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If you were to peek into my creative dance class, you might see a teacher and preschoolers sitting with their legs crossed, swaying from side to side. This activity in itself may not look particularly exciting. However, if you realized that we are imagining ourselves on a boat trip, riding the ocean waves, each carrying different cargo in our boats and visiting exotic destinations along the way, you would understand the enthusiastic smiles on the children's faces.

Or you might see us walking very slowly and quietly. However, in our imaginations, we are creeping through the jungle, trying to spot different animals. We move like each animal we encounter—swimming, crawling, galloping, and soaring. This is a glimpse of the excitement in store for young children who experience creative dance.

Children move the instant they are born and the moment they wake up every morning. Moving is one of the first and most important ways infants and toddlers explore and learn about the world, and this process continues as they grow and develop. Why, then, is creative movement not an integral part of every early childhood curriculum? My theory is twofold.

First, teachers and society at large are less familiar with dance than with the other performing arts. Second, because some teachers may not have experience with dance, they may be uncomfortable offering creative movement. They may think that bringing dance into the classroom will result in children moving randomly and without noticing the other children. However, one of the gifts of guided creative movement is that it helps children learn to control their bodies and develop awareness of moving in a space with other children. As children learn awareness and body control through movement, they become familiar with following instructions, listening for cues, and respecting others as they move together in the shared space. Creative movement can be a guidance tool teachers use in many ways during the day (Gilbert 2002).

What is creative movement?

Teachers and parents often ask this question. The terms *dance* and *movement* are interchangeable when referring to creative movement. Creative movement is an art form whose medium is the human body in motion. The four basic elements of dance are the body and its different parts and range of movement, and space, time, and energy (Stinson 1988). Understanding and using these four elements can open up a range of imaginative possibilities.

For example, teachers can enliven marching, a basic locomotor movement, by varying the four elements:

Young Children and Movement



The Power of Creative Dance

Body part movement variations: “Can you march with your arms up high?” “Can you clap? Touch your knees?” “Can you march bending one knee and keeping the other leg straight? On your tiptoes? Lying on your back with your feet in the air?”

Spatial variations: “Can you march backwards? Low? High?” “Can you turn?” “Can you march in a square pattern on the floor?”

Time variations: “Can you march in slow motion?” “Can you march for seven steps and then freeze? Let’s count together.” “Now, march as fast as you can!”

Energy variations: “Can you march as if your feet are caught in quicksand?” “Can you march and stomp through mud puddles?” “Can you march as if you are in bare feet on a

hot blacktop driveway on a summer day?” “Can you march without making a sound when your feet touch the floor?”

The possibilities are endless. Children can perform the variations according to their individual abilities and imaginations. Creative movement gives children opportunities to move in new ways and helps them learn that there can be more than one solution to a question, a problem, or a task.

Benefits of creative movement

Dance can have a powerful impact in children’s daily lives because it is both a physical activity and a vehicle for self-expression. It offers the rich experience of exploring and creating, with the added benefits of lively movement. Here are some reasons to encourage children to dance.

Access for all children

Equipment. Movement activities require little in the way of equipment, and most items are available in early childhood classrooms. The ideal space, such as a gym or indoor play area, is clear of obstacles and well defined. However, with some advance planning, teachers can adapt movement activities to smaller, irregular spaces—even those with

obstacles such as bookshelves, chairs, or play equipment. In these situations, choose activities that children can do while staying within their own personal spaces, such as learning about opposites: “While staying in your spot, can you show me the opposites, backward and forward? High and low? Straight and crooked? Little and big? Tired and energetic? Hello and good-bye?” Incorporate the obstacles when the children move out of those spaces: “Let’s march around the bookcase!”

Other requirements are a small drum, tambourine, or other device for giving auditory cues and one for giving visual cues, like a drawing of a stoplight or stop sign. Musical accompaniment enlivens a dance session, so a CD or MP3 player is beneficial. Given these few requirements, it is easy to include movement sessions in every early childhood setting.

