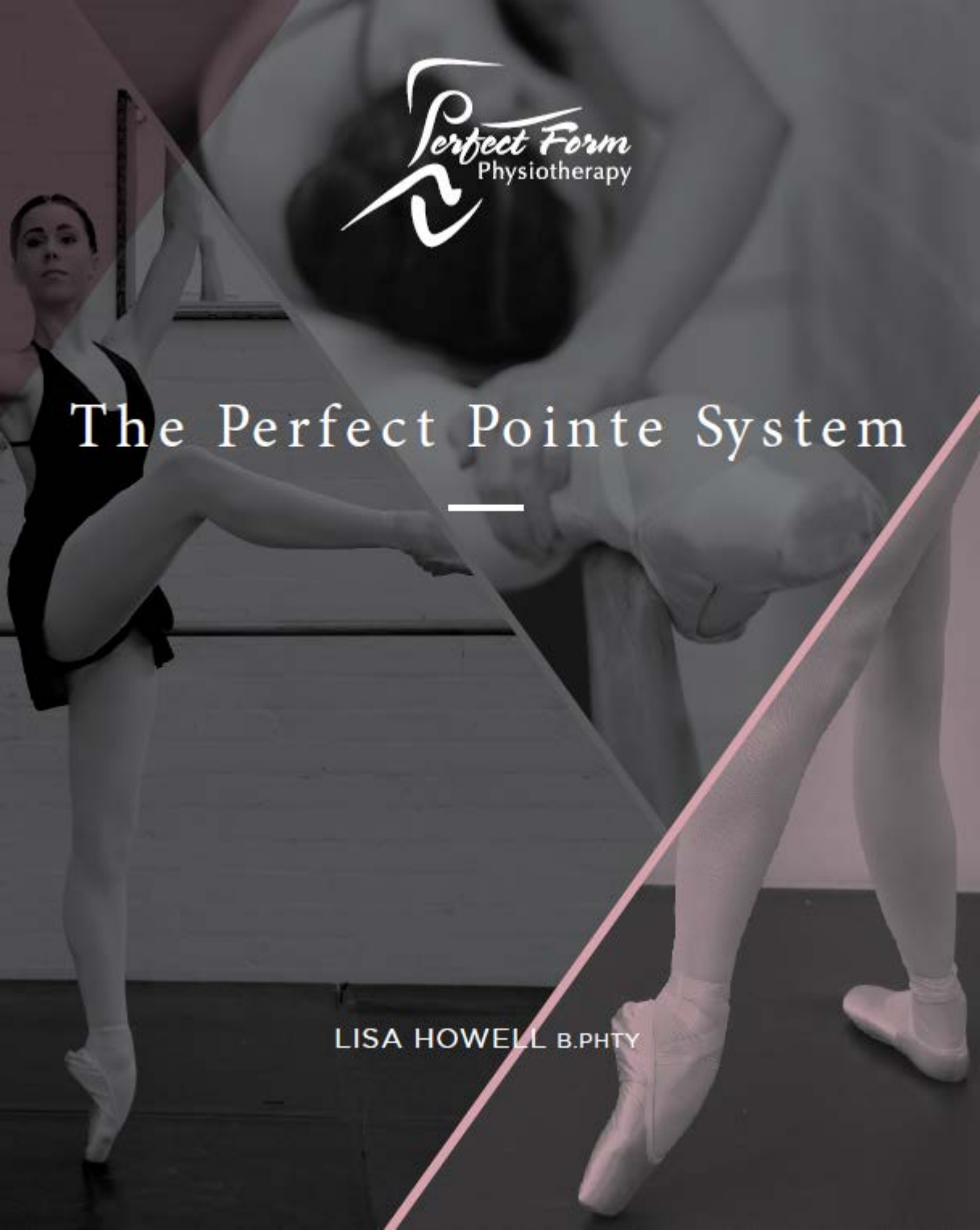

The Perfect Pointe System

LISA HOWELL B.PHTY

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Lisa Howell

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Perfect Form Physiotherapy (PFP) is a Physical Therapy Clinic in Australia devoted to the ongoing education of today's young dancers. PFP produces online resources to improve the knowledge base of dancers and teachers alike; to bridge the gap between sports medicine and the physical practice of all dance forms.

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INTRODUCTION

The art and science of assessing a student for pointe work

The importance of integrated pre-pointe training and a formal assessment

How to use this manual

The Art and Science of Assessing a Student for Pointe Work

"The art of dance is changing. The new commercial nature of ballet and the many different types of dance encourage many young dancers to push the boundaries of their capacity. Dancers are working longer hours at a younger age, and often commence pointe work while still very young. Companies are also less willing to sustain their support of underperforming artists, whether this be due to injury or incompetence, as there is always someone else 'waiting in the wings'.

To survive these challenges, a dancer needs to know her body more intimately than ever before, and guard against the injuries that befall so many would-be stars. She needs to build a strong base in her initial training, as this is from where her career grows. We, as dance teachers and dance medicine specialists, also need to take a new approach to the art of developing a ballerina that encompasses helping her build this base of knowledge and technique.

Dance teachers are now faced with unprecedented and extraordinary challenges. Alongside the traditional pressures of providing a high quality of teaching, and realizing success for their students and themselves, teachers must also deal with the acceleration of technology in relation to the development of a dancer. Dance teachers, no matter how dedicated they may be, rarely have time to explore the latest research regarding advanced training techniques. One of the constantly frustrating questions for a teacher is when to push a talented child forward and when to hold her back for her own healthy development. This is where the marriage of art and science properly comes into play; a close relationship between dance teacher and physiotherapist is now essential in the development of tomorrow's prima ballerinas. Neither can do the job alone, and each has their part to play in extending their students' potential.

One vital phase in this relationship is the time when a girl is being prepared to go on pointe. Dance teachers are well aware of the quality of their dancers—their technical capabilities and strengths, however there are many factors that may go unnoticed in regular classes that only a professional versed in anatomy and physiology would recognize. Correcting these issues can make all the difference in a student excelling in, or struggling with pointe work. In addition, having set requirements that must be achieved before going onto pointe gives the teacher greater leverage to motivate her students. The promise of progressing onto pointe is a huge 'carrot' for getting girls to take responsibility for their own wellbeing. Commencing a structured exercise program also helps develop focus and attention to detail, and encourages good habits that may last a lifetime.

The intention of this manual is to introduce dance teachers to an advanced system of assessing and preparing a student for pointe training. Strict criteria takes the subjectivity out of the decision and helps the conscientious teacher enable the transition of her students onto pointe in the most integrated and responsible manner possible. The manual helps you learn detailed assessment techniques to understand why some students can perform movements so much more effortlessly than others. While the main drive behind this is to ensure that all students are correctly prepared for pointe, this also allows for tailoring of pre-pointe classes most effectively, for optimal strength and control in minimal time, with a reduced incidence of injuries.

This manual focuses on bridging the gap between the science of physical assessment and the art of teaching a girl to work en pointe. I aim to illustrate how information from outside the

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realm of traditional teaching practices can enhance the teacher's ability to succeed in the ever-evolving dance world. While many of the tests used to assess readiness for pointe are based on components of simple ballet steps, skill is needed in interpreting each test. To read the results in an objective, scientific and anatomical way, rather than subjectively saying "She can't do that properly," is a huge gift to the teacher. Any discrepancies noted with the functional tests can then be confirmed with more specific testing to identify the exact weakness or restriction. This allows for structured exercise prescription that will accelerate the development of the strength needed to progress quickly onto pointe. Understanding technique from an anatomical stand point as well as an aesthetic point of view is imperative for devising the most appropriate strengthening program for each individual dancer.

Areas addressed in the pre-pointe assessment include:

- Postural control.
- Pelvic stability and alignment.
- Foot and ankle mobility and type.
- Articulation, strength and control of the foot.
- Turnout control and core stability.
- Body Composition.

I also discuss an area that is perhaps the hardest component to assess objectively, but is in fact one of the most important factors in starting pointe work. Some students may have all the physical capabilities for progressing onto pointe yet they lack maturity or are unable to sustain attention in class. If easily distracted — for example; if they 'get the giggles' in class — students are at much greater risk of injury. They should be responsible enough to take care of their own shoes, sew their own ribbons, and continue with their strengthening exercises when allowed en pointe.

This manual was designed to help you optimally prepare your students for pointe work, and facilitates this by using the stages of 'The Perfect Pointe Book'. The book is designed in a way that directs the girls to look at the way they are controlling their body and feet and learn exercises to correct any weaknesses that may exist. This manual assists you in integrating 'The Perfect Pointe Book' into your teaching repertoire and class structure, and will provide you with plenty of information to help you explain the benefits of the process to any concerned parents. I hope you enjoy working through this manual with your students and take the stage of progressing onto pointe very carefully. While it is a potentially serious issue, it is also a very enjoyable time and I look forward to hearing how you are going every step of the way."

Lisa Howell – Physiotherapist

The Importance of Integrated Pre-Pointe Training

Young girls dream of their first pair of pointe shoes for years before they will be allowed to get them and up until now it has basically been up to the teacher to decide when each student makes the transition. Many students simply progress onto pointe once they begin a certain level, after passing a previous exam. Unfortunately, most formally assessed syllabus regimes do not include sufficient training exercises in the years leading up to this progression onto pointe to correctly train each aspect of strength and control needed to progress safely onto pointe. This leaves the teacher responsible for ensuring that each student is prepared, and teacher training often lack specific tuition on this subject.

This has lead to many girls being allowed en pointe too early, to 'keep up with their class' or out of fear of losing the student to another school. This can result in the dancer developing chronic foot injuries that may plague even the most competent dancer throughout their career. On the other hand, cautious teachers may hold girls back unnecessarily with exaggerated fears of what early pointe work may do to the child's feet.

