

Skill-Building Opportunities

Importance of the Arts

Question: My daughter loves ballet class, but now that she's getting older, I want to make sure she focuses on her schoolwork. How can I encourage her interest in dance without distracting from her school responsibilities?

Hey, hold on a minute! Does involvement in the arts promote schoolwork or distract from it?

That was one of the questions the Dana Foundation pursued by assembling a task force in the late 2000s. Michael Gazzaniga of the University of California at Santa Barbara, the task force chair, shares its conclusion:

"An interest in a performing art leads to a high state of motivation that produces the sustained attention necessary to improve performance and the training of attention that leads to improvement in other domains of cognition."

Here are some suggestions for maintaining your daughter's interest in ballet without sacrificing school responsibilities.

Focus and Self Control involves paying attention, remembering the rules, thinking flexibly and exercising self-control (not going on automatic, but doing what's needed to pursue a goal). Children need this skill to achieve their goals, especially in a world filled with distractions and information overload.

1

Foster your child's creative interests.

As the Dana Foundation Task Force found, when a child, like your daughter, really cares about something, she's more likely to pay very close attention, work hard, deal with and overcome challenges, and practice, practice, practice. These skills can positively affect schoolwork.

Larry Schweinhart of the HighScope Educational Research Foundation was involved in the HighScope Perry Preschool Project in the 1960s. This program's aim was to help children take increasing responsibility for their own learning—to become more goal-directed—through daily routines. Schweinhart says:

"The reason we want children to be involved as initiators is because it works better for their education and, in fact, makes them better citizens in the long run. The basic cornerstone of that daily routine is children making plans, then carrying out the plans, and then getting back together and reviewing the plans."

2

Help your child set goals.

Help your child set goals about how much time she is going to devote to ballet and how much time to school work.

The lessons of the HighScope project—which have positively affected children—can be used in your home. Rather than organizing things for your daughter, recognize that she's old enough to take some responsibility for organizing her commitments to ballet and to school. There is the issue of the larger schedule and her schedule at home.

- Discuss together how many times a week she'll pursue ballet after school and whether that schedule is working or not working.
- She can use a planner or other tool to stay organized and to keep track of events and tasks.
- Help her to think about how she works and learns best, and whether it's better to work on ballet or schoolwork first at home or to go back and forth.
- She can set her own short-term goals, like: "I will work on reading or spelling as soon as I get home."

Consider her schedule with ballet and at home as an experiment. If you find that it's not working, sit together and non-judgmentally map out problems and look for solutions. Mid-course corrections are always part of setting and achieving goals.

The American Academy of Pediatrics notes that many children and their families get over-scheduled with too many activities that fill children's "free time." All children—and adults—need some downtime.

3

Build downtime into the schedule.

Your child is more likely to take in and make sense of new information and experiences when she has time to process and reflect. Make sure she has room somewhere in her daily life for unstructured free time.

The research of Carol Dweck at Stanford University has shown that the children most willing to take risks, to feel comfortable making mistakes and to take on learning that's hard for them are those who are praised for their effort, not for their intelligence or inborn skills.

4

Because your child has a special talent, it's especially important to praise her strategies.

Instead of praising your daughter's skill in dancing or in schoolwork, praise her strategies. Rather than saying, for example, "you are so smart," or "you are so gifted," say:

- When you set a time to do your homework before ballet it ended up you had more time to dance. Setting a time is a strategy that worked for you.

This doesn't mean you should never tell your child that she looks nice or is talented, but the focus of your attention should be on what she is doing to use her talents, not who she is.