Accommodating children with special needs. Most movement activities can be modified to allow all children to participate. Children can approach movement in individual ways, according to each one’s imagination, ability, and experience. For example, in a greeting activity that involves waving different parts of the body, children with physical disabilities can move the tongue, eyelids, fingers, or toes. A jumping activity can include children in wheelchairs when they move their head, shoulders, arms, or fingers. In an alphabet game in which children use their bodies to form letter shapes, the teacher can guide children with special needs in using part of the body, like the fingers, instead of the whole body. Or a child can hold up or point to a picture of the letter in order to be an active participant in the experience. Dance stories, during which children use movement to explore ideas and elaborate on a book, story, poem, or song, let children of all abilities respond to the events and characters in a story. (For more information, see “Creative Dance Starters for Young Children,” page 35.)

Movement specialist Rae Pica emphasizes the importance of making movement accessible: “Given the increasing emphasis on accountability and academics, physical

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activity is in danger of falling by the wayside in the early childhood curriculum. Indeed, more and more early childhood professionals say they have trouble fitting movement into the program because they're too busy preparing children for academics. Developmentally appropriate practice dictates that we educate the whole child. Furthermore, academics and physical activity are *not* mutually exclusive" (2006, 12).

Curriculum enrichment

Movement sessions provide the perfect forum for integrating physical activities with other areas of the curriculum. Because children can approach many subjects through movement, it is a good vehicle for teaching themed sessions, such as weather, animals, transportation, and colors, and encompassing all learning domains—physical, social-emotional, and cognitive—and potentially addressing early learning standards. Here are some examples.

During an exploration of shapes, children can use their bodies to form circles, squares, triangles, or other shapes; walk or march making floor patterns such as figure eights, straight lines, and zigzag lines; or jump and make shapes in the air, like an X or Y. While playing a dance/freeze game, children can dance freely until the teacher stops the music and calls out instructions: "Freeze in the shape of the letter T!" "Freeze while balancing on one straight leg, with the other leg crooked!" "Freeze in a twisty shape!" "Freeze in a wide shape!" "Freeze in a low shape!"



When children are fidgety, try integrating movement into a learning game, like a counting game: "Let's count to five while we fidget. Now let's count to seven" or a game of opposites: "Fidget as much as you can, and when I clap my hands, freeze!" "Don't move a muscle! Now fidget again as fast as you can!" "Can you fidget in slow motion?" Fidgeting can become a vocabulary game: "What is another word for fidget? Squirm! Jiggle! Wiggle!" Intersperse movement games like these throughout the children's day for rich learning opportunities.

Dance and movement educator Mimi Brodsky Chenfeld addresses integrating movement and curriculum, stating, "Every idea is a universe of possibilities. Every idea, lesson, concept



can be enriched by movement, by dance. Connecting movement to *all* areas of the curriculum, to *all* skills, is natural. The arts are the connective tissue that holds our spirits intact" (Chenfeld 2005, 51).

Physical development

While participating in creative movement activities, children learn to control their bodies. They become aware of how fast they are moving, how to speed up and slow down, how to stop and start, and how to control their bodies when they change direction. They learn important spatial concepts as well. Creative dance helps children learn to move in their own personal spaces, to be aware of other children's personal spaces, and to respect others as everyone together moves in a shared space. When children become used to these unwritten understandings about space and movement, they carry them over to other daily activities (Stinson 1988). Guided creative movement helps young children learn new motor skills and practice, reinforce, and build on those they already use. Because children especially love using large, expansive movements, they enjoy practicing large motor skills such as walking, marching, galloping, tiptoeing, hopping, jumping, turning, and moving across the floor in

many other ways. Children who are 5 and 6 can add skipping and leaping to their repertoire of gross motor skills.

As you become comfortable leading children in creative movement and borrowing ideas from dance, you will find that children look forward to repeating, changing, and discovering new ways to approach basic motor skills. In doing so, they improve their coordination, body control, balance, stamina, and overall strength.