Preparing the feet and ankles for pointe work is obviously crucial in preventing foot and ankle injury in a dancer in both the short and long term, and the prospect of going onto pointe is a huge goal that can be used to help girls improve their strength and control very quickly. Often when there is a goal, such as this, the student will be much more motivated with their exercises than they would if they were missing such a goal. Due to the variability in growth rates of girls in the 11 – 14 year age group (when most girls start en pointe) age cannot be relied on to determine readiness for pointe, and therefore strength of the feet and ankles is a major factor when deciding when to progress a dancer into pointe shoes.

I recommend commencing girls who are serious about ballet on the pre-pointe program at 10 years of age. Prior to this they usually lack the discipline to follow through with the program independently, however there really is no age barrier for the inclusion of many of the concepts and exercises. Many more recreational dancers will often not develop the potential for commencing pointe until much later in their teens and may start on the program at 12-14. I feel that for any dancer, at least one year of focused attention on the feet and legs, both in and out of class is important to develop the relative strength, attention and control that is needed to safely commence pointe work.

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It is very important that each dance student receive comprehensive training before she progresses onto pointe. As a general rule pre-pointe preparation should include:

- At least 3 ballet classes a week for one year, after several less intense years of ballet training.
- At least one year of focused strengthening of the feet both within and outside of the class. This may be through a section at the beginning or end of class focussing on education and specific strengthening of the foot for pointe, or, a specific, additional class, in which girls learn all the exercises and advice needed for pointe.
- Participation in a regular home exercise program that takes into account the structure of the dancers own feet. This teaches her the discipline and attention needed to maintain healthy feet while dancing en pointe.
- Lessons on how to care for pointe shoes and how to sew on the ribbons.
- Sound tuition in all other areas of dance, with a focus on technique and control.
- Basic education about the risks of pointe work, and how to care for dancers' feet.
- Basic anatomy knowledge and injury prevention techniques.

The Perfect Pointe System includes tests and exercises for inclusion in class work, and a pre-pointe assessment tool to carefully assess students before they progress onto pointe. This program integrates some of the tests and exercises from 'The Perfect Pointe Book', yet also delivers so much more. The manual details how to integrate what the child is learning in the book into their class situation so that there is the essential cross-over to enhance learning. By helping your students to work through the stages of the book during the year prior to commencement of pointe, you will begin to identify which students are capable of the required amount of attention to detail to progress onto pointe. You will also see the benefits of the special strengthening exercises in their class work! By integrating the training in this way, when the time actually comes to progress onto pointe they should be well prepared.

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The Importance of a Pre-Pointe Assessment

In Australia, many dance teachers have realized the importance of getting each girl individually assessed prior to going onto pointe. The 'best dancer' within a class may not necessarily have the strongest feet, and many weaknesses can be hidden inside regular ballet slippers. They advise each girl to undertake an assessment with a Physical Therapist who specializes in dancers, who will perform screening tests to assist the dance teacher in deciding who is able to go onto pointe and when. Following an initial assessment, special strengthening and mobility exercises are taught to strengthen any weaknesses in the dancer's feet, ankles, hips and core muscles, to help the girls cope with the demands of pointe work.

Unfortunately, there is a distinct lack of qualified therapists that have this knowledge, so this teacher's manual and the 'The Perfect Pointe Book' were written to allow teachers to gain the knowledge needed to more confidently determine their student's readiness for pointe. The promise of getting en pointe is a huge draw card for many dance students, and will often make them work much harder than they have previously in order to improve specific parts of their technique.

The assessment forms in the back of this manual can be printed out and used to record any specific areas of weakness for each dancer. By using the sheets provided and closely assessing the student's ability in each area some of the subjectivity is taken out of the decision. This makes it easier to explain to parents why their child is, or is not yet ready to progress onto pointe. The objective scores with some of the tests will highlight the reason why some girls are able to go up and others aren't, rather than the teacher 'playing favorites'.

When girls have been working hard on 'The Perfect Pointe Book' program, both within and outside of their class work for one year, it is an optimal time to do an individual pre-pointe assessment. Set aside at least an hour for each child to go through the assessment. Some teachers find it helpful to video the process so that they can analyze it in greater detail later on. In the beginning the assessment does take some time but you will find yourself getting faster and faster at it with practise. It is very important to write down the results of the assessment at the time and perhaps even spread the assessments out over several weeks so you do not get confused as to who could do what!

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It is a good idea to write down your assessment on a sheet that the student can see and if appropriate, copy the assessment for them or have the sheet accessible to the student. For those who do not fulfill all the requirements of their official pointe assessment, go back through 'The Perfect Pointe Book' and select exercises that are particular to the specific weakness of the student, and then draw up a program for the student to practise for another month. If the student progresses well with this and can fulfill the assessment criteria at this time, they may be progressed onto pointe.

Using the pre-pointe assessment at least once each term in the year leading up to the commencement of pointe work will help the students understand the importance of many of the tests. Some teachers even like to do the tests in class once a month. After learning the areas involved, students often focus much more intently on the relevant steps in class as they understand each ones relevance to the all-important decision of when to go onto pointe. Spreading the assessment over several group classes, or having a private lesson for each child are both good ways of getting the information out to the students, depending on the set-up of your studio and lessons.

Having a structured pre-pointe assessment also takes some of the subjectivity out of the decision to progress a child onto pointe, and is wonderful to reassure concerned parents that you are doing everything possible to assist their child in a safe dancing environment. Having set testing procedures also gives you ways of demonstrating weaknesses in a student to their parents, if there is pressure to put the girl en pointe.

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How to Use This Manual

While it may look a little daunting at first, you will soon find it very easy to use this manual in assessing your students.

1 In the beginning, simply flick through the manual to familiarize yourself with each test and the way to mark each one.

2 Print out the assessment forms at the back of the manual and go through the tests yourself several times. Many teachers like to go through the tests with another teacher or older student a few times to get used to the format and how to explain the tests.

3 Assess your older students. The results of this can often quite surprising! Many older students can lack simple stability in their hips and ankles; especially any students that are plagued with frequent injuries.

4 Go through the tests with the pre-pointe class. Do this either in sections at the beginning of class, or set aside one class to go over the whole test. Explain to them why you are looking for certain things, and explain that they must be able to do all of the tests well in order to go onto pointe the following year. Encourage them to get a personal copy of 'The Perfect Pointe Book' so that they can work their way through it at home, as well as in class.

5 Follow the guide in Section 3. "How to work students through the program" to integrate the course into normal class work during the year.

6 Revise the assessment process with the whole class once a term to check on their progress.

7 Assess the students individually before allowing them to progress onto pointe. If they are still lacking in any area, give exercises tailored to that area for them to do at home for one month and then reassess.

HOW TO ASSESS READINESS FOR POINTE

The pre-pointe questionnaire

Components of the physical assessment

Other factors to consider

The Pre-Pointe Questionnaire

The pre-pointe assessment starts with a questionnaire to establish the current status of each child in relation to their dance training and any current injuries. Some teachers are the sole instructor for each child for many years and will know the dancer's history in detail. The structure of some other schools may result in each child having several different teachers for different disciplines and may have students that are new to the school. In either case it is helpful to have each dancer's dance and medical history documented. Students will also often be involved in other sports that may assist with their ballet training, or conflict with it.

The student's age, while not a reliable indicator of readiness for pointe must be taken into account when progressing onto pointe and this is discussed in detail later in the manual. Due to the variability of growth rates in the 10 –14 year age group, it is important to consider the child's physical development as well as their technical abilities. I do not believe that children younger than 10 should be put onto pointe and only 10 – 12 year olds with very good technique should be considered for pointe.

Hours of dancing and involvement in other sports should be assessed at this stage in the dancer's training, to determine if they are suitable for progression onto pointe. A ballet student should be doing at least 3 classes a week, or demonstrate excellent home practice on top of two classes to be considered. It is also important to ensure that students are not doing too much dancing at this age. It is vital that they are able to keep up with their school work, and enjoy other activities as well as their dancing. Studies conducted by Sydney Physiotherapists Claire Hiller and Melinda Purnell indicate that if a child under the age of 14 is doing more than 10 hours of dance per week, their risk of foot and ankle injury increases significantly.

Any student with a current injury should not be progressed onto pointe. Whether it is a traumatic injury or a chronic one due to faulty technique, the injury should be fully settled before progression onto pointe. This is especially true for low back, hip, knee, ankle or foot pain, as the increased loads on the lower body with pointe work, will usually aggravate existing injuries. Students should be referred to an appropriate medical professional or alternative health practitioner to assist their recovery if needed.

Get the student and their parent/guardian to fill out the form provided prior to their formal pre-pointe assessment. Discuss any areas of concern with the student and their parent before the assessment to allow them time to seek advice on any injuries.

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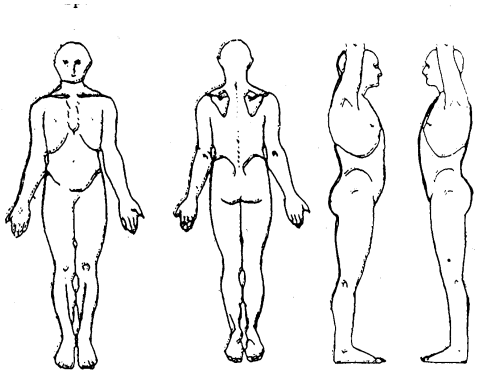
Pre-Pointe Questionnaire ***(Sample)***

Personal Details	
Name:	*Susan Thompson*
Date of Birth:	*02/11/1995*

Dance History	
Age Started Dance:	*5*
Hours of Dance/wk:	*13*
Styles of Dance:	*Ballet, Jazz, Tap*
Other Sports:	*Rhythmic gym (4hrs/wk) Swimming*

Current Injuries	
R. Achilles	*Niggly pain in right Achilles tendon with lots of jumping (3 weeks)*
R. Ankle	*Sprained right ankle 3 months ago, still weak*



Injury History	
Low Back	*Had low back pain with Jazz dance last term, lots of back bends. Ok now.*
Right Ankle	*Sprained Right ankle badly age 6, repeated about once a year since.*

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Components Of The Physical Assessment

All of the assessment points outlined below are extremely important in deciding whether a girl is suitable to go onto pointe or not. While it does look like a long list, you can split the assessment up into two or three sessions if needed. You can also go over the tests as a class each term the year before doing the formal test so that girls have some idea of what to expect. Each one is described in detail including possible weaknesses or areas to watch.

