

# Family Dance! Dance as a Healthy and Fun Family Activity

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Over their lifetimes, children grow and become more competent in building their skills in thinking, learning, emotions, and physical development. Dance has the potential to help families and those caring for young children to grow in multiple, healthy ways. As you read through this material, please keep in mind that while the focus is on children's skill building and growth, these activities are beneficial for individuals across the lifespan. It is also *crucial* to think of this as an opportunity to engage with children, and *not* just a "dance class." Dance is the activity used to encourage parents and children to have fun together.

## Benefits of Dance as an Activity

Dance provides benefits across the physical, mental, and behavioral areas. Physical benefits include weight loss, increased fitness, energy, and strength. Dance also builds movement skills in young children, and helps their young bodies grow strong. Dance participation has been linked to children having better relationships, better interactions with parents and teachers, and improved school performance. Mentally, adults and children tend to have higher confidence and positive moods when they dance regularly. Also, children and adults who dance have both increased physical activity at home and improved healthy eating habits. Possibly even more importantly, siblings of children involved in dance also increase their physical activity. This points to the potential for dance to be used with different ages of children and across families of all shapes and sizes.

## Prepare to Help Your Child

### *Mindfulness*

Mindfulness can be thought of as being in tune. Much like a musical instrument sounds so much better when it is in tune, humans do better when they are in tune. This means being present in the moment. When you are mindful, you think of things



not as they regularly are, but as they can be with a simple shift in thinking. Being mindful helps you recognize the potential for many different ways of doing things. Each of these ways could be as good as the rest! Mindfulness is an active and intentional way of being in the moment, and helps you focus on the activity at hand. This framework encourages you to really, on purpose, think about what is happening and respond with ways to build thinking and learning skills.

### *Mindful-mindedness*

Mindful-mindedness involves thinking about children as people with minds, as opposed to just having needs (for example, food, clothing, shelter), and using strategies, on purpose, to help them grow. Good adults always strive to meet children's needs, and doing them in a mindfully-minded fashion boosts the chances for learning in these interactions. For example, when dancing, an adult can think about what a child might be thinking about the way her legs and feet move, and use a technique known as

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scaffolding to build the child's confidence. This still meets basic needs to move and be active. Mindful-mindedness highlights responding to children's wants and needs. For example, if you are dancing, you can talk about the steps and the sounds they can make. You can even let your child try new, unusual dance moves. You can support them by thinking about the purpose of your words.

### Scaffolding

Scaffolds are intentional, temporary, and flexible structures used in building. In a similar way, child development scaffolding is made to build a child's development. Creating and positioning of scaffolds involves active thought processes, allowing the building to be completed with supporting structures that eventually are no longer needed. There are many ways to think about scaffolding, but here are six approaches that have proven effective in building cognitive and social-emotional skills in children, and can help with teaching and learning dance. They are: Questioning, Instruction/Explaining, Modeling, Keeping Focus, Setting the Stage, and Feedback.

### Instruction Is One Part of the Equation

You have lots of ways to teach and learn, and scaffolding strategies help you identify and use those ways of extending thinking and learning. Instruction is one, and when teaching new strategies, the tendency is to use this one too much. Try to ask questions, or offer encouragement and feedback (using the word "because"), and try modeling or demonstrating what the child needs to do.

You can also help by letting children know what to expect, and what is coming next, by setting the stage for them. For example, saying, "Now we are going to learn the Shuffle, but then we will get to be silly!"

Finally, keeping focus on learning the steps can be difficult for children. In this activity, you just want the children to have fun, so encourage adults to continue to learn the steps and show them to their children.

While there are several right ways to scaffold teaching and learning to dance, one wrong way is to issue commands to the child. Commands should be reserved for safety issues only, and you want children to feel free to express themselves when dancing. If children do not follow the steps, that is

okay! Different children respond to different ways of scaffolding. Some children like having an adult help them by moving their feet and legs in the right steps, and others like to have the adult simply show them how to do it.

There is no single "right way" to teach and learn, but your own knowledge of your child, and your own use of multiple scaffolding approaches can help. One important lesson from developing this program is that often children will appear as if they are not paying *any attention* at all, but then they will suddenly perform a step flawlessly. It is important for us to realize that children are always learning — you just cannot always directly observe it.

### Remember: This Is *not* Dance Class!

Adults tend to consider the goal of any activity is to "master" it. For example, if you begin to learn to ski, you want to eventually become good skiers. Often, you want to master other aspects of learning, such as reading, writing, and other skills.

While there is no harm in mastering the dance steps presented below, mastery of them is not the object. Dancing with young children should be, at the very least, a fun activity. You're encouraged to use tap dance as a fun, healthy, and engaging family activity. You can dance virtually anywhere, any time, and with anyone: inside or outside, in the morning or evening, with boys or with girls, with older adults and very young children.

