Dancing Is for Boys!

by Marian Rose

Many generalizations can be made about the different ways boys and girls learn, and the activities that naturally attract them. Theories abound about brain function, genetic propensities, parenting styles and the influence of consumer entertainment, but the fact remains that boys and girls very quickly learn that they are different and that it is in their best interests to gravitate

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toward the activities "appropriate" for their gender.

Nowhere is this phenomenon more exaggerated than in the dance class. By the time they are in upper elementary grades, many girls have been attending dance classes for most of their lives, usually in several different genres, and often at a very high level. Those who do not have formal training are generally comfortable with dancing and are eager to participate. At the very least dancing is an acceptable activity in a girl's life.

Boys, on the other hand, learn from an early age that dancing "is for girls" and they would be better off to play sports or Lego. The sad reality is that in Canada in 2005 it is unusual to find boys in upper elementary who have had any significant exposure to dance in any form. As

a result, they not only face social barriers to participating in dance, but they are also far less skilled than the girls, all of which combines to make the dance unit a fearsome experience for them.

"We hate dancing!"—"Dancing is for girls!"—"Why do we have to miss floor hockey this week?"—"Are you really going to make us dance with the girls?" (said half hopeful, half horrified).

The good news is that at the end of a week of dancing, they sing a different tune. These are actual quotes from intermediate-level boys:

"That was the most fun I've ever had!"—"When can we dance again?"—"I got to dance with all the girls in my class!"—"I didn't know that dancing was so much fun!"

How We Got Here

How did we get into the situation where half the population are unwilling to dance? What are the mechanisms and beliefs that cause boys to shun dancing? How do boys acquire these attitudes?

1. **Role models.** Boys don't see fathers, or other boys/men, dancing. Instead, they see the whole world take a holiday for the Olympics and six months of non-stop media coverage of the NHL labor dispute. Can you imagine such a hoopla surrounding the World Square Dance convention or a whole country mourning if the Royal Winnipeg Ballet had to cancel its season?

"Just think for a minute about how much TV time is devoted to hockey, and how much acclaim is awarded to the players. Think about the number of police shows or other shows with macho men, and then think about how many times you see a male dancer on TV. No contest!"—June Cannon

2. Societal changes. Dance as a form of community celebration is an endangered species,

usurped by television, the Internet and consumer sports. Children have little opportunity to see adults of any kind dance, and therefore miss the opportunity of learning it in a natural setting.

- 3. **Competitiveness, fear of failure, perfectionism.** When I ask men why they are reluctant to dance, the answer is always some variation of "I don't want to look stupid." Boys learn very early that they are supposed to "know," to be right, to be the best. They want to be noticed, to shine and don't want to be upstaged by women at any age.
- 4. **Parental Influence and Peer Pressure.** At the beginning of a dance camp recently, seven year old Max's father told me "You won't get Max to dance—he's into sports!" I'm happy to report that Dad was wrong—by the end of the week, Max was a diehard dancer, screaming at the top of his lungs for his favorite dance. He has attended every year since, and has proven to be one of the most creative kids in the camp.

Ann Green Gilbert, of the Creative Dance Centre in Seattle, says that up to about age four, boys and girls come to her classes in equal numbers, but when they get to kindergarten age, the boys disappear. When her performing group does a show, young boys in the audience always come up afterwards and say they want to join, but this rarely translates into registration. This can only mean that the parents discourage them. Could it be their own fears of dancing, concern that their boy will be teased for being gay, or because dancing (or any arts, for that matter) rarely lead to a high-paying job later in life?

When my son was five, he told us he'd like to learn to tap dance. Before we could find him a class, he told us he didn't want to take it, because the other boys had told him that only girls danced. He had five years of seeing me dance, of being brought to dances and seeing as many men as women at them, and yet he was ready to believe his friends instead of his own eyes!—Jacob Bloom

- 5. **Sexual immaturity.** By the time they are in school, children have figured out that dance is connected to that mysterious world of romance, dating and sex. Terms like "couple" and "holding hands" are now electrically charged. Boys are acutely aware and confused by the feelings they get when they watch girls dance, and they don't want people to watch them the same way.
- 6. **Homophobia**. There's something about dancing that threatens masculinity, and inspires such epithets as "a bunch of poufters in tights." If boys are taught that "girls dance, boys do sports" (Elizabeth Burchenal, 1904), then a boy who wants to dance must be girlish (heinous damnation!). There is a fear that they will be perceived to be gay, or even that they may discover an attraction to the same gender. This image is more likely to be connected to more expressive dance forms such as ballet, modern, tap and jazz, perhaps related to the perception that one has to wear tights. Folk dancing is (somewhat) less afflicted with this attitude since the tradition is usually a man/woman couple.

Because of this, when boys do dance, they gravitate to macho, competitive dance styles and tend to shun styles that require grace, subtlety and expressiveness.

What to Do?

As dance educators and advocates, we are faced with the complex challenge of ensuring that both boys and girls have a positive experience in the dance class. If we succeed, we increase their chances of being enthusiastic recreational dancers all their lives. Based on two decades of teaching dance in schools across my country and the United States, and the collective wisdom of many people who have been good enough to send me their tips and tricks, here are a few things to keep in your

mind as you face your next group of dancers.