It is important for each student to understand why the test is so relevant to them going onto pointe, so I give examples of why this is the case. Go through each test slowly with each child using the assessment sheet which can be found in the appendix. For each test watch the student's natural tendency with minimal instruction first and note how they perform the test. Then give instructions to correct. This allows you to note how good the student is at self correction.

- ✓ Standing Posture.
- ✓ Forward Bend.
- ✓ Back Bend.
- ✓ Standing in 1st position.
- ✓ Demi-plié.
- ✓ Grand Plié.
- ✓ Rise in 1st position.
- ✓ Sauté.
- ✓ Échappé à la Seconde.
- ✓ Single Leg Standing.
- ✓ Single Knee Bends.
- ✓ Tendus en Croix.
- ✓ Retiré.
- ✓ Relevé Passé.
- ✓ Single Leg Rise.
- ✓ Toe To Wall Test.
- ✓ Intrinsic Toe Muscle Exercises.
- ✓ Pointe Range.
- ✓ FHL Thickening.
- ✓ Bunions.
- ✓ 1st Toe Extension.
- ✓ Toe Formula.
- ✓ Gluteal Assessment.
- ✓ Turnout Control.
- ✓ Abdominal Control.

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Marking the Tests

Below the instructions for each test, there are guidelines for marking. Watch the student's initial performance of the exercise and document their performance. If correction is needed, tell the student what you are looking for in each test so that they are aware of what to focus on and make sure to note down if they can correct the weakness with prompting. In most cases, the tests are marked with 'ticks' to document how well the exercise is performed.

For example:

Two ticks (✓✓)	=	Excellent control.
One tick (✓)	=	Good.
Dash (–)	=	Not satisfactory.

Foot Assessment				
	Left	**Right**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Toe To Wall Test	*10 cm*	*12 cm*		
Toe Swapping	✓✓	✓✓		
Piano	✓	✓	*Difficult*	
Doming	✓	✓	*Fatigues Quickly*	
Pointe Range	*– 5˚*	*– 7˚*	*Restricted in ankle*	*No*
FHL Thickening	✓✓	✓	*Some on Right*	
Bunions	✓✓	✓✓	*Family History*	
1st Toe Extension	✓✓	✓	*Sl. tight on Right*	*Massage* ✓
Toe Formula	*12345*	*12345*		

If the student is able to correct the test with instruction, mark this down and observe their behavior in class following the assessment. Often, once the student knows what is expected of them they will be able to perform the test much more efficiently. However, if the student can perform the test well but then drops back into slightly lazy behavior in class, this is certainly an area that needs attention. Go through each test thoroughly with the child, and then mark off which tests they can do well on the chart provided in the Appendix.

It depends on the dynamics of the class as to whether it will work to have these charts displayed or not. If you have some students who do not cope well with being slightly less able in class then this may not be a productive experience. However, if you have girls who are reasonably competitive, having the comparison of results may be good motivation to make them work on improving their areas of weakness. To go onto pointe, students should achieve at least a "good" mark for each test. They do not have to demonstrate perfect technique at this stage but must demonstrate control and awareness of the required task.

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Pre Pointe Assessment (Sample)

Postural Assessment			
	Mark	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Head	✓	*Slightly forward*	*Yes*
Upper Back	✓✓		
Low Back	✓✓		
Abdominals	✓	*Sl. decreased control*	*Yes*
Hips	✓✓		
Knees	✓✓		
Right Foot	✓✓		
Left Foot	✓	*Slightly pronated*	*Yes*

Functional Assessment				
	Mark		**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Fwd Bend	*Knuckles*			
Back Bend	✓✓			
1st Position	✓		*Left sl. pronated*	*Yes*
Demi-plié	✓		*Sl. Decr. Left*	*No*
Grand Plié	✓		*Bottom out sl.*	*Yes*
Rise in 1st	✓✓			
Sauté	✓		*rolling L on landing*	*No*
Échappé	✓		*Sl. weak Left*	*No*
	Left	**Right**		
Single Leg Standing	✓	✓✓	*Sl. roll left*	*Yes*
S K Bend - Parallel	✓	✓✓	*Decr. hip + foot L*	*Yes*
S K Bend - Turnout	-	✓✓	*Wobbly L*	*Some*
Tendus en croix	✓	✓	*Not working thru foot*	*Some*
Retiré	✓✓	✓	*Wobbly L supporting*	*No*
Relevé Passé	✓	✓	*Pulling back*	*No*

Single Leg Raise Assessment				
	Left	**Right**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Strength	*16*	*20*	*Rolls out as fatigues L*	*No*
Height	✓	✓✓	*Decr. pointe L*	*No*
Toes Flat	✓	✓✓	*Sl. clawing left*	*No*
Weight Placement	✓	✓✓	*Sl. lat left*	*Yes*
Maintains Turnout	✓	✓✓	*Decr. L*	*No*
Controlled Lower	✓	✓✓	*L rolls in*	*Yes*
Hips Square	✓✓	✓✓		
Abdominal Control	✓	✓	*Occasionally forgets*	*Yes*
Knees Straight	✓✓	✓✓		

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Foot Assessment				
	Left	**Right**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Toe To Wall Test	*10 cm*	*12 cm*	*Pinches front left*	*No*
Toe Swapping	✓	✓✓	*Rolling left*	*Yes*
Piano	-	✓	*Very hard to do*	*No*
Doming	-	-	*Unable*	
Pointe Range	*-7°*	*0°*		
FHL Thickening	✓	✓✓	*Sl. thick left*	
Bunions	✓✓	✓✓		
1st Toe Extension	✓✓	✓✓		
Toe Formula	*12345*	*12345*		
Foot Type	*Giselle*			

Hip Assessment				
	Left	**Right**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Turnout - Active	*25*	*35*		
Turnout - Passive	*45*	*60*	*Tight left*	*With stretch*
Gluteal Firing	-	✓✓	*None Left initially*	*Yes*
Hamstrings – 1	*90˚*	*120˚*		
Hamstrings – 2	*70˚*	*110˚*	*Sl. neural left*	*No*

Core Stability			
	Mark	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Deep Abdominals	*G 3*	*Weak*	*No*
Side Support – Left	*20 sec*	*Shoulder shaking*	
Side Support - Right	*40 sec*		

Other Factors		
	Mark	**Notes**
Age	*12 + 3 mths*	*Well developed*
Hypermobility	*7/9*	*All but knees*
Body Type	*Meso/endo*	
Height	*143*	*Recent growth spurt*
Weight	✓✓	
Maturity	*Variable*	*Loves to learn, can be silly in class*

Suitability for Pointe?
Left foot, turnout and gluteals need attention. All else good
Tight left hip restricting hamstrings?
Good at following corrections, Reassess in 6 weeks
Ex: Toe swapping, Rises, Tendus, glutes, t/o @ wall, piriformis stretch

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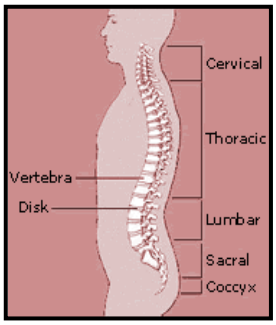
Postural Assessment

Description:

Every dancer and dance teacher knows that good control of posture is essential for optimal alignment and in preventing injury, and this is a definite requirement before progressing onto pointe. If a student struggles to maintain correct spinal alignment in standing, once they begin to go en pointe it becomes even harder to maintain. Many young dancers stand with a "sway back" or "increased lordosis" in their lower back. Progressing onto pointe will usually increase this extension of the low back and may put pressure on the delicate joints of the low back, increasing the chance of a back injury in the young dancer.

There are three natural curves present in a healthy spine. Many people, and especially some dancers, try to flatten out these curves in trying to assume a good posture and avoid the common sway back. However, some individuals may actually put the spine in a more vulnerable position. The neutral alignment of the low back is important in helping to stabilize the spine in its optimum position, and maintain optimum range of movement in all directions. This also helps protect the discs from too much stress and strain when dancing, and in day to day life.



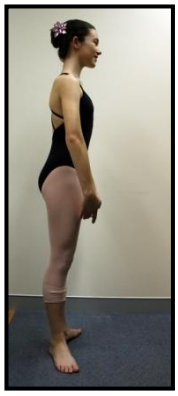
Many people feel that their posture is "inherited", and that because their mother stands like that, it is how they must stand. Some people do have a ***predisposition*** to a certain posture, however, we all have the capacity to modify this and train the appropriate muscles to counteract our natural tendencies. The pictures on the following pages demonstrate that any one individual can present as many different postural types, depending on what muscles they activate.

When we asses posture, it is helpful to look at the individual sections to see what is happening at various points in the body as well as the students posture as a whole. The following pages give examples of good and poor postural positions for the following areas:

- Head Position.
- Upper Back.
- Low Back.
- Abdominals.
- Hips.
- Knees.
- Feet.

To find a good standing posture may take practise, and students may need to check themselves in a mirror frequently to make sure that they are in a good position. Ideal alignment should result in the lobe of the ear, the shoulder, the hip, through the centre of the knee and through the middle of the arch of the foot falling in line. Many students tend to rock their weight too far back onto the heel and sway the knees backwards in order to compensate for this. They may then also push the hips forward, round the upper-back forward and push the neck forward. This is not a very conducive posture to ballet and should be avoided at all costs. Actually suspending a plumb line in the studio and taking photos of each child side-on may help them get an understanding of which areas they need to correct. Take one photo in natural standing and one with what the student perceives as 'good posture' in first position to compare the two.

- "Stand side on to me."
- "Keep your feet in parallel, and have your arms at your sides."
- "Lengthen through the back of your spine and neck, and keep breathing naturally."
- "Now stand in first position, with the arms in bras bas."