Movement as an antidote to obesity

Health experts have been sounding the alarm about the obesity epidemic among children in the United States. First Lady Michelle Obama has introduced a major initiative to address this problem, "calling obesity an epidemic and one of the greatest threats to America's health and economy" (Hellmich 2010, D-4). In 2005, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) reported that "one-third (33.6 percent) of American children and adolescents are either obese or at risk for becoming obese. . . . Overweight and obese children and teens are much more likely to become overweight or obese adults. These kids also have greater risk for high cholesterol, high blood pressure, bone and joint problems, poor self-esteem and other health, social and psychological problems" (RWJF 2006, 1).

Listening and responding to directions, offering suggestions, exploring others' ideas while waiting for a turn, and simply moving in a shared space together are opportunities for learning and practicing social skills.



Experts offer many ideas for tackling obesity, including creating task forces at the state, local, and national levels to study and coordinate efforts and establishing policies on the types of food and beverage advertising aimed at children age 12 and younger (RWJF 2006). Doctors and other health experts present two practical recommendations: teach children about healthy food choices and offer opportunities for physical activity. The IOM report recommends mandating daily physical education in all schools (RWJF 2006).

Keeping children active is a crucial part of addressing this health crisis, and the good news is that teachers don't have to find extra time to add dance to the day. You can incorporate it anytime, in a large or small space, for greetings, circle time, transitions, or waking up from a nap. For example, "Let's wake up our bodies! First let's yawn and stretch. . . . Now let's wake up our faces. Open and close your eyes, then your mouth. Stick out your tongue and move it around. Can you circle your head one way, then the other?" (Continue with shoulders, arms, upper body, and legs.) "Now let's stand up and shake out all the parts at once!" Incorporating active, enjoyable, creative movement into classroom routines is just what the health professionals ordered!

Social and emotional development

Creative movement is a great medium for working with children as a group. It is one of the best ways for children to learn the social skills needed for working together (Gilbert 2002). A teacher can offer movement tasks and problems for children to solve individually: "How many ways can you move from sitting to standing?" "How many ways can you make a big curve like the letter C with your body?" and as a group: "Imagine we are back in the days of the dinosaurs. What would we see? Can you move like a pterodactyl?"

Children learn that they each can contribute to the group and that they can all work together to find a solution. Listening and responding to directions, offering suggestions, exploring others' ideas while waiting for a turn, and simply moving in a shared space together are opportunities for learning and practicing social skills.

Children can express themselves in movement sessions. A child who cannot express his feelings verbally may find an outlet in movement. The National Dance Education Organization states, "Dance promotes psychological health and maturity. Children enjoy the opportunity to express their emotions and become aware of themselves and others through creative movement. A preschool child enters a dance class or classroom with a history of emotional experiences. Movement within a class offers a structured outlet for physical release of feelings and emotions" (NDEO 2009).

Creativity

In the years ahead, children will enter a global workforce. We need to teach children to look at problems in new ways, to practice critical thinking skills, and to learn collaboration and cooperation in finding new solutions. The National Center on Education and the Economy states, "Whereas for most of the 20th century the U.S. could take pride in having the best-educated workforce in the world, that is no longer true" (NCEE 2007, 24). In proposing solutions, the authors point to the development of creative thinkers as one of the keys to success: "Seeing new patterns and possibilities is the essence of creativity" (NCEE 2007, 24).

In a speech at the 2006 TED (technology, entertainment, and design) Conference, Sir Ken Robinson, an author and international leader in educational and industrial reform and innovation, said, "We are educating people out of their creative capacities. Picasso once said that all children are born artists. The trick is to remain an artist as we grow up. I believe this passionately: We don't grow into creativity; we grow out of it. Or, rather, we get educated out of it. Creativity now is as important in education as literacy, and we should treat it with the same status" (2006).

The creative arts, by definition, nurture these aspects of developing children. Movement allows young children to approach tasks through the body, or kinesthetically, and come up with new questions, new answers, and innovative solutions. (For more ideas for integrating movement into young children's day and nurturing the creative spirit, see "Creative Dance Starters for Young Children.")

