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Body Image and Ballet

Young dancers and their bodies is a topic rarely out of the news right now. Those involved in the art form and the public have argued whether ballet has pushed the ideal “ballet body” stereotype to such an extreme that the ballet community is full of insecure, depressed and eating disorder ridden girls. The ballet school environment has been called a weight-obsessed subculture and a breeding ground for eating disorders. Body image is a major issue for young ballet dancers with potentially life-damaging consequences because of the distorted idea of body image instilled in them at such a young age. The main cause of poor body image in young dancers is the perceived idea that one must have the perfect ballet body. Body image issues can deeply effect a young dancer both mentally and physically and even affect their future career. There are simple things that can be done to protect young dancers and help reverse the negative path schools have been forcing on their young impressionable students. The damage caused by such a negative atmosphere is present at most schools all over the world, but it can be changed.

The “ballet body” stereotype has been around ever since ballet become a prevalent art form. The main cause of poor body image in young dancers is the perceived idea that one must have the perfect ballet body. Studies have shown that girls start expressing concerns about their weight as early as the age of six. Most ballet dancers begin their high-level training around age seven. These girls are dreaming of becoming professional ballerinas at such an impressionable age and the need to be extremely thin can cause significant mental and physical damage. Dancers must achieve greater perfection than the average person. Success is entirely based on everything about the dancer being as close to perfection as possible. Technique, stage presence, artistry and of course the body must be at a very high standard. Technique, stage presence and artistry can be taught and perfected over time, but the body is much different. In classical ballet, the ideal “Balanchine” body type is pushed on young impressionable dancers as the only acceptable body type. This body type is extremely thin and tall with long slender arms and legs, small hips and little to no breasts. This body type has been the ideal since the 1970s, when choreographer and mentor George Balanchine was extremely popular in the ballet world. Ballet dancer Gelsey Kirkland was mentored by George Balanchine, and she recalls in her book that he would often stop class to inspect his dancer’s bodies. “With his knuckles, he thumped on my sternum and down my rib cage, clucking his tongue, remarking, ‘Must see the bones.’ He did not merely say, ‘Eat less.’ He said repeatedly, ‘Eat nothing’”. She also states that at the time, she was already extremely underweight. Even today, if a dancer’s body does not fit the characteristics of the “Balanchine” body type they are pressured not only from themselves but from their peers, teachers and sometimes even parents to restrain from eating. As if the pressures to have a certain body type weren’t enough, every day students are wearing leotards and tights and looking at their peers in the same clothes and comparing every little thing about each others bodies. This is far from normal. The whole purpose of dance is to be self-critical and to be constantly pushing and striving to be better, but usually this does not produce positive results when applied to body image. If being underweight is constantly linked with praise and selection, it will always be strived towards and will always damage young dancer’s perception of body image and their health.

Poor body image often results in the development of an eating disorder. Body image issues can deeply effect a young dancer both mentally and physically and even alter their future career. Ballet dancers have a much higher risk of developing eating disorders than their non-dancing peers. The link between dancing and eating disorders has been researched by many health professionals and psychiatrists. Per a 2013 study by Jon Arcelus, Gemma L. Witcomb and Alex Mitchell titled “Prevalence of Eating Disorders amongst Dancers: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis,” explains that dancers are three times more likely to suffer from eating disorders, specifically anorexia nervosa. This is likely because if a young person is insulted daily they only lose their confidence and self-respect. They are then forced into a vicious circle of not believing in what they can achieve which hurts a dancer mentally. Physically, if a dancer is not eating they do not supply their body with the nutrients they need, and it becomes harder for them to perform. Eating disorders destroy the body, leaving the dancer malnourished and with decreased muscle tone and bone strength. Ballet requires an enormous amount of strength, so a dancer with an eating disorder will eventually be unable to execute difficult leaps and skillful maneuvers, as well as keep up with the cardio aspect and therefore alters their ability to perform. Being underweight also puts a dancer at risk for bone and muscle problems, heart problems, seizures or even death. A young dancer training at The School of American Ballet was so obsessed with her body image that she turned to extreme dieting and weight loss. This resulted in her not menstruating for five years and developing osteoporosis at a young age. Her osteoporosis prevented her from ever having a professional career. A more extreme example of the effects of body image issues is Heidi Guenther. Guenther was a dancer at the Houston Ballet School on scholarship and was told by the school that she had to lose weight. This is when she developed an eating disorder, and kept losing more and more weight to receive the best roles. Eventually, at age 22, Guenther died of a cardiac arrest caused by her eating disorder. In a similar case, 29-year-old ballet dancer Charlotte Robins suffered from anorexia for 14 years because her ballet teacher told her she was to fat to be a dancer. At the time of her death, she weighted only 44 pounds. Unfortunately, cases like the these are far too common in the world of ballet.

Ballet should not be known as the cause for childhood body image issues and eating disorders, it should be known as the beautiful art that it is. Ballet schools and companies need to make an effort to change this perception. There are simple things that can be done to protect young dancers and help reverse the negative path schools have been forcing on their young impressionable students. Ballet schools play a crucial role in preventing eating disorders in their dancers. Recovery is possible, especially with early intervention. Proper nutrition education is key. Many ballet companies have been forced to take eating disorders very seriously and are attempting to implement programs to ensure their dancers stay healthy. It is important to teach young dancers that the way to achieve goals is by being passionate about dancing, not weight. Schools can monitor student’s eating habits, levels of preoccupation with their weight and other symptoms of an eating disorder such as depression. They can also assess the level of dancer’s perfectionism with tests to reveal which students might be at a high risk. Teachers can avoid criticisms or jokes about weight or food and instead encourage and show empathy with students when they must display their bodies. In general, teachers and other influencers must understand that ballet students are under specific stressors related to their appearance at the most self conscious time of their young life, and the risks they are facing should not be ignored. The Royal Ballet School in London England has protocols already in place for identifying students with disordered eating and has programs to help to rehabilitate them so that they can recover and dance to their full potential. All That Dance Studio in Seattle took it one step further by having an annual “Love Your Body Week”. Love Your Body Week is filled with class activities for the dancers to focus on healthy body image. The event was started in 2005 by teacher Rachel Stewart after some of her 5-year-old students began comparing the sizes of their thighs in class. Stewart wanted to reverse the negative messages her students were receiving from others and acknowledge the pressures young dancers face about their bodies. Rachel’s took her idea to the studio director, Maygan Wurzer and together they created the annual event which helps provide a supportive and accepting environment the school. Schools all over the world should take notice of All That Dance and The Royal Ballet school and implement similar protocols and events in their own schools. If dance schools all over the world provide a more body positive environment for their students, young dancers won’t be as pressured to turn to eating disorders to cope.

There is no question that young ballet dancers are under more extreme pressures than the average child, but the pressures associated with their bodies should not encompass them entirely. Young dancers should be striving for the best technique, the best artistry and the best performance not the best body. Body image is a major issue for young ballet dancers with potentially life-damaging consequences because of the distorted idea of body image instilled in them at such a young age. The main cause of poor body image in young dancers is the perceived idea that one must have the perfect ballet body. Body image issues can deeply effect a young dancer both mentally and physically and even alter their future career. There are simple things that can be done to protect young dancers and help reverse the negative path schools have been forcing on their young impressionable students. The ballet community must move away from the weight obsessed subculture they are known for if they want healthy talented students to create the future of ballet.

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