Assessment points:

Look at the student from side on and from the front. Make sure to note down the position of each of the areas assessed. Examples of different positions are provided on the following page.

Two ticks = Excellent position.
One tick = Reasonable position.
Dash = Not satisfactory.

For example:

Postural Assessment			
	Mark	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Head	✓	*Slightly forward*	*No*
Upper Back	✓	*Slightly flexed*	*No*
Low Back	✓	*Flat*	*No*
Abdominals	–	*Poor Control, gripping obl.*	*Some*
Hips	–	*Forward*	*Some*
Knees	✓	*Sl. Hyperextended*	*No*
Right Foot	✓	*Slightly pronated*	*Yes*
Left Foot	✓	*Slightly pronated*	*Yes*

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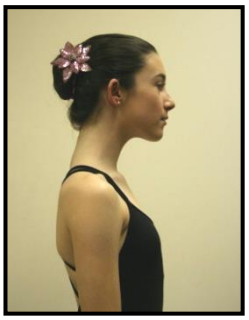
Examples of postural descriptions:

Head and Neck: Dance students often either over-correct or under-correct the position of their head and neck in standing. Note the presence of any excessive tension that is held around the jaw or neck as this is a large contributor to headaches in adolescent girls.

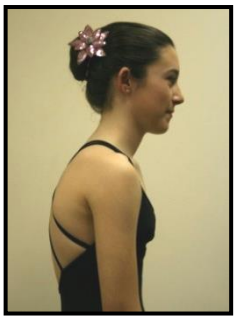


Chin Forward

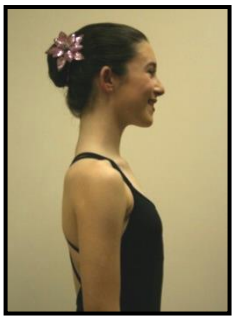
Neutral

Pulled back

Upper Back: As 'slouching' is more socially acceptable in the girls day-to-day lives, poor posture of the upper back can often creep into the dance studio. At the other extreme, girls will over correct their upper back and hold excessive tension between their shoulder blades, leading to chronic pain and stiffness as well as poor arm lines.



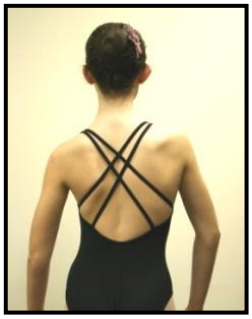
Flexed or Kyphotic



Neutral

Flat back

Also note whether the student has one shoulder higher than the either in both relaxed standing and during a simple port de bras. Hitching of one shoulder may be a sign of Scoliosis, and often stems from a poor sitting posture, with one shoulder elevated when writing.



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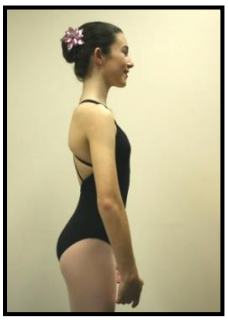
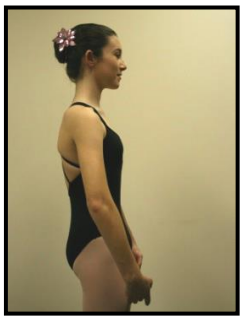
Low Back: For many years dancers have been taught that a 'flat back' is an optimal posture in standing. Unfortunately this is not entirely correct yet this is a very hard message to break in dance circles. An optimal standing posture of the lumbar spine must have a slight curve in the lower back in order to facilitate the activation of the deep back muscles. If the back is completely flat the muscles that stabilize the lumbar spine are in a position where it is hard for them to work. This reduces the stability of the low back and excess train will be taken in the intervertebral discs, putting them at risk of injury. This is especially important in students who have hypermobile joints.



Arched or ↑Lordosis

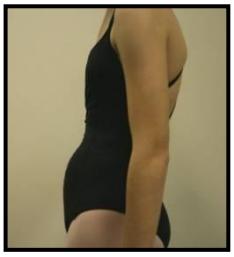
Neutral



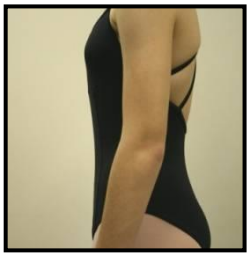
Flat back

Abdominals: If the abdominals are weak the pelvis is often rotated forward - increasing the curvature of the lower back. It is obviously very important to not allow children to stand with a sway back and this is why many teachers give the cue to 'tuck the tail under'. However, I have found that this cue is not very effective in correcting an over-arched back, as over time the student may 'overcorrect' their spine and end up tucking excessively. In light of this I instead focus on the 'lengthening' of the lower back or asking the student to feel their hip bones pulling up towards their ribs. This helps to correct either extreme and helps bring the child back into a neutral position. Often placing the fingers on the lower spine and spreading them out helps give the child the feeling of lengthening through this area. Try to get the student to draw in their deep abdominals by feeling the skin pull away from their leotard, below the belly button. Often girls will grip with their outer abdominals (obliques) and have a small 'belly' remaining in their lower abdomen.

Poor control

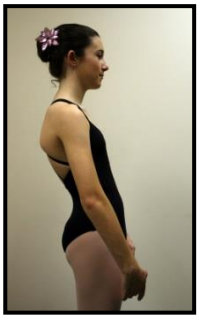


Gripping with obliques

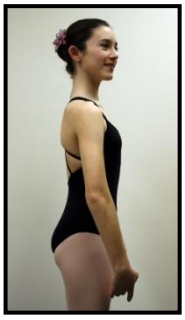


Good control

Hips: Some students have a tendency to thrust their hips forward, and slump in their upper back, sitting into the ligaments at the front of the hips and the upper back. This is a very bad habit to get into, and can be a major cause for chronic hip irritation that is present in many dancers. Other students will stick their bottom out and thrust the chest forward in a very un-natural position.



Hips Forward



Neutral

Bottom out

Knees: Some students will find it very difficult to fully straighten their knees, due to excessive muscular tension. Others will have excessive range and must be reminded not to 'sit' into their knees as this will stretch the already lax ligaments even further. All students must take care to pull up both the front and the back of the knee when working in class.

Hyper-extended

Neutral

Flexed

Feet: Care must be taken that the feet are not rolling in (pronation) or rolling out (supination). Check that the weight is evenly distributed between the big and little toe joints, and 60% of the weight is on the ball of the foot, 40% on the heel.

Pronated

Supinated

Weight back

Neutral

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Forward Bend

Description:

The forward bend test is great to show you the students' global flexibility and control of their spine. As you get used to watching this test you will begin to notice if some students can't work through some areas of their spine. Watch from the side to check spinal mobility, and from the back to make sure that both sides are even.

Instructions:

- "Make sure you tell me at any point if there is pain with this test."
- "Stand with your feet in parallel, hip width apart."
- "Place your hands on the front of your thighs."
- "Tuck your chin forward and slowly roll through the spine to take your hands to the floor."
- "Do not bounce into this stretch - just take it to where it feels comfortable."
- "Where do you feel the stretch?"
- "Now slowly roll up through your spine, one bone at a time, into standing."

Things to watch for:

- ✓ Make sure that the student does not bend their knees (during testing only – in a repeated exercise this is totally acceptable).
- ✓ Note where they are getting most of the range from whether it be their back curling, or folding from the hips.
- ✓ Make sure that they can 'roll through the spine'. Note any stiff areas.
- ✓ Check where they feel the stretch – Back? Hamstrings? Calves? This may indicate wether it is the muscles or the nerves that are tight. Pulling in the calves usually means that the sciatic nerve is being stretched.
- ✓ Scoliosis –Watch from behind to check to see that the spine or pelvis does not appear humped on one side when the student rolls forward. If this is severe it may be wise to consult a medical professional.

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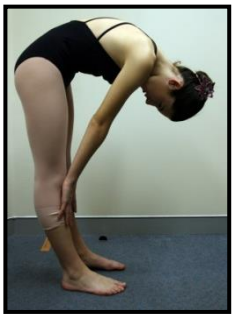
Visualization Ideas:

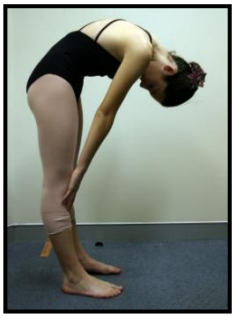
- "Feel your spine bend forward one bone at a time."
- "Roll forward like a waterfall tumbling off a cliff."
- "Imagine you are a piece of Sellotape being peeled off a wall."
- "Try to stretch the ligaments between each joint on the way down and up."

Assessment Points:

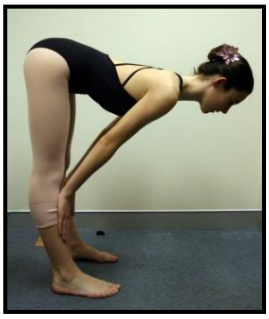
Note how close the student can get their hands to the floor. If they can't touch the floor, measure the distance from the floor to where their fingers reach to on the shins. If they can touch the floor, mark down as 'fingertips', 'knuckles', 'palms flat' or 'elbows bent', depending on their range.



