

PERHAPS YOU ARE A PARENT OR grandparent of a young dancer; a dance instructor or studio staff member; or a college intern working with children in a dance venue. It doesn't matter. All of us have a responsibility to keep children safe from abuse and exploitation. It is a community responsibility to "upstand" rather than "bystand."

That was the key message I heard at a recent virtual seminar for dance professionals taught by Alison Feigh, Director of Jacob Wetterling Resource Center (JWRC) of Minnesota. Dance teachers will have students in their classes who have been maltreated or exploited. They often don't know who has experienced trauma because most survivors of abuse do not tell anyone or wait until they are adults to disclose. Sometimes abused youth will act out. Sometimes they are overachievers, requesting to stay for extra classes or instruction because the dance studio is a safe place, and they don't want to go home.

What can we do as dance professionals and as a dance community to be trauma-informed? First we must understand the nature of child physical and sexual abuse. Then each of us can be trained to recognize signs of abuse and what to do about it.

## Dynamics of Child Exploitation

Offenders can be all genders, socioeconomic levels, and cultures. About 4-5% of sex offenders are female. Most child maltreatment comes from people the child knows. Very few incidents are stranger assaults or abductions like we hear in the media. We know some molesters even offend when other adults are present, because the conduct is so normalized that the other person doesn't do anything about it.

Offenders look for weak spots in studio oversight. They target children who

## How the Dance Community Can Lead in Keeping Children Safe

BY EMBER REICHGOTT JUNGE



don't get the affection and attention they need at home. For example, one offender watched how parents interacted with their kids when they were picked up. Were the kids put in the back seat without engaging with them? Did kids happily tell their parents about the lesson or avoid talking with them? It's easy to screen the dynamics around attention or affection.

Eighty percent of children who experience abuse in one way often experience it in other ways. A single bruise doesn't tell the whole story of possible sexual abuse, criminal neglect, etc. What's more, people being harmed in person are at greater risk of being harmed online.

Older children between ages 12-17 are especially vulnerable to sexual harm. Their brain is still developing, but puberty is happening; they are becoming more independent, and parents are less involved in their lives. They look for approval from older adults. The last part of the brain that develops is the part that asks, "Is this

a good idea?" A child's gut may say "don't give out my address online." But her brain says, "But I get a free game!"

This is how "grooming" the child target works. Offenders skillfully break boundaries with kids. "With me you can do this, but only me. You can trust me. I will keep it secret." Groomers look for the weaker child, and offer trust and affection, within a seemingly safe social context. Note that once a child is abused by one person, their risk of abuse by others increases.

The most important way to stop the cycle of abuse is for children to have at least one positive relationship—a stable and committed relationship—with an adult who doesn't abuse them. It's a place they can feel safe. That's where community arises, and each of us can play a part. What to do? Here are five insights provided by JWRC.

## Make a Difference and Lead

Dance teachers who intentionally work to create a positive space for

people to grow in community and celebrate what they can do with their bodies are doing more than teaching dance. They are actively challenging the negative messages abuse survivors have heard about bodies and self-worth. They are demonstrating safe ways for youth to be in relationships with others. By using power and authority to lead or help, rather than harm, teachers actively challenge messages the youth receive about power and control. Dance professionals (perhaps joining with other studios) can make prevention discussions the norm by hosting occasional seminars for parents, teachers, and the community. That way, no one feels guilty about “saying something” or fears negative

repercussions for their studio. It’s expected. It’s the norm.

Parents can lead as well. It is important to say something; don’t assume someone else will speak up. Sometimes warning signs are in plain view. Inappropriate behavior can become normalized. Sometimes a new person on the scene, such as a college intern or specialist coach, can see things differently. Is an instructor hugging children too closely and too enthusiastically? Are they touching a child on the upper thigh or carrying the child from one place to another when the child can move on his own? Does the child who loves dance tell their parent “I don’t want to go back there again”? Does the child mention that she is so good at dance that she

gets special training with her teacher that no other child receives? The latter violates the “rule of three”—that there always be a second adult present. Finally, don’t encourage “secrets” with your child: encourage surprises. That’s an easy thing to change.

## Model Consent

Dance teachers and parents can set good boundaries by “normalizing asking” before correcting a behavior. For example, a teacher might ask, “Can I lift your leg here?” or “Can I show you what I mean by flat back?” Taking an extra moment to check in with a child or teen helps create a standard where young people know they own their body, whether in or out of class. Many adult ballroom dance students also appreciate such courtesies, as their instructor asks informally, “Can I mess with your shoulder?”

## Write Policies and Make Them Accessible to Families

Most dance studios have written policies on a wide range of topics: clothing, hair styles, attendance, etc. But few studios have policies that require training for prevention of abuse and protocols on how to address it. People who cause harm look for places that don’t have policies. All parents should request to see the child abuse prevention policies. In one case, a mother requested to see the policy and was told “We don’t have policies because we don’t hire sex offenders.” That’s horrifying to hear. We have no way of knowing if someone is sex offender. Background checks hardly help because most abusers are never arrested or convicted. (Instead, parents can ask for three dance families to call for references). A written policy makes it easier for parents to speak out if they see something that doesn’t seem right.





What should policies say? They should document how the studio team invests in the safety of students and teachers. The policy should include best practices, such as requiring two non-related adults in the building when open. It should clarify limitations around texting and social media, usually prohibiting direct text communications between teacher and student without including a parent. Texting and online communications are prime strategies for offenders to groom their targets, with 15-year-olds being the average age for online exploitation. Finally, parents and students should know who to contact if they have a safety concern, including an alternate contact if the lead contact is also the person of concern.

### Know How to Respond If You Hear Bad Things

If there is reason to believe that child maltreatment is happening, it is important to err on the side of making a report. It is not necessary to interrogate a child about suspected abuse—simply obtain necessary details (names, contacts, and what is concerning). It is the adult’s responsibility to report, not investigate. If the child or teen reveals they are being abused, they should be assured this is not their fault. Tell them they did the right thing in talking with someone. Respect them, and write it down. Don’t have a big reaction or be angry with them, but thank them for telling you. Don’t make promises except to say “We’ll get more adults involved.” Call in the report directly. Don’t notify the suspected offender because it puts the child at risk. Don’t avoid the youth. Keep the abuse private, not “secret.”

Most children don’t disclose abuse. They don’t have someone to tell, they may not have the words, or they don’t know how to explain it. They feel guilty

that they caused it. They fear being rejected or not believed. Regretfully, 90% of children who tell someone have a negative experience in telling them.

Parents can help prepare children by having a conversation with them about “What ifs.” For example, “What if your friend was abused? Wouldn’t you want someone to know?” Assure your child you just want to make sure they know what to do if something happens, like preparing for a tornado. Make sure your child has a safety network of five adult people they can tell if someone is breaking their body rules. That raises the chance that at least one of them will hear it and say something.

### Know Your Resources

There are people in every community actively involved in addressing child abuse. Get to know your local child advocacy center or other agencies working with families in your community. It is important to have

relationships with those doing this important work before you need to ask a question or find a resource. Kids are better served when everyone works together to support kids. Jacob Wetterling Resource Center is one such resource at [www.jwrc.org](http://www.jwrc.org). They offer a curriculum called “Empower Me!” that gives kids body safety tools and vocabulary to help them be “smart and not scared.”

The dance community can lead the way in ensuring that children have a safe place to express themselves verbally and physically. The skills and experiences that children learn through their dance education can protect them for a lifetime.

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