

Preparing a student's body for pointe is an extension of technique, solidly prepared, in ballet training. Pointe work is a series of adjustments in weight distribution, weight bearing, and timing—not a new form of dance. Without the proper method in pointe preparation, there is significant risk of short and long-term injury.

In determining the best timing for a dancer to begin pointe work, Dublin Dance Centre & Gymnastics (DDC&G) considers many factors. Inherent in the decision is, not only the technical strengths and limitations of each dancer, but also emotional commitment, bone maturity, and an individual assessment with a dance physical therapist or orthopedic specialist. Great care has been taken at DDC&G to design a pre-pointe curriculum stressing the development of necessary strength and muscle tone, strength and suppleness in the feet and strength of the postural muscles. DDC&G makes certain, to the best of our ability, each dancer is ready to go on pointe.

Following is a more-specific list of the rationale for each requirement.

1. Dancers must complete the curriculum for Placement Ballet, study ballet a minimum two times per week (preferably three), and be at least 12 years old.

Time and preparation are needed for dancers to develop adequate strength and technique to begin pointe work. The dancer's muscles must be strong enough to support her entire body weight on the tips of her toes. If training is limited and dancers only take a minimal amount ballet class each week, adequate strength and technique will not develop and injury may result. The Placement Ballet curriculum at DDC&G is specifically designed to advance a dancer's technique with the intensity directed toward pointe preparation.

The age a dancer starts pointe work depends on all of these requirements, and 12 years of age is a safe estimate for the sufficient ossification of girls' bones. All growth plates ossify, or solidify from cartilage to bone, at different rates. The long bones, those that support most of the weight of a dancer on pointe, begin to solidify in the early teens. The growth plates gradually narrow and harden through the teen-age years, but when strong body placement and sufficient muscular strength are developed, a dancer can support the growing bones and protect the joints during the weight shift onto pointe. Without correct training and adequate preparation, the alignment of the joints can be compromised, resulting in short-term and long-term musculoskeletal dysfunction.

2. Dancers must demonstrate adequate strength and flexibility through the feet, ankles, knees, hips, and core in order to support the change in balance and weight distribution rising up to pointe requires.

During the Placement Ballet years, dancers at DDC&G will be asked to do increased repetitions of steps they know and of new steps. They will be asked to perform steps they already know on demi-pointe and balance for longer intervals to improve the strength in their feet and ankles. Dancers who attend Ballet Conditioning classes at DDC&G will see improvements in their core strength

and general flexibility. Dancers who cross-train in other genres of dance will also demonstrate advantages in strength and flexibility, muscular endurance, and stamina.

As part of the dance physical therapy screens and assessments, DDC&G's physical therapist will evaluate each dancer's strength and flexibility in specific areas. The therapist will provide home exercise programs for dancers to address specific opportunities for improvement in strength, flexibility, and technique.

3. Dancers must show solid technique in regards to turn-out, leg alignment, and foot work to ensure safety on pointe.

Your Placement Ballet teacher will give technical corrections throughout ballet classes in order to fully prepare a student for pointe. The dancer is responsible for applying those corrections. Additionally, corrections given throughout class, even if directed toward a specific dancer, can probably be applied to all dancers. This is one way that a dancer can demonstrate emotional maturity and commitment to preparing for pointe work. The dancer's attitude in class and her ability to absorb and apply corrections is a quality the teacher will be able to assess and contribute to the pointe-readiness evaluation.

4. Dancers must undergo an individual evaluation with a dance medicine physician and/or dance physical therapist to ensure that the growth plates in the dancer's bones have sufficiently narrowed. This is to prevent damage to the student's long-term health and assess the general and specific needs of each dancer.

At DDC&G, this evaluation will be preceded by two or three informal screenings and follow-up meetings with the dancers and our on-staff physical therapist. We will assess each dancer's progress toward the goals established at the initial evaluation, through observation of ballet class, and reports from the ballet teacher. The first meeting will be an informal, general class in September for all dancers to improve their strength, flexibility and technique. In November, an individual screening will be offered for the dancers to meet with the therapist to address specific needs. A full evaluation will take place in the spring and consist of a physical therapy evaluation, a technique class in front of a judging panel of the ballet faculty, and a meeting with the teacher, Ballet Coordinator, and Director of Education. Following this process, letters will be sent to each family to describe the steps necessary for each dancer's summer study. If at any time during the process, the physical therapist is unsure about the skeletal maturity of a dancer, an evaluation with the orthopedic specialist will be recommended to ensure safety in pointe work.

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