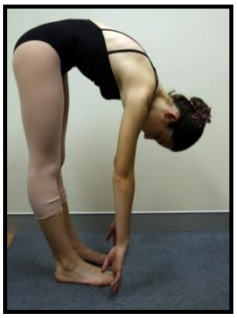
20 cm from floor



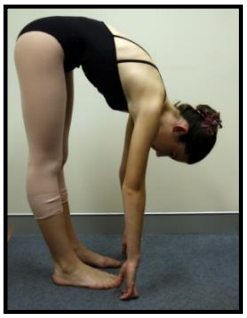
Poor hip mobility



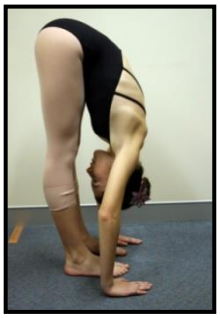
Poor spinal mobility



Fingertips



Knuckles



Palms Flat

Example:

Functional Assessment			
Test	**Mark**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Forward Bend	*15cm*	*Poor hip mobility*	*No*
Or…			
Forward Bend	Palms	*Excellent Mobility*	*N/A*

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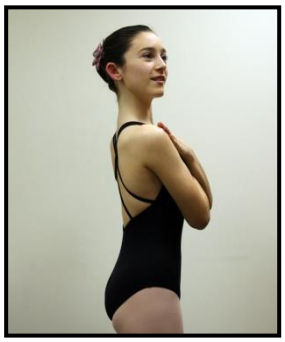
Back Bend

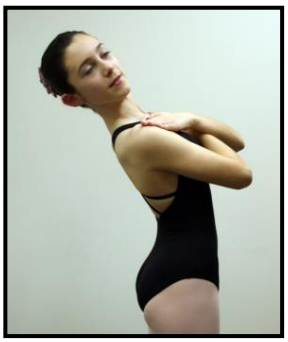
Description:

While students beginning pointe work often have not been introduced to back bends in their syllabus work, they will often have them included in performance solo pieces or jazz dances. This is a good time to introduce them to the safest way to extend the lower back and the concept of controlling the movement with their abdominals. It is much better practice to educate them in safe ways to work their spine, before any injuries occur.

Instructions:

- "Stand side on to me, with your feet in 5th position."
- "Hold your arms across your chest."
- "Slowly bend backwards into a backbend."
- "Come back up slowly."
- "Do that again trying to go through your upper back first."
- "Make sure you use your tummy muscles!"
- "Did you feel any pain with that?"
- "Can you go any further?"





Things to watch for:

- ✓ Neck overextending.
- ✓ Upper back staying flexed.
- ✓ Hinging in the lumbar spine.
- ✓ Poor abdominal control.
- ✓ Hips shifting or tilting forward prematurely.
- ✓ Knees bending.
- ✓ Feet rolling.

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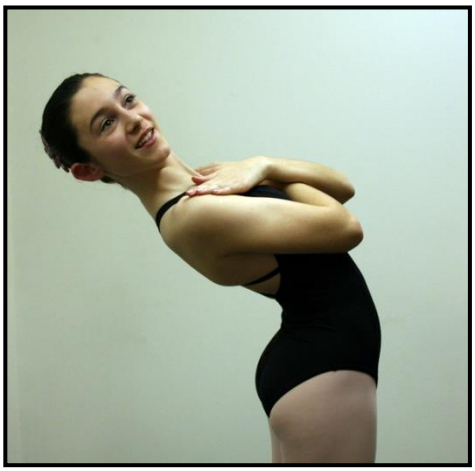
Visualization Ideas:

- "Imagine you are standing with your low back supported by a brick wall. To look over it you have to lift your upper body up, and then extend from the top down."
- "Imagine that there is a sheet of glass in front of you tummy, keep it in to avoid breaking the glass."
- "Feel like you are being pulled back by a string attached to your bun – lifting up and back."

Assessment Points:

Note how much range the student has, and whether it comes evenly throughout the back, or from one or two joints. Many students, especially if they have a hypermobile spine, will tend to naturally hinge the spine in the lumbar region to get maximal range. Explain that the dangers of this are overuse injuries to the low back, and in very bad cases, doing this may even lead to stress fractures in the spine. Give one 'tick' for the amount of range and one 'tick' for the quality of the movement.



Hinging lumbar spine

Example:

Functional Assessment			
Test	**Mark**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Back Bend	–	*Poor abdo. control, hinging*	*No*
Or…			
Back Bend	✓✓	*Excellent range & control*	*N/A*

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First Position

Description:

Often, in their attempt to impress the assessor in a testing situation, dance students will overturn their feet in first position and begin to roll the feet in. Having good control of the feet, arches, and leg alignment in first is crucial in preventing many common overuse injuries of the feet and ankles. It is also important to determine the stability of the ankles on the flat, before introducing the unstable base of the pointe shoe into the equation. One of the biggest issues I see is students carrying their weight too far back on the heels and gripping with the Tibialis Anterior muscle that sits in the front of the shin. Overuse of this muscle can lead to the various different syndromes that are often termed 'shin splints' including 'Anterior Compartment Syndrome' and 'Medial Tibial Stress Syndrome'.

Instructions:

- "Stand facing me with your feet in first position."
- "Keep your hands on your hips."

Things to watch for:

- ✓ Overturning the feet.
- ✓ Rolling arches.
- ✓ Weight back on the heels.
- ✓ Rigid tendon at the front of the ankle.
- ✓ Gripping with the thighs.
- ✓ Bent knees.
- ✓ Hyper-extended knees.
- ✓ Hips tipped forward.

Assessment Points:

Look at the range of turnout demonstrated and the control of this range from the core, hips, knees, ankles and feet. Note the weight placement through both feet.

Two ticks	=	Excellent turnout range and control.
One tick	=	Good range and control.
Dash	=	Not satisfactory.

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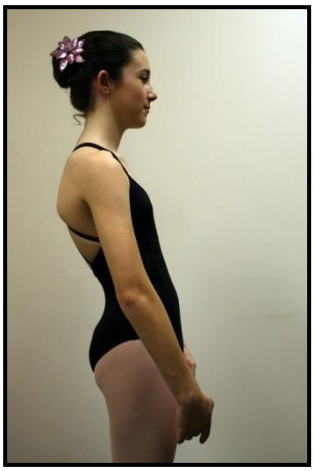
Make sure to note down any areas of weakness noted during testing. For example:

Overturning

Weight back

Knees Bent



Hips Forward

Example:

Functional Assessment				
Test	**Left**	**Right**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
1st Position	–	✓	*Overturning, rolling…*	*Slightly*
Or…				
1st Position	✓✓	✓✓	*Excellent control*	*N/A*

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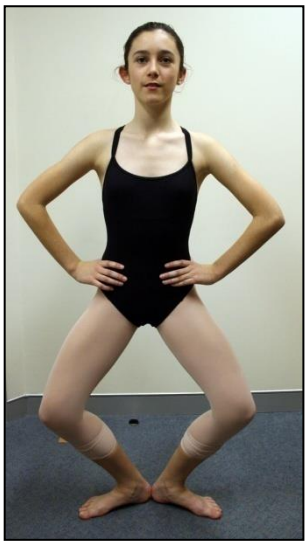
Demi-plié and Grand Plié in First Position

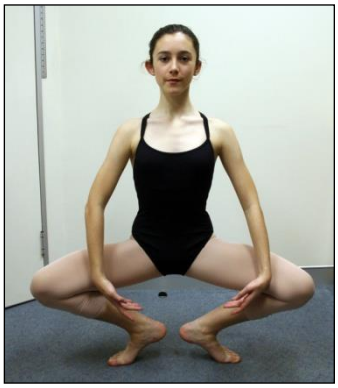
Description:

A simple demi-plié and grand plié often tells a teacher a lot about how a student can control her hips, feet and legs. While students do a plié exercise in every grade, they often do not think very much about the correct performance of this crucial step. Correct execution of a plié is the basis for so many other steps, and correct alignment en fondu will help guard against most knee injuries

Instructions:

- "Stand in first position with your hands on your hips."
- "Slowly bend your knees to come into a demi-plié."
- "Repeat that three times."
- "Now do two grand plié, taking the arms through simple port de bras."





Things to watch for:

- ✓ The heels must stay in contact with the floor during the demi-plié.
- ✓ The arches stay lifted and ankle aligned.
- ✓ Both the big toe joint and little toe joint stay in contact with the floor.
- ✓ The toes stay long and relaxed.
- ✓ The knees stay out over the second toes.
- ✓ The chest stays upright.
- ✓ Their bottom should not stick out or tuck under.
- ✓ The student should be able to keep their balance for the two grands pliés unsupported.
- ✓ There should be no pain at the front of the ankle or in the arch.
- ✓ No 'sitting' at the depth of the grand plié.
- ✓ Watch the weight placement of the foot in grand plié. Often students sit on the outer border of the foot and then slide the bottom out to compensate.

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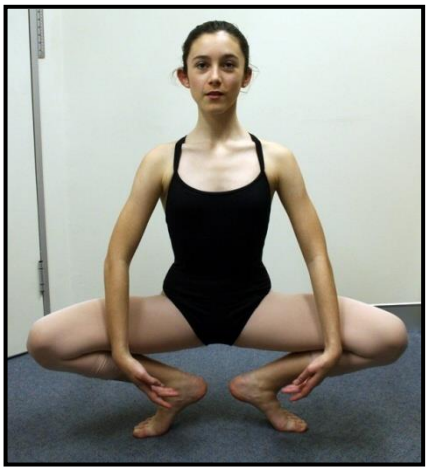
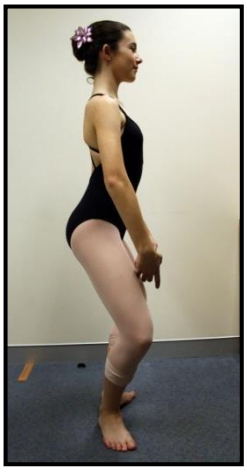
Assessment Points:

Give one tick for depth of the plié, and the other for control of the feet, ankles and spine.

Heels lifting



Sitting in grand plié



Bottom out

Example:

Functional Assessment			
Test	**Mark**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Plié	✓✓	*Ex. range and control*	*N/A*
Grand Plié	✓	*Bottom out*	*Yes*

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Rise in First Position

Description:

'Rise in First Position', unsupported by the barre give you a good idea of how the student is able to control their ankles, hips and trunk. Encourage the student to feel that they are pressing down into the floor with the balls of the feet while lengthening the back of the neck towards the ceiling to help facilitate optimal stability.

Instructions:

- "Stand in first position, with your hands on your hips."
- "Have the hands on your hips or in first position."
- "Slowly rise up onto demi-pointe on both feet."
- "Hold your balance for at least 3 seconds."
- "Slowly lower the heels back down into first position."
- "Repeat 3 times."