When dancing together, always try to remember the joy of dancing is in the process. The satisfaction of mastery will never compare to the joy of moving, dancing, singing, clapping, and learning with your child. As adults in this activity, it is up to you to focus on having fun, and letting your children be children. If you can, remember what it is like to be a child, and even let yourself be child-like for a while. There is no safer and more enjoyable time to reconnect with being a child than when you are engaged in fun, physical activities such as dance.

### Before You Begin

An important aspect of dance is the music you use to dance with. Children often like to hear songs with which they are familiar, but adults sometimes tire of these songs. If you have ever listened to a single



song from one of the Disney films over and over, you know this to be true. So, selecting the music can help you and your child have a good time. Practice taking turns with the music so that the adult gets to hear a song he or she likes and then the child gets to hear a song he or she likes. This provides a chance to practice basic turn-taking skills, and also provides children with a chance to hear something that the adults who care for them like. You might be surprised to learn that your child enjoys Pink Floyd as much as Pink! Make sure the music is upbeat and that you can learn to dance with it. Anything from Big Band to the latest chart topper is fair game. You just want it to make you want to move. One advantage of the modern world is the accessibility of literally millions of songs online. While using smartphones around children is usually not recommended, this is one instance where using your smartphone is encouraged. Use it as a juke box!

### Basic Steps

Regardless of the music choices, there are three basic steps to tap dance that adults and children can learn together to start. They are the Stamp, Step and Clap, and the Shuffle. These are the most basic tap steps and set the stage for later, more complex dance steps. However, before you begin, always keep in mind that any physical activity can cause injury. Please make sure you are healthy enough to perform light exercise, and make sure to listen to your bodies as you engage in these activities. In developing this program, one of the most repeated lessons we learned from families is that they did not anticipate how much exercise they would get during it. Please pace yourselves, and make sure you and your child take appropriate breaks and/or drink plenty of water.

These YouTube videos provide excellent examples of how to do these steps:

Stamp-<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yCMkj-LilPQ>(0:35-0:50)

Step and clap-<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-15PIJNpyE>(0:00-0:09)

Shuffle-<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7D582WY2Et4>(0:00-0:52)

It is important to realize that children (and adults) will not always get these steps correctly, on time, with the right foot, on the beat, or even every step



for the first few times. That is just fine! You want this to be fun. One of the most important things adults can do is to just show children, through their own enjoyment and movements, that it is fun to dance. Children **love** fun! If you are having fun, chances are very good they will want to have fun.

As you begin to master these steps, you will then learn to change the order. If you are dancing as a pair, just take turns with the child in choosing which step to use. For example, dance a Shuffle for a few steps, then call out, “Stamp!” and switch to that step. Keep doing this during the song. As the number of dance steps you learn increases, the number of combinations you can do will increase as well. This can lead to elaborate, and often hilarious, combinations of dance steps.

### Keeping Things Interesting

Children cannot continually keep their focus to the same extent as adults. This means that sometimes we need to just let the children be silly. A good way to do this is to shout “Lightning and Thunder!” and then shake your bodies all over and stomp your feet. This provides a good break for children’s attention, and is fun. It also lets them be as silly as they want. You can then shout “Freeze!” and freeze your bodies in place. This provides a chance to catch your breath for a moment before going into either another Lightning and Thunderstorm, or a different dance step.

The next steps to learn are the Irish, Toe Drops and Heel Drops, and the Flap.

These YouTube videos provide excellent examples of how to do these steps:

Irish - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=43UoZ0a4cIA> (0:00-1:13)

Toe drops and heel drops - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p3H7csi\\_A8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p3H7csi_A8) (0:00-1:20)

Flap - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcxRnK4-r1s> (0:00-0:39)

As you begin to build these into your dancing, always remember to refresh your memories with the older steps. New knowledge is great, but you also want to remember to use what you have learned before. There are more and more steps, and here are a few more:

Straight kick - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-wzOXT\\_orc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-wzOXT_orc) (0:55-1:03)

Shuffle ball change - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wmmBLi1Eyl> (0:00-1:41)

Buffalo - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=unszgGPxC0Y>

Toe tap - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X61YfjtjjD4&index=4&list=PLSc9hQHUK-PKr2NjflNMEIG0Bx3DxHsC6> (0:00-0:48)

## Take-Home Message

Remember that dance should, above all else, be fun. Dancing has benefits to the heart, mind, and body, and these are benefits to children of all ages. While mastery is a good thing, try to think of tap dancing with young children as a good excuse to have fun, learn something new together, and to explore your creativity by putting the steps together in different combinations. Remember to take breaks, drink water, listen to your bodies, and **laugh a lot!**

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