1. **Be positive and proactive.** The best thing we can do is to offer children the world of dance with our full confidence that they will love it. Many of the men I have spoken to attribute their love of dance to a skilled and charismatic teacher.

Create a school and atmosphere where it's natural and expected to see male dancers, and you open a door for boys to experience the joy that dance has to offer.—Rhee Gold

Getting all children involved in dance takes a commitment from you, the teacher. You must be or become interested in dance, you must believe in it, and you must see it as an essential part of children's growth and development.—Sam Baumgarten

When I get... a few sullen guys determined to not have a good time, I simply do not worry about them. I know that they will love to dance. And I believe that this unflappably positive attitude of mine is one of the reasons that I have been pretty successful getting boys to enjoy dancing, sometimes in spite of themselves.—Peter Amidon

When I go in assuming that we are all going to just love this, we all do—even the most avoidant boys. Often the boys who get the troublemaker label are the ones with the best sense of rhythm and movement.— Karen Kaufman

I've found that when the boys get into the dancing, they REALLY get into it and become even more enthusiastic than the girls. I love their energy!— Laraine Miner

2. **Know the potential trouble spots** such as holding hands or choosing partners, and work to minimize their traumatic effect. It is important to address these issues, talk about them and defuse their power with skill, persistence and humor. I always let the children know that I understand their discomfort, because I have been there and have felt the same way. In fact I still do on occasion. However, it is worth the effort to get past it, because the rewards are so plentiful.

I never insist on any particular type of partnering. In schools, I find that boys dance willingly with boys to a much older age than I would predict.—Karen Kaufman

3. **Give them role models.** Wherever possible, use male teachers to demonstrate, and show videos of boys and/or men dancing. Take them to see STOMP!, or Barrage, or a Ukrainian or African dance performance featuring strong men dancing.

The (male) teacher's participation was absolutely key to how willing the boys were to try.—Rachelle Ackerman

4. **Use the sports connection to our advantage.** One day as I was watching a basketball coach work on offensive plays with his team, it struck me how similar it was to what I was doing with the same students in dance class. Both are very physical, require a high level of skill with hands and feet, and each participant must be aware of the position of everyone else on the floor. If you replace the basketball with some dance music, the two become variations on a theme.

Look for every opportunity to compare dance and sports:

- The grapevine step is an important skill of the offensive linemen in football.
- Buzz step swing uses elements from skateboarding and figure skating.

- Many high-level sports teams use ballet as training for strength and flexibility.
- Have the children take their pulse before dancing, after a particularly strenuous dance and at the end of the session. When boys realize how physically demanding dance is, they gain new respect.
- If you are doing creative dance, suggest that they use the skills they already know from sports.
- 5. **Be aware of different learning styles.** As a rule, boys are more kinesthetic learners than girls—get them moving and worry about the fine details and expression later.

What seems to engage them is a really athletic dance or something that's like a puzzle or contest.—Laraine Miner

There's never been a problem getting fifth grade boys to dance morris—that's simply part of what fifth graders do in that school, and yes, they enjoy smashing sticks. (Stick dances are far more appealing than handkerchief dances at that age.)—David Millstone

- 6. **Give them dances they can succeed at.** One of the great things about dancing is that it can be fun and fulfilling at every level of skill, and there are many good dance resources with great, fun dances. Our job as educators is to help students feel comfortable in the role of a beginner.
- 7. **We're all in this together.** In my dance residencies I insist that the whole school participates, that no one is allowed in the gym unless they are dancing, and I have a Zero Tolerance policy on teasing. In British Columbia, dance is part of the curriculum in both PE and Fine Arts, so we are able to insist that they participate. After all, no one is allowed to opt out of math because they don't like it, right?
- 8. Remind boys that dancing will make them popular with the girls. I recently read a wonderful article by a young woman in Whistler, a popular ski resort close to Vancouver. She was tired of hearing young men moan about the high boy/girl ratio in ski resorts and her article offered them suggestions on how to get a date. Her number one recommendation? Dance! If you're willing to get up on the dance floor, she says, you'll have your pick of the women in the room.

I saw some really good male dancers on the floor in college, noticed that the women really dug it and that was all the encouragement I needed.—Kevin McMullin

9. **Keep it light.** Remember that fun is a more worthy goal than precision.

Tension begets tension. As long as everyone is laughing and having a good time, it keeps the sexual anxiety down to a dull roar.—Victor Smith

Conclusion

I have an immense soft spot for the boys in my dancing classes. Sure, they can be rowdy, clumsy, resistant and rude. But they can also be enthusiastic, mischievous, graceful and creative. And their conversion is so much more dramatic for their initial reluctance. As they relax and gain skill, they fairly explode with the joy of it all.

There is enough room in the spectrum of dance activities for boys and men to find a place of comfort and belonging. It takes persistence, dedication and skill on the part of those of us teaching them, but most of all it requires a firm belief in the value of dance, and its potential to promote cooperation, civility and community.

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Resources: Baumgarten, Sam; Boys Dancing? ... You Bet!, Teaching Elementary Physical Education, September 2003. Gilbert, Anne Green; The Male Myth, www.dance-teacher.com, February 2003. Gold, Rhee; On Education, Dance Magazine, November 2003.

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