Things to watch for:

- ✓ No wobbling on demi-pointe or pulling the upper body back.
- ✓ Rise up to full height of demi-pointe.
- ✓ The ankle must stay straight, no sickling out.
- ✓ Control both the rise and the lower.
- ✓ Arches are on at the height of rise and as the heels are lowered.

Assessment Points:

Mark one tick each for height of demi-pointe and stability around the ankle.

Example:

Functional Assessment			
Test	**Mark**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Rise in 1st	✓✓	*Ex. range and control*	*N/A*
Or…			
Rise in 1st	✓	*Wobbles at ht of rise*	*No*

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Sauté

Description:

Observing a student performing several sautés is a great way to assess their abdominal control and feet in a dynamic situation. Often girls can control their back and feet when performing things slowly, however it is essential to watch what happens when more dynamic movement is incorporated. Good points to watch for are the control of the upper back and chest, whether they pull back when in the air or relax forward when they land, and arching of the lower back in the air or with landing. Also watch the alignment of the knees and feet on landing as this can show you a lot about the genuine control of the arch. Watching the articulation of the foot during take-off and landing also gives the idea of how natural the use of the intrinsic foot muscles is becoming in each student.

Instructions:

- "Stand facing me with the feet in first position."
- "Perform six sautés, making sure you land in a clean first position in the same spot each time."

Things to watch for:

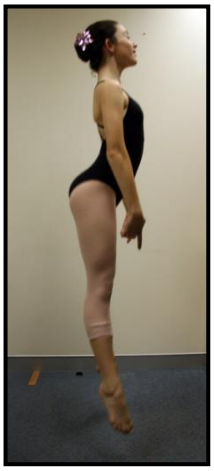
- ✓ Articulation of the feet with each jump.
- ✓ Controlled landings.
- ✓ Arch control.
- ✓ Feet pointed in the air.
- ✓ Pulling back with the upper body.
- ✓ Neck and arms straining.
- ✓ Arching the low back in the air or on landing.
- ✓ Knee alignment with landing.

Cues for visualization of the movement:

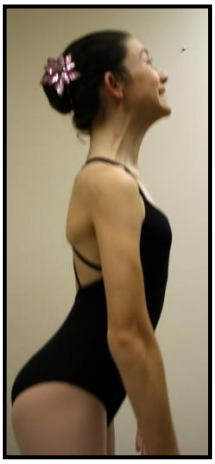
- "Make the landings as soft as you can, like jumping on a spider's web."
- "Work your feet on the floor like a cat pawing its owner's lap"
- "Make the jumps as quiet as you can."
- "Imagine your body as a magician's assistant in the box that gets cut in half. Have your lower half working well, but don't let your upper body show it at all."

Assessment Points:

Assign one tick for foot control, and one for trunk control. The student must work through the feet on take-off and landing, and maintain stability of the low back throughout. Note for signs of excessive tension through the upper body, for example:



Back arching



Strain in the neck in the air

Example:

Functional Assessment			
Test	**Mark**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Sauté	✓✓	*Ex. Foot & Back control*	*N/A*
Or…			
Sauté	-	*Arching Back, not pointing feet*	*No*

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Échappé Relevé à la Seconde

Description:

Once the students commence pointe work it is not long before they begin doing échappés relevés at the barre. It is important that the student can control the rest of the legs and body on demi-pointe before they start doing it in pointe shoes. Do this test away from the barre with the hands in bras bas or on the hips to establish a good picture of their ability to stabilize the core.

Instructions:

- "Stand facing me with the feet in fifth position."
- "Perform six échappés relevés à la seconde, making sure you change feet every time you close."

Things to watch for:

- ✓ Closing in 5th.
- ✓ Controlled landings.
- ✓ Arch control.
- ✓ Demi-pointe stability.
- ✓ Control of the upper body.
- ✓ Neck and arms straining.
- ✓ Arching the low back on demi-pointe or on landing.
- ✓ Turnout control with demi-plié in 5th.

Cues for visualization of the movement:

- "Shoot the feet out the side, like a little fire cracker is going off between them!"
- "Have a slight pause at the height of your échappé, as though someone is taking a picture of you"
- "Really stretch your arches out to the side, as if they will end up further than your toes."
- "Imagine you are in a pas de deux and your partner is holding your hips gently."

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Assessment Points:

Assign one tick for foot control, and one for hip control. The student must work through the feet throughout, and demonstrate good stability on demi-pointe in seconde.

Good foot control in seconde

Sickling on demi-pointe

Not closing in 5th

Example:

Functional Assessment			
Test	**Mark**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Échappé	✓✓	*Ex. foot & back control*	*N/A*
Or…			
Échappé	✓	*Sickle on demi-pointe*	*Some*

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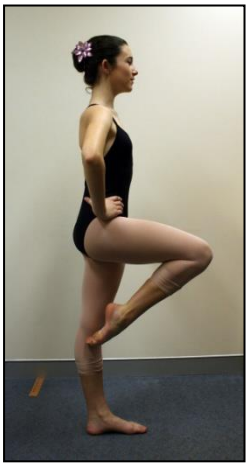
Single Leg Standing - Parallel

Description:

Simply getting a student to stand on one leg in parallel and hold their balance is a good way to begin to assess their foot and pelvic control. Some girls find this quite tricky, as they are not used to holding balances in parallel for more than a few seconds. It is important to assess the fine balance control of the ankle in 'Single Leg Standing' before introducing the slightly unstable sole of a pointe shoe into the equation.

Instructions:

- "Stand on one leg in parallel and remember to pointe the toe of the lifted foot!"
- "Keep your hands on your hips."
- "Keep looking straight ahead and find a point to focus on."
- "Hold for 10 seconds."
- "Now try that on the other leg."



Things to watch for:

- ✓ Make sure the toes are kept long and relaxed, not gripping the floor.
- ✓ Make sure that the foot is stable, not rocking from side to side.
- ✓ The arches should stay gently lifted.
- ✓ The big toe joint and little toe joint are both on the floor.
- ✓ The tendons at the front of the ankle are reasonably relaxed. Occasional flickers are okay, constant gripping is not!
- ✓ Also make sure that the knee is kept facing the front, not turning in.
- ✓ Watch the level of the hips throughout. There should be no dropping or hitching at either hip.

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Visualization Ideas:

- "Image you are a Flamingo standing in soft mud. Hold your centre so that the wind doesn't blow you over."
- "Imagine you are a tall tree with roots deep down in the ground and new growth reaching up towards the sun."

Assessment points:

Make note of the overall quality of the movement, the stability at the hip and ankle.

Two ticks	=	Excellent control.
One tick	=	Good control.
Dash	=	Not satisfactory.

Make sure to note down any areas of weakness noted during testing. For example:

Dropping hip

Clawing Toes

Rolling In

Example:

Functional Assessment				
Test	**Left**	**Right**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Single leg stand	–	✓	*Poor pelvic stab, rolling…*	*No*
Or…				
Single leg stand	✓✓	✓✓	*Excellent control*	*N/A*

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Single Knee Bends – Parallel and Turnout

Description:

'Single Knee Bends' are a great way to assess functional control of the truck, abdominal, gluteal, turnout, knee and ankle muscles. Students must be able to control the alignment of the hips and leg with simple knee bends in flat/no shoes before progressing to the more unstable sole of a pointe shoe. As the sole of a pointe shoe is typically slightly rounded, instability in any of the afore-mentioned muscle groups can result in overuse of other muscles as they attempt to stabilize the leg and ankle. These typically include the hip flexors and extrinsic foot muscles.

Instructions:

- "Stand facing me in parallel, with your hands on your hips."
- "Find a point to focus on, and then stand on your left leg."
- "Find your balance, and now do five slow knee bends with your left leg."
- "Repeat that on the other leg."

- "Now do the same in turnout, starting on your left…"
- "… and then on your right."

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Things to watch for:

- ✓ Make sure that the student keeps their body upright, not leaning forward or back.
- ✓ Make sure that their knee stays in line with their second toe.
- ✓ Check that the hips are kept level, neither hitching nor dropping the hip of the lifted leg.
- ✓ The arch of the supporting foot must stay active.
- ✓ Check that there is no clawing of the toes.
- ✓ Make sure that the spine stays in neutral, and does not tuck or arch as the knee bends.
- ✓ Watch the supporting hip to ensure that it does not stick out as the student bends the knee.

Visualization Ideas:

- "Imagine that there is an elastic band attached to your bun. Feel the force pulling up as you bend your knee."
- "Imagine you are a horse on a carousel. You go straight up and down the big silver pole. Make sure you don't tip forwards each time you bend your knee."

Assessment points:

Two ticks	=	Excellent control.
One tick	=	Good control.
Dash	=	Not satisfactory.

Make sure to note down any areas of weakness seen during testing. For example:

Rolling

Dropping Hip

Example:

Functional Testing				
Test	**Left**	**Right**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
S K Bend - Parallel	–	✓	*Poor pelvic stab, rolling…*	*No*
Or…				
S K Bend - Turnout	✓✓	✓✓	*Excellent control*	*N/A*

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Tendus en Croix

Description:

Watching a student perform a simple set of battements tendus en croix is a good way of assessing their overall control of the foot, the hip, and the trunk. I feel that this is an essential test before going onto pointe as it demonstrates if the student can control their centre while focusing on the feet. Pay close attention to how the student works the foot through the floor, especially her ability to work through the demi-pointe position before stretching the toes. Watch the articulation of the rear foot, the mid foot, the ball of the foot and the toes, to assess any area in the foot where the student has trouble articulating or controlling muscles that are required in pointe work. It is important to do this test without ballet shoes on as it is amazing what a student can hide within a pair of ballet flats, and even more in a pair of demi-pointe shoes.

Instructions:

- "Stand facing me with your hands on your hips."
- "Have your right foot front in 5th position,"
- "Do four tendus devant with the right foot."
- "Now four to seconde, and four derrière."
- "Repeat with the left foot."

