

## **When Can I Begin Dancing On Pointe?** **(Guidelines for ballet students – and their parents!)**

**By Dr. Heather Snyder**

As a podiatrist with a special interest in dance medicine, this is perhaps one of the most frequent questions I get asked by my younger ballet patients. Unfortunately, the answer is not always clear cut. I would like to offer some suggestions and insight to guide you in making this very important decision.

- Some physicians and dance instructors argue that unless a dancer is beginning **pre-professional** ballet studies, then she should NOT even consider going on pointe. Going on pointe should NOT be a key requirement for ballet – particularly for those students who dance primarily for recreation or enjoyment.
- Most dance instructors and physicians agree that pointe work should NOT begin before the dancer is **11** years of age. However, each and every child physiologically develops at his or her own pace. Therefore, although one child may be developmentally ready to begin pointe work at age 11, another may not be ready until age 12, 13, or even 14.

Dr. Justin Howse writes in his book *Dance Technique and Injury Prevention*, second edition (© 1992, Theatre Arts/ Routledge Chapman & Hall), “there are certainly well-known dancers who were not strong enough to start their pointe work until they were over the age of sixteen and this has proved no handicap in their career.”

***Dr. Snyder’s side note...***When we are born the bones in our feet are not completely formed - they are very soft. As we age, the bones of the feet gradually begin to ossify (harden). The long bones in our toes usually begin to ossify between the ages of 8-14, and the process is not usually complete until our early twenties! It makes sense to wait until the bones in the foot are hard enough to be physiologically able to support the body’s weight before beginning dancing on pointe.

- Almost all pointe instructors will require a minimum of **2 years** of ballet training as a prerequisite for beginning pointe.
- Most physicians, including Dr. William Hamilton (consulting orthopedist for the New York City Ballet) and Dr. David Weiss (orthopedist at the Harkness Dance Center in New York) recommend a minimum of **4 years** of pre-pointe ballet training.
- Pointe students should be taking at least **2 ballet classes per week**.

***Dr. Snyder’s side note...***most physicians agree that the dancer’s strength and technique actually may be more important than age in determining when to start pointe training.

The following is an excerpt from *The Pointe Book* by Janice Barringer and Sarah Schlesinger, second edition (©2004, Princeton Book Company):

Dr. James Garrick (head of the Dance Medicine Division of the Center for Sports Medicine at St. Francis Hospital in San Francisco) “believes a student should be able to do a solid *passé* on *demi-pointe* with a straight, pulled-up knee. This requires that she put

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all her weight on one leg, with full knee extension and full *releve*...if a dancer can go from a *grand plie* in center to standing with her knees straight, no wobbling, and without altering foot positions, it may be time for pointe.”

Dr. Justin Howse (former orthopedist for the Royal Ballet School) “says that strength must have been achieved in the feet and around the ankles, with full control of all relevant joints. Students should be able to hold turnout at the hips and be stable in the hip area when standing on both legs or one leg alone. There also needs to be strength and stability in the trunk. Inadequate control of the muscles of the trunk, hip, and thigh can make a student unstable and unsafe on pointe. If the feet and body are in any way soft, mobile, or floppy, pointe work must be delayed.”

The following is an excerpt from an article entitled *When Can I Go On Pointe?* by Dr. Richard Braver (a sports medicine podiatrist and medical consultant to Capezio):

“The dancer must be able to go onto the center floor and be able to *releve* and hold *passé* position...the dancer must be able to stand balanced up on the ball of one foot with minimal shaking for a period of 15-30 seconds. She should also be able to walk in the *releve* position without problems.”

“When the child is in the barefoot *releve* position...the fat pad on the bottom of the toes should be in contact with the ground. The toes should not be curled downward or knuckled. The weight should be centered on the ball of the foot as well as to the bottom of the toes.”

- If there is any doubt about starting pointe – **WAIT!** It is always better to take another year to work on strengthening your technique than risk injury.

***Dr. Snyder’s side note...***Some common dance injuries that can occur from beginning pointe training too soon are bunions, hammertoes, neuromas, bursitis, Achilles tendonitis, ankle sprains, and foot fractures. Many of these conditions can end a dancer’s career and lead to chronic disabilities as an adult. In my professional opinion, it is much better to endure a child’s brief disappointment at being told that she should wait a bit longer before starting pointe than to suffer the long-term, and often permanent, damage to the body that can occur if pointe training begins too soon.

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