprehensive resources available which provide the necessary



**tip**

The introduction to spatial awareness below is aimed at three-year-olds in their first term at nursery. Whilst I've used a circle to describe the movement of travel, it can be adapted easily for use with a square, oval or rectangle. The purpose is for the children to use the given dance space to its maximum perimeter.

materials, guidance and advice on assessment, and which will help build confidence in leading dance sessions.

Whether you choose to invest in a resource or work upon a programme yourself, there are key areas of learning that you should be considering. These include:

- Spatial awareness
- Personal dance space
- Dance etiquette
- Correct postural alignment
- Transfer of weight
- Extension & flexion
- Coordination
- Gross motor movement vocabulary and function
- Fine motor movement vocabulary and function
- Rhythm & phrasing
- Musical interpretation and improvisation
- The purpose of a musical 'introduction'.

They should then be harnessed to a variety of types of activity to ensure that you make the most of the inherent enjoyment factor. Try to be imaginative, fun and use surprise to

engage children's interest. Activities might include songs, the use of props, percussion, mime, storytelling and partner work.

**Catch the train**

It is of course impossible to cover each of these areas in detail here, but by way of example, let's take a look at one of the suggested key areas of a proposed learning framework: spatial awareness.

Learning to use the space in a room while at the same time being aware of personal space is an essential starting point for young children. This will be evident to anyone reading this who may have asked children to 'make a circle'. Many three-year-olds may understand what shape a circle is, but will not know how to make one in the context of their body, or with other bodies, in a dance space.

Using props can be extremely helpful, so before the dance session begins place objects as markers, well-spaced apart in a circle. Try:

- Coloured hoops
- Mats
- Circles
- Triangles
- Squares
- Rectangles
- Cones.

The markers can also represent a variety of different scenarios and objects during the course of the session.

Select a coloured hoop and ask the children if they know what shape it is. Then draw their attention to the big circle made by the markers on the floor. Suggest that the children make a train which will go on a journey around the circle, and that the children will be the carriages. Explain that every child is a very special carriage and position each one in their own very 'special' place, one behind the other.



When all the children are assembled explain that they are going to be the Puffer Train (the Puffer Train is an enjoyable song and movement exercise to introduce the concept of travelling around the circle, making it ideal for this activity). Encourage the children to describe the train – its colour, the stripes down its side, the shiny new wheels (feet together!), etc. Use mime to ‘polish the wheels’. Ask the children to place their hands on the shoulders of the person in front to link the train together and not to press too heavily or they will spoil its new coat of paint.

Encourage the children to help make the sounds of the Puffer Train, e.g.

ff ff ff  
sh sh shhh  
sh sh sh sh sh sh sh shhhh

Ask the children where they would like the train to go, e.g. the seaside, the park, the circus. Explain that the train doesn’t go in the middle of the room because that’s where, for example, the:

lake is  
frogs live  
crocodiles are hiding  
baby pandas are asleep

## taking it further

Once this activity has been introduced to a group it can be used in a variety of situations. It need not be restricted to the dance session and can be accompanied by music or used without, with practitioners leading the children.

### It’s ideal for use:

- around the activity room on an occasion when the children are generally distracted and the teacher requires their attention.
- in a situation where the children need to be gathered together before story time, before break time, home time, etc.
- outside in the play area, e.g. take the train on a journey around the play area before going inside.

## Two more ways to get your children dancing...

### Let’s boogie



Boogie Pete of CBeebies and Meningitis Research Foundation are hoping to get children moving with their Boogie Fit DVD, which

includes six simple and appealing dance routines, will raise awareness of the diseases and vital funds, and costs just £5. Visit [meningitis.org/boogiefit](http://meningitis.org/boogiefit) for more information.

### Musical moves

Diddi Dance offers pre-school dance classes aimed at improving coordination, rhythm and gross motor skills while boosting confidence too. A range of dancing games and exercises mean there’s something for everyone. To find out more about our classes, parties or nursery sessions, visit [diddidance.com](http://diddidance.com) or call Anne-Marie on 07973 982 790.



Remind the children that they should stay in their own ‘special’ place when the Puffer train starts to move out of the station.

An imaginary station master could come to inspect the train before it leaves the station – an opportunity for all the carriages to stand very still with their wheels (feet) together very smartly. Next you should face the line, holding the hands of the child at the front, and lead the Puffer train on its journey around the circle, i.e. around the hoops, mats, circles or cones on the floor.

On the first journey it’s not necessary to use music. This will allow the children more time to use their imaginations at their own pace and not to the demands of the music’s tempo.

Stop at the first marker and ask the children for suggestions as to what each marker could be, e.g. if the Puffer train is going to the park, perhaps the blue marker could be the pond, the yellow marker might be the golden castle, the green marker becomes the playground and the red marker the red light, which means the train has to stop. When the train stops, make the noises of the train with the children articulating the sounds at a comfortable speed for them.

Reinforce at every stop that the train is going around each marker in the circle and not in the middle. Frequently check to make sure that each ‘carriage’ is still in its ‘special’



place. The train might go through tunnels, over bridges, up steep hills before it finally comes back to the station.

Next, repeat the journey with the music (reiterating at various points as before that the train is travelling around the circle).

The key learning element is the beginning of an understanding of spatial awareness, although the enjoyment factor for the children will be their participation in creating the imagined train and its journey, working together as a group, making the sounds of the train, knowing that they all have a special place on the train and the pleasure of moving to the music.

## find out more

Mandy Fouracre has taught dance for over 30 years, with a particular focus on young children. She is the Director of Lavour Prima Dance Ltd, which offers a comprehensive dance syllabus for children aged 3–7-years, suitable for early years educators. For details, visit [lafourprimadance.com](http://lafourprimadance.com)