Things to watch for:

- ✓ Stability of the supporting foot.
- ✓ Good foot articulation through the demi-pointe of the working leg.
- ✓ Toes long.
- ✓ Turned out.
- ✓ Good pelvic control.
- ✓ Not weight bearing though the big toe.
- ✓ Control of the pelvis especially in à la seconde and en arrière.

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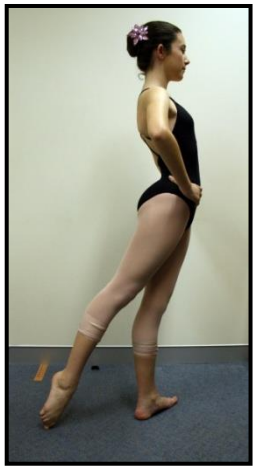
Cues for visualization of the movement:

- "Feel like I am pulling your heel forward." (When working en avant, to encourage turnout throughout the movement).
- "Push the ball of the foot through the floor."
- "Make sure you stretch the front of the ankle forward before you pointe your toes."
- "Feel the space between your feet expand as though the foot is being pushed away by an invisible force."
- "Image your supporting leg has roots into the ground."

Assessment Points:

Mark one tick for articulation of the foot, and one for turnout control of both the working and supporting legs. Note any areas of weakness, for example;

Leaning on big toe



Hips tilting forward

Hip hitching in seconde

Example:

Functional Assessment				
Test	**Left**	**Right**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Tendus en Croix	✓	✓	↓ *Articulation of foot*	*Some*
Or…				
Tendus en Croix	–	✓	*Poor pelvic stab & T/O*	*No*

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Retiré or Retiré Passé

Description:

Being able to perform a strong retiré position requires good range and control of turnout, a stable supporting foot and good pelvic stability. It will also often highlight any discomfort in the hip flexors due to overuse or poor technique that should be settled before progressing onto pointe. Make special note of how the working foot is peeled off the floor, and the position of the hips throughout the movement.

Instructions:

- "Stand facing me in fifth position, with the right foot front."
- "Peel the foot off the floor and draw it up the leg to a retiré position."
- "Hold it there, and then close the foot behind."
- "Repeat that twice each side."

Things to watch for:

✓ The ability to transfer weight from two feet to one foot without excessive hitching of the hips.
✓ 'Peeling' the foot off the floor, rather than lifting it off as one piece.
✓ Control of turnout throughout on both the supporting and working legs.
✓ Keeping the shoulder over the hips, not leaning to one side.
✓ Keeping hips level in the final position.

Assessment Points:

Give one tick for the control of the working foot, and one for the control of the hips and trunk.

Functional Assessment				
Test	**Left**	**Right**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Retiré	✓	✓	↓ *hip control*	*Some*
Or…				
Retiré	–	✓	*Not working feet or T/O*	*No*

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Relevé Passé

Description:

'Relevé Passé' is important to test in order to watch the involvement of the upper body whilst the student is focusing on her foot and turnout control in a dynamic movement. I find that it highlights the students who are unable to stabilize through their centre and tend to grip with their upper body. The student should be able to take the arms through simple port de bras, coming through first position to seconde and then to bras bas as they perform six relevé passé travelling backwards. Many girls tend to grip with the arms and this should be addressed before going onto pointe. Over-contracting the upper body gives an unsightly line and if the girls learn how to control this from their core before progressing onto pointe their performance en pointe will be much more pleasant.

Instructions:

- "Stand in fifth position facing me."
- "Start with your arms in bras bas."
- "Perform a relevé passé with the front foot, bringing the arms to first position."
- "Do a demi plie, then relevé, bringing the front foot to a retiré passé position."
- "Pause slightly, and then close the foot behind."
- "Repeat six times, alternating feet each time."

Things to watch for:

- ✓ Make sure the student achieves good alignment in demi-pointe position.
- ✓ The ankle must stay strong, no major wobbling.
- ✓ The student should land cleanly in fifth position of the feet each time.
- ✓ Both heels touch the ground with each landing.
- ✓ Body must stay upright, not swinging forwards and/or backwards.

Cues for visualisation of the movement:

- "Feel energy pushing down through that ball of you foot."
- "Feel like you are being stretched from the top of your head down to your toes."
- "Make sure you stay tall as you land, as though you don't really want to come down."
- "Make sure you don't crumple in the middle when you come down."

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Assessment Points:

For full marks, make sure that the student;

- Is stable through the centre.
- Demonstrates good height of demi-pointe.
- Has good weight placement.
- Is able to do 6 relevés passés without overbalancing.
- Keeps relaxed in the upper back and neck.
- Shows a strong retiré position.
- Closes cleanly in 5th each time.

Sloppy retiré position

Not closing in fifth position

Overbalances

Example:

Functional Assessment				
Test	**Left**	**Right**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Relevé Passé	✓	✓	↓ *height of demi-pointe*	*No*
Or…				
Relevé Passé	–	✓	*Overbalances*	*Some*

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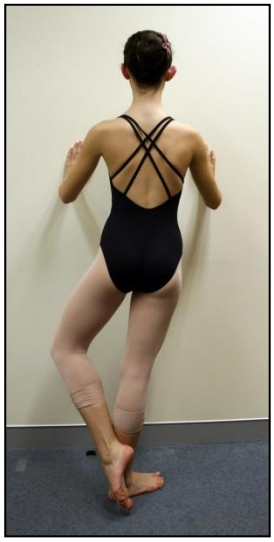
Single Leg Rises

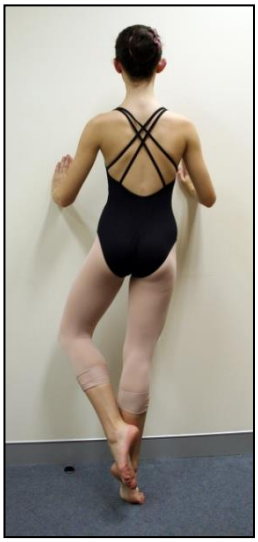
Description:

Effective 'Single Leg Rises' are extremely important in developing the strength required to go onto pointe. It is also a fantastic exercise to maintain strength once en pointe and should be monitored after each class. Companies such as The Australian Ballet, actually get the entire company to perform 'Single Leg Rises' in parallel after every barre to maintain the strength of the foot and ankle and this has resulted in a vast drop in foot and ankle injuries throughout the company in the last few years.

Instructions:

- "Stand on one leg in turnout facing the wall."
- "Rest your finger tips gently on the wall (or barre).
- "Hold your lifted leg in petit retiré derrière."
- "Make sure that the supporting foot is turned out from the hip, with the arches lifted, and the lifted foot is pointed."
- "Slowly rise up onto a full demi-pointe, and lower slowly.
- "Repeat as many times as you can (up to 20)."





Things to watch for:

- ✓ Make sure the chest stays lifted, with the spine in neutral and the abdominal muscles on.
- ✓ The lifted foot should remain pointed, with the thigh turned out from the hip.
- ✓ The toes must remain long – no clawing!
- ✓ Make sure that full height of demi-pointe is achieved.
- ✓ Ensure that the student's weight is centred between the first and second toes.
- ✓ The knee should remain pulled up throughout.
- ✓ Make sure the hips stay facing forward and are level.
- ✓ Turnout is maintained as the heel is lowered.
- ✓ The arches should stay lifted throughout.
- ✓ At least 20 good rises.
- ✓ Ensure that the student is feeling no pain in the back of the ankle or big toe.

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Assessment Points:

Mark one point for each of the following achievements;

- Strength (up to 20).
- Height of rise.
- Toes flat or clawing.
- Weight placement (Sickle out or in).
- Maintaining turnout of both legs (Especially the lifted leg).
- Control of arches as the heel is lowered.
- Keeping the hips square.
- Abdominal control.
- Supporting knees is kept straight throughout.

↓ *Height of rise*

Example:

Single Leg Rise Assessment				
	Left	**Right**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Strength	*17*	*13*		
Height	✓✓	✓	*Sl ↓ on Right*	*No*
Toes Flat	✓	✓	*Begins to claw as tires*	*No*
Weight Placement	✓✓	✓	*Rolls out as tires (Rt)*	*Yes*
Maintains Turnout	✓	✓	*Loses T/O as tires*	*Yes*
Controlled Lower	✓✓	✓	*Sl rolling (Rt)*	*No*
Hips Square	✓	✓	*Hitches lifted hip sl*	*No*
Abdominal Control	✓	✓	*↓ as tires*	*Yes*
Knees Straight	✓✓	✓	*Rt bends sl as tires*	*Yes*

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Toe to Wall Test

Description:

The toe to wall test is a fantastic way for girls to monitor their own flexibility into a demi-plié. I often encourage the girls to set up a small tape in an area of the house where it won't mark the floor to monitor their own progress. When in pre-pointe classes and also when on pointe, restriction in the achilles can pre-dispose to numerous injuries so it is best to test this on a regular basis to maintain equal range on both sides. Have a piece of tape set up in the studio with 2cm (or half inch) marks drawn on it so that the students are tested on the same tape each time.

Instructions:

- "Stand facing the wall, with your feet in parallel."
- "Place one foot so that the big toe is against the wall, and then bend the knee so that it touches the wall. This counts as zero."
- "Now, move the foot back a little along the tape, and press your knee to the wall, keeping the heel on the floor.
- "Find the point when your foot is the furthest it can be away from the wall, but where the heel is still on the floor, the foot is in parallel and the knee can still touch the wall."
- (Record how far (in centimetres or inches) this is.)
- "Repeat on the other side."

Things to watch for:

- ✓ The heel MUST be kept down! No cheating!
- ✓ Ensure the foot is kept in parallel, perpendicular to the wall.
- ✓ The arches must be gently lifted. By rolling in the student may be able to get a little bit further but this is a false measure.
- ✓ It does not matter what the other foot is doing.
- ✓ The plié depth needed does depend on the height of the individual, but aim for at least 10cm on both sides. If the student is very small (under 140cm tall) 8cm is okay, and if they are over 160cm tall, aim for 12cm.
- ✓ The range should be similar on each side.
- ✓ There should be no pain at the front of the ankle. The student may feel a stretch up the tendons at the back of the ankle.