The mind-body connection: Movement and the brain

Research shows that movement and exercise can spark the growth of new brain cells and facilitate learning (Ratey 2008). In *Smart Moves: Why Learning Is Not All in Your Head*, neurophysiologist Carla Hannaford explores the role of the body and movement in the learning process. She con-

cludes, "Movement, a natural process of life, is now understood to be essential to learning, creative thought, and high level formal reasoning. It is time to consciously bring integrative movement back into every aspect of our lives and realize, as I have, that something this simple and natural can be the source of miracles" (Hannaford 1995, 214).

In his book, *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*, Ratey states, "Exercise improves learning on three levels: first, it optimizes your mind-set to improve alertness, attention, and motivation; second, it prepares and encourages nerve cells to bind to one another, which is the cellular basis for logging in new information; and third, it spurs the development of new nerve cells from stem cells in the hippocampus" (2008, 53). Ratey says about physical activity, "Building muscles and conditioning the heart and lungs are essentially side effects. I often tell my patients that the point of exercise is to build and condition the brain" (p. 3).

Evidence is mounting about the benefits of movement in the learning process. Creative dance is the perfect vehicle for enhancing the mind-body connection in young children and an important part of early education. Once educators become familiar with movement and its many benefits, instead of asking, "What is creative movement?" the question will be, "Why *not* creative movement?"

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Creative Dance Starters for Young Children

Just about anything can be an impetus for children to move and dance, creating a learning experience as well as a playful and lively physical activity.

Greetings and hello games

"Let's wave to each other with our hands. What other parts of your body can you use to wave?" "Can you wave with all the parts at once?"



Circle time movement games

"Do you know the game Telephone? You whisper a word in your

neighbor's ear, and she passes it along to the next person. This movement game is like that, except we will be passing along movements. I will think of the first one."

Begin with something simple, like crossing and uncrossing your arms. The next person watches, turns to his neighbor, and performs the same movement. Children pass it along till it goes all the way around the circle. Repeat until everyone has had a chance to introduce a movement.

At the end, review all the movements with the children in the order they created them, and do them sequentially all together. Try them standing, play some music, and performing the movements together becomes a dance!

Dance stories from books, songs, and poems

Descriptions of movement images abound in children's literature. Here are guidelines for creating a dance story:

1. Select 5–7 images in a book (or song, poem, or story) that could spark movement ideas, such as descriptions of a character, pictures or words that depict action, or other images to spur the imagination. Through the exploration of movements, children can bring the story to life.
2. Choose music for the dance story. Use a quiet piece, preferably an instrumental, for the background, and then intersperse it with a more upbeat song or instrumental selection for the more active sections of the story.

3. Read the book aloud to the class. Then ask the children to go to a personal space. Before you begin reading again, remind them to be aware of others in the shared space.

4. Play the music. In the order they happen, retell the highlights of the story (using the 5–7 images you chose) and call out movement prompts. Allow each section to develop. The children will naturally think of variations as they relive the story through movement. Pick up on these, and add your own ideas, so that each section is fully explored. Then, move on to the next movement prompt.

5. Bring the story to a conclusion. You can do this through movement by asking them to hold a final position that relates to an idea in the story, to come together in a circle, or to return to their original spots. Hold a follow-up discussion about the story or about their movement experiences.

Themes

Pick up on your daily and weekly themes, and add movement to any topic the children are exploring. For example, for the theme *spring*, prompt children to dance the making of a garden: dig the holes, plant the seeds, water and weed, watch plants grow, and finally harvest the vegetables or flowers.

Transitions

"Today we are going to think about how animals move. Think of your favorite animal, and I am going to ask you one by one to move like that animal as you go to your cubby to put on your coat." Use cues for signaling the start and stop for each child's movement. For the next several days, continue this activity during transitions. Try narrowing the choices each day: animals that fly, animals in the ocean, animals that live in the jungle.

Props

Scarves, streamers, shakers, costumes, small musical instruments, small flashlights or fiber optic lights, stuffed animals, pipe cleaner bracelets with colorful ribbons tied to them, pompoms, hats, and any items the children make.

Quiet-down activities

Bring each activity to a quiet conclusion. You could ask the children to freeze in a shape (connected to the theme) at the end of a dancing session. For example, to finish an activity about winter, prompt: "Can you freeze in the shape of a snowflake? Try to hold that shape as you melt to the floor!"