



Learning about nutrition in a seminar at Houston Ballet's summer intensive

Bringing Up the Weight Word

How to talk to students about a touchy subject

BY NANCY WOZNY

An offhand comment from a teacher such as, "Gained a little weight?" can leave its mark on a young dancer. When Patricia Rozow heard those very words from her ballet instructor at the age of 15, something shifted in her thinking that contributed to a 15-year struggle with anorexia and bulimia. "I went from 113 pounds to 85 pounds," recalls Rozow, a former dancer with Ballet West and Cincinnati Ballet. "That probably wasn't what that teacher had in mind."

Maintaining a healthy physique—not too heavy but not dangerously thin—is a reality of going pro as a dancer, and helping students commit to that ideal is one of a teacher's many jobs. "A physically toned and sculpted body is a part of a dancer's package, just like turnout, extension, and elevation," says Rozow, now chair of the dance program at Cincinnati's School for the Creative and Performing Arts. But the subject of losing (or gaining) weight to achieve that aesthetic can be extremely sensitive, particularly during the emotional minefield of the teen years, when the body is in flux and body image more vulnerable than ever. So what's the best way to talk to students about their weight, without causing undue emotional, psychological, or physical harm? *Dance Magazine* spoke with

school directors across the country to find out.

At Houston Ballet's Ben Stevenson Academy, you won't find teachers making sly "slim down" comments at the barre. Shelly Power, associate director of the school, insists that teachers concerned about a dancer's weight come to her first. At least three teachers need to bring up the same concern before Power calls for a one-on-one conversation with the student, which she does only with parental consent and notification. "We want to make sure it's not just one person's opinion," she says. "These situations are best handled as a team, when the student knows they have support and access to resources that can help them make a change. That can't happen with a remark in a hallway."

Age and emotional maturity are other factors to consider. "I almost never bring up the subject with a child before the age of 15," says Margaret Tracey, associate director of Boston Ballet School. "The body needs time to settle in. And if the discussion isn't completely necessary, it's not worth the trauma." She also thinks about a dancer's professional goals. "If I know they're going on to a university to pursue another career, it just doesn't make sense to start that conversation." Like Power, Tracey keeps parents in the loop. "I need to know that the child is in a

supportive environment," she says. "Without that piece, we're not going to get anywhere."

Once she has decided to meet with a student, Tracey chooses her language carefully. She steers clear of the words "weight" or "fat" and never mentions a specific number of pounds to be gained or lost. Instead, she frames the conversation around being in the best shape possible. "I talk about dance being a visual art. You will be presenting yourself, so let's figure out how you can be at your best," she says. "And I never draw comparisons to other dancers. That can be very destructive." Similarly, Power focuses on "physicality" (rather than "weight") as "part of a larger set of requirements" for a dance career. She stresses the demands of partnering, and the aesthetic preferences of different choreographers, as reasons to stay fit. "It's not just about getting skinny," she says.

Helping dancers reach an acceptable weight means educating them about nutrition. Both Tracey and Power arrange for students who need assistance to work one on one with a nutritionist. "They learn to keep a food journal and receive an individualized eating plan, while not entirely giving up their favorite foods," says Power. "What we give them isn't a diet but a life-long strategy for health." At Boston Ballet and Houston Ballet, group nutrition classes are also a regular offering for all students.

In contemporary dance, the pressure to look long and lean may be less intense, but staying sculpted and toned is just as necessary. As Denise Jefferson, director of The Ailey School, explains, "You'll see all kinds of bodies in our two companies, but the fitness level is extremely high." The school's nutritionist, Marie Scioscia, offers a seven-week health and nutrition workshop for freshmen in the Ailey/Fordham BFA program and students dealing with weight issues, as well as in-depth one-on-one sessions. Her classes debunk common myths like low-carb diets. "Carbs are a dancer's fuel," she says. "Without them the body craves sugar. We also address portion size and timing of meals, to minimize nighttime eating."

At the School for the Creative and Performing Arts, Rozow often talks about healthy eating during technique class. She also offers student-parent

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workshops taught by former dancer Judy Vogel. “We encourage parents to prepare healthy snacks,” she says. “When I see kids toting around a box of cereal all day, I get worried. I also stress that a diet isn’t what you eat to lose weight, but what you do to be physically and mentally fit.”

Staying in shape does not mean wasting away. A too-thin dancer requires immediate attention due to the long-term risks of eating disorders. “My alarm bells ring louder in this potentially dangerous situation,” says Tracey. “A dancer needs to know that their health is more important than being in class. We don’t take it lightly, and require a doctor’s note to

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return.” When Jefferson has concerns about a student rapidly losing weight, she either asks permission to call their parents, or, if less urgent, places them in a wellness workshop with Linda Hamilton, *Dance Magazine* advice columnist.

A dancer usually knows when she needs to work on her body. “Sometimes it’s almost a relief to have it out in the open,” says Tracey. “The student might decide not to make this their battle and pursue another career.” Jefferson remembers a student who, after a long struggle with her weight, chose to study physical therapy. “We can’t force students to make changes,” she says. “Some will find ways to continue dancing where their weight is not an issue; those possibilities exist.”

Whether it leads them forward in dance or into another field, grappling with a weight problem compels dancers to ask, “Can I do this? Do I want to do this?” Whatever they decide, the teacher’s role is to guide and support them, not bring them down. Tracey sums up one of her goals: “I want them to come through this with their self-esteem intact.”

Nancy Wozny writes about the arts and health in Houston.