

## Feeding The Beast: Providing An Effective Pre-School Curriculum

Pre-schoolers are a tough audience! Anyone who has had kids this age knows this all too well, and if you have taught this age in your classes, you're also familiar with the challenges. Their bodies are new to them in every respect; they're still learning balance, fine and gross motor skills and coordination. They also have lots of new and interesting things competing for their attention. Yet, as a studio owner, you know that this age group is the life-blood of your school. A well-structured, engaging curriculum for this age group can lock in your dancers for the next fifteen years.

With all that said, it's very easy for us to get wrapped up in the day-to-day focus on our older age groups, and leave the younger ones to our less experienced teachers, or to put together a program quickly at the beginning of the year –in short, to neglect this critical element of your long-term success.

So, what does it take to put together an effective program for pre-schoolers? Well let's look at the "buyers" (moms and dads) and the "key influencers" (kids and teachers). Your program needs to talk to them in their "language".

**Parents:** are looking for something that is low maintenance, that their kids enjoy and that won't cost them a fortune; their kids are too young to invest a large amount of money in something that they might not like or be good at, so try to give them a taste of everything so they can help their kids decide where they want to focus their energies.

**Kids:** Kids are kids – they have lots of energy, but it can be challenging to direct it. Make sure your program is simple for them to grasp, but has sufficient variety and interest to keep them engaged. Remember, they have a much shorter attention span than your older dancers. Plan your activities accordingly. A 30-40 minute class is plenty for kids under the age of 5.

**Teachers:** Your teachers make or break this class. In addition to recognizing that teaching this age group requires humor, patience and a certain element of babysitting, realize that kids form a bond with their teacher. Your teachers need to be excited about this; they need to enjoy teaching it and to convey that enjoyment to their kids. So make it fun for them too.

So what are the critical elements of making a curriculum that meets these challenges? Let's look at the crucial components:

**Variety:** Kids of this age are bored very easily. They have lots of competition for their attention and, in today's media-rich economy, it's easy to lose them. Try to engage them with a little of everything; they generally don't have the patience to focus on any one thing for very long.

**Music:** Today's kids are exposed to a LOT of music from a very young age, whether it's the soundtrack to the latest fast food commercial, movie soundtracks or their older sibling's latest acquisition, they're surprisingly discerning listeners at an early age. Music that emphasizes formality over fun will be less interesting. Try to keep it up-tempo, rhythmically-engaging and with a strong "hook" or chorus that they can catch on to easily. And keep them relatively short. Adult "pop" singles are typically 4 minutes long, but kids have a shorter attention span. Look for 2 to 3 minutes as an ideal time.

**Choreography:** Whether it's jazz, tap or ballet, or even creative movements, keep it simple. Remember, these kids are still trying to figure out balance and co-ordination. Keep them challenged, but also make sure there's enough repetitiveness that they're learning something concrete week to week – parents, kids and teachers all expect visible progress.

**Consistency:** It's critical to have a consistent structure. Kids of this age expect and want structure; moreover they need it. Have a consistent approach to each week's class; for example, start with a warm-up number every week, and end with a complete dance. Switch out jazz, tap or ballet as your main dance, but reinforce the lesson from the prior week. The kids should know what to expect by week four, and the older kids will soon call you out on it!

**Communication:** Talk to the kids and to the parents. Tell them what's going on; help the parents see the curriculum as more than an ad hoc series of dances and as part of a broader learning experience. Send information home with the parents so that they have a context for what their children are learning. The parents need to feel like they're getting their money's worth, and that they are doing some good for the price of three lattes a week!

**Fun:** Last but by no means least, keep it fun! The kids are spending 30-40 minutes with you instead of playing in the park or sliding in the snow or running around the yard. You have to compete with all of that and more. They have to WANT to come to dance class – that will ultimately be the biggest yardstick by which the parents will judge you. And, if you make it fun for you and your teachers, you can make it fun for your students.

Remember that, while your style is all your own, good content and a consistent approach will win hands down. A well-tuned pre-school curriculum will feed your program for years, so think of it as time and money invested rather than spent.

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