

Dancer Universe

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Infants and Toddlers in Motion

by Jasmine Rios — Dec 12, 2008

A child's first introduction to dance typically begins at age four. Classes for children ages three and even two are also becoming more common. Some will be amazed to learn that there are also dance classes for infants and toddlers. This is not a new phenomenon. In different parts of the country, schools specializing in infant and toddler programs have been around for decades.

There are still many dance professionals barely learning about this area of expertise. These programs are designed to provide the most basic introduction to movement using a variety of techniques that help stimulate physical and neurological activity during early child development. Three prominent dance schools have been selected to present their unique approach to reaching these particularly young children. Creation Station dance school first opened in Sherman Oaks, CA, in 1992. Within the first six months of opening, founder/creative director, Judy Carmen saw that her school was on its way to becoming a major success.

Carmen was introduced to dance at an early age, but had a less than pleasant experience. "I started ballet at the age of four and wanted out at four and one month. I went kicking and screaming to a contemporary dance class and much to my amazement, found that dance could be about creativity in movement and I could be a tree! I fell in love."

The Creation Station approach to early child development is about helping to further develop cognitive, interpersonal, tactile and gross motor skills through creative movement in a non-competitive environment. The school's signature class for children 18 months and older, Tot's and Tutu's, enables caregivers and their toddlers to share in this introductory experience with dance. Toddlers also learn basic ballet terminology, positions and ballet steps. The Tot's and Tutu's class has been the most popular since the school opened and accounts for approximately 80 percent of enrollment at most Creation Station locations. Many children from this program have gone on to upper

division dance classes and have aspirations to dance professionally. Some choose to keep dancing simply for the love of the art.

Earlier this year, Carmen opened a new flagship location and franchise training center in Culver City, CA. With the school's consistent success over the years, Carmen decided it was time to take her business to the next level by creating franchise opportunities. Carmen shares, "We are fortunate that many of our current and past clients are the ones opening Creation Stations. It's fairly common to have a client invite a potential investor or friend to watch our classes and then approach us about the possibility of a franchise. We have had a hand full of teachers who have taught for us, opening and wanting to open their own franchise as well."

Carmen makes an important point that toddler programs are not for everyone. "Teachers should not offer a toddler program just to increase enrollment. Not everyone has the ability to teach toddlers. It takes a 'magical quality' which cannot be learned, it is innate. That is why there are so few successful programs out there."

Over the next decade, Carmen envisions opening 100 school sites with satellite locations across the country to provide enough accessible outlets for dance educators everywhere to adopt the Creation Station dance program model.

Stories in Motion (SIM), based in New Jersey, was founded by director Ann Biddle in 2001. The family and toddler dance curriculum for children 12 months and older follows the Dance Education Laboratory model (DEL) which she co-founded at the Harkness Dance Center in New York, an approach that integrates thematic movement with storytelling.

Biddle started dancing at age five and went on to become a professional modern dancer/choreographer and dance educator in New York City. Prior to opening SIM, Biddle had firm beliefs about when a child should be introduced to dance. She shares, "I always felt dance class should start no earlier than five or six. But, it wasn't until I had my daughter that I came to appreciate the need for early childhood dance. When my daughter was two, I launched the concept of Stories in Motion at her birthday party. She loved stories and loved to dance, so bringing stories to life through dance was born with her 'Where the Wild Things Are' party. It was a great success. When I witnessed the extraordinary response from my daughter's friends and their families, I realized I had stumbled across something magical. My beautiful two children have been dancing with me since the age of 10 months. My six-year-old son's early dance training has set him up well for gymnastics and sports. My 10-year-old daughter is a great improvisational dancer. We dance a lot at home together or just go into the studio and jam!"

"Bringing stories to life through dance" is the SIM tagline that has captured the interest of families since the school opened. The science and expertise behind the program model is what has sustained the schools ongoing success. Biddle shares, "SIM links sensory-motor, cognitive and social-emotional experiences to provide the optimal environment for brain development. Its rich story telling component enables the child to grow in symbolic development; and in its creative movement component, it builds more connections in the brain. Research points to the concept that movement and literacy

stimulation affects spatial awareness and mathematical skills in young children. Spatial awareness pertains to the child's ability to form mental images, visualize graphic representation and recognize the relation of various objects to one another; essential building blocks for cognitive development.”



Photo courtesy of CREATION STATION

David Kriegel * DMK Images

Copious onsite training is provided to all SIM teaching staff. Educators must have a vast knowledge of each stage of child development. They must also know how a child learns and how to inspire movement through the use of music, stories and activities.

Biddle’s school has earned its reputation for excellence from families that have come to know the benefits of bringing their children to SIM. “I started in 2001 and still have many of those same children enrolled. We also have many families now sending their third child through the SIM curriculum. It's marvelous to watch a family that dances together,” shares Biddle.

Currently, there are locations in Maplewood, Westfield, Morristown, and Randolph, NJ, and efforts to franchise the SIM model in parts of New York City, Canada and Las Vegas are in progress. Biddle says, "I believe it is an inevitable trend that will only grow, especially with the current brain and education research that supports kinesthetic learning and early exposure to literacy. My goal is to spark in children a love of movement and dance that will stay with them for life. I predict that SIM will become a thriving franchise model, expanding nationally and internationally.”

The Creative Dance Center (CDC) in Seattle, WA, was founded in 1981 by dance education specialist Anne Green Gilbert. Theresa Goetz, director of education and outreach for CDC, is a former dancer for Pacific Northwest Ballet (PNB). In 1996, one year after Goetz retired from PNB, she discovered the Creative Dance Center. She says, "I was looking for a dance class I could take with my first daughter, who was about 18 months old. I was thrilled to find a studio that provided such an amazing class for toddlers and their parents. My first class there was the beginning of an incredible learning journey for me, as my life quite literally became transformed."

CDC follows Gilbert's BrainDance model, which consists of eight fundamental movement patterns a child instinctively goes through during the first year of life. "Awareness of these patterns can help dance teachers of all forms teach technique and give them tools to help their students of all ages warm-up, have better focus and concentration in class and strengthen their balance system, which is necessary for successful functioning in all aspects of life. Teachers also gain a deeper understanding of how these patterns are linked to the social, emotional, cognitive, psychological and kinesthetic development of young children," shares Goetz.

"Tummy time" is a CDC term used in the Nurturing Baby class, which refers to when an infant is facing down on their stomach. These classes offer "multi-sensory activities with nursery rhymes and tummy time exercises, instrument and rhythm play and movement with various music genres. Infants want social and emotional engagement more than anything and getting down on the floor, face to face with baby, is the best thing an adult can do. Many parents who come to Nurturing Baby class have often not done tummy time early enough. All the work an infant does on the floor against gravity is developing a foundation for healthy physical development and life-long learning skills," says Goetz.

CDC conducts a great deal of outreach and training workshops and has a loyal following of parents and dance professionals that help spread awareness about the program on a community level. Though there has been a steady growth in the infant and toddler classes, Gilbert is not looking to convert the infant/toddler program model to a franchise. "Our Summer Dance Institute for Teachers will continue to draw participants from all over the world to learn and transform their lives and their students," shares Goetz.

Whether or not a dance educator is interested in exploring an infant/toddler program for their school, studies on this area of expertise will remain ongoing. It would be in the interest of all dance educators to stay well informed of how these studies and programs continue to evolve, as someday, this information could have a direct impact on your school.