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Assessment Points:

Mark down the maximal distance the big toe can be from the wall, while maintaining arch control and the heel in contact with the floor. Note any areas of pain or restriction.

Heel lifting

Arches rolling

Example:

Foot Assessment				
	Left	**Right**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Toe To Wall Test	*10cm*	*14cm*	*Rolling arches left*	*Yes – 8cm*
Or…				
Toe To Wall Test	*2 cm*	*14cm*	*Pain at front, Left only*	*No*

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Toe Swapping

Description:

This is an excellent way to assess how much conscious control a dancer has over the small muscles in her toes. This will often take time to perfect! While it may feel impossible for some students at first, encourage them that with regular practise it will soon become easy. It is simply a matter of learning how to tell the nerves that control these muscles what to do!

Instructions:

- "Sit on a chair, with your feet in parallel, and placed feet in the 'Tripod Foot' position."
- "Make sure the inner arch and under surface of your foot stays active."
- "See if you can lift the big toe of your right foot off the floor, keeping all the small toes down."
- "Now, lower the big toe, and raise all the other little toes off the floor."
- "Make sure that the arches of the feet stay on, and that the foot does not twist or roll from side to side."
- "Continue swapping between the big and little toes at least 10 times."
- "Repeat on the other side."

Things to watch for:

- ✓ The arch MUST stay elevated, not roll in when the little toes are lifted.
- ✓ Ensure the ball of the foot is kept in contact with the floor.
- ✓ Keep the heel on the floor.
- ✓ Note the quality of the movements.

Example:

Foot Assessment				
	Left	**Right**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Toe Swapping	✓✓	✓✓	*Excellent*	*N/A*
Or…				
Toe Swapping	–	✓	*Rolling arches in*	*No*

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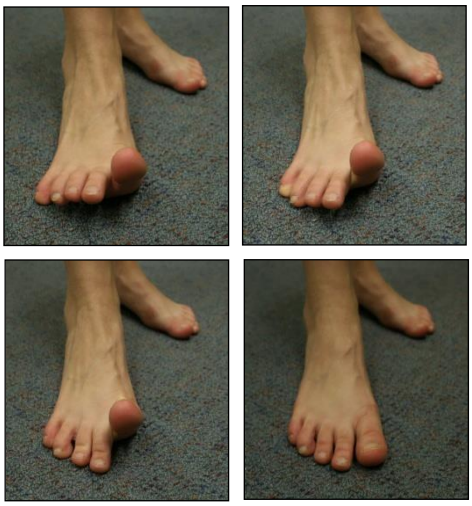
Piano Playing

Description:

Now this one will definitely take time to perfect! Being able to do this exercise well is not a definite requirement before going onto pointe, but it will help improve the control of the dancers' toes a lot. You can tell your students to test the rest of their family members to see if any of them can do the exercise!

Instructions:

- "Set your feet up as for the toe swapping exercise."
- "Keep the ball of the foot flat on the floor throughout the exercise."
- "Lift all the toes off the floor."
- "Place the toes back down on the floor, one by one, starting with your pinkie (little toe)."
- "Make sure that the arches of the feet stay on, and that the foot does not roll in as you lower your big toe."
- "Now, reverse the exercise, by lifting up the big toe, followed by the other toes, one by one."



Things to watch for:

- ✓ The arch MUST stay elevated, not roll in when the big toe is placed down.
- ✓ Ensure the ball of the foot is kept in contact with the floor, even when the big toe is lifted.
- ✓ Keep the heel on the floor.
- ✓ Note the quality of the movements, and the ability to separate the middle few toes.

Assessment Points:

Mark in terms of the quality of the movement, as for Toe Swapping.

Example:

Foot Assessment				
	Left	**Right**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Piano	✓✓	✓✓	*Excellent*	*N/A*
Or…				
Piano	–	✓	*Lifting big toe joint*	*No*

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Doming

Description:

Underneath the ball of the foot are some tiny muscles called the 'Lumbricals'. These muscles help flex the joint between the metatarsal bones of the forefoot and the toes. This is an essential area to gain control of in order to rise correctly from demi-pointe onto full pointe. Weakness in this area will result in the student hopping or jumping onto pointe instead of working through the foot, which puts them at risk of injury. Working on strengthening these muscles also allows the front of the foot to be pointed strongly without clawing the toes, essential in preventing blisters and overuse problems in the ankles.

Instructions:

- "Sit or stand with the ankle slightly flexed."
- "Keep your toes long, and the heel on the floor."
- "Try and lift the ball of the foot off the floor, creating a dome under the pad of the foot, with the tips of the toes staying in contact with the floor."
- "Feel like you are stroking the floor with the pads of your toes."
- "You should be able to see your knuckle bones pop up, and feel the muscles working under the ball of the foot."

Things to watch for:

- ✓ Make sure that the main part of the foot stays aligned, no twisting of the foot.
- ✓ The toes must stay long, not bending in the middle.
- ✓ Ensure the heel of the foot is kept in contact with the floor.
- ✓ Note the quality of the movement, and any cramping that may occur.
- ✓ Check that there is space between the floor and the ball of the student's foot.

Assessment Points: Note the ease and quality of the movement.

Foot Assessment				
	Left	**Right**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Doming	✓	✓✓	*Easy on Rt, harder Left*	*No*
Or…				
Doming	✓	✓	*Takes lots of focus*	*No*

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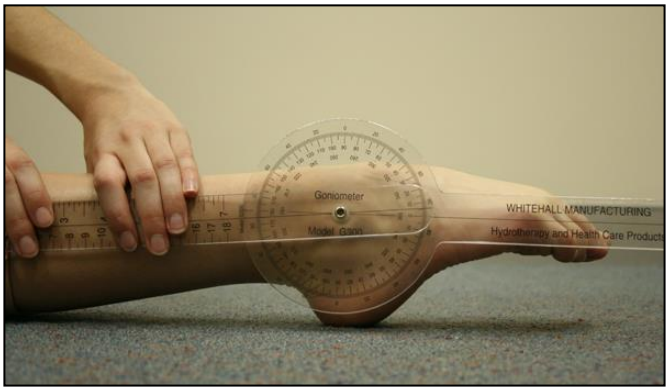
Pointe Range Test

Description:

Having adequate pointe range in the foot and ankle is obviously essential in being able to dance well en pointe. Stressing the importance of this before commencing pointe work will give students incentive to work on their range early, rather than relying on pointe work to improve it. If there are physical restrictions limiting a student's pointe range, these should be worked out before progressing onto pointe.

Instructions:

- "Sit on the floor with your legs out straight."
- "Keep your knees pulled up."
- "Point your toes and ankles as far as you can, keeping your toes long."



Things to watch for:

- ✓ Make sure that the toes are not curled under, but are pointed at the knuckle and stay almost straight in the middle joints.
- ✓ The ankles must be straight, not sickling in or out, and the knee-caps pulled up.
- ✓ There should be no pain in the back of the ankle.
- ✓ Optimal pointe range for commencing pointe work is 0˚ to +5˚
- ✓ If a girl has excessively mobile ankles (over +10˚) she will need extremely strong muscles to support the body en pointe. While they can give a lovely line, once strong, mobile ankles are at much greater risk of injury.

Assessment Points:

Mark the student's achievement in degrees, measure with a 'Goniometer' or large 'Protractor'. A flat pointe is measured as 0˚, a restriction as a negative (-5˚) and a flexible ankle as a positive figure (+6˚). Another good way to check this is to take a photo of the pointed foot from the side and join the dots! Range should be at least 0˚ before commencing en pointe to avoid injury.

Foot Assessment				
	Left	**Right**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Pointe Range	*-5˚*	*-10˚*	*Achilles pain, clawing*	*No*

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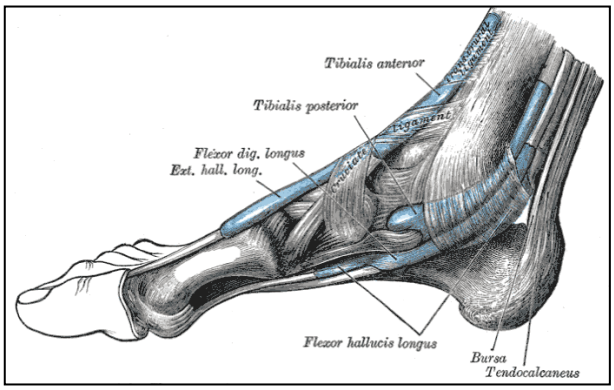
FHL Thickening

Description:

Flexor Hallucis Longus (FHL) is a muscle that has its muscle belly in the back of the lower calf, and a long tendon that runs all the way under the foot to the big toe. Many dancers over-use this muscle when pointing the toes, especially when they hook the big toe under. Chronic overuse of this muscle, either when pointing, or to stabilize a wobbly ankle can result in thickening of the tendon as it passes behind the ankle. This can progress to a stage where thickened parts of the tendon are no longer able to slide in the sheath they run through, and this can become very problematic. It is wise to frequently assess the integrity of this tendon, especially as girls begin pointe work to avoid any problems.



Instructions:

- Place your finger tips behind the inner ankle bone of both of the dancers' feet.
- Ask her to pointe her ankles, and then wiggle her big toe.

Things to watch for:

- ✓ Audible cracking sounds.
- ✓ A lump that moves when she wiggles her big toe.
- ✓ Pain or thickening in the tendon as it passes behind the ankle

Assessment Points:

Document whether any thickening is present, and describe symptoms if necessary.

Foot Assessment				
	Left	**Right**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
FHL Thickening	*No*	*Yes*	*Audible clicking, no pain*	*No*

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1st Toe Extension

Description:

If the student lacks mobility in the big toe joint it will limit her from rising to a good height of demi-pointe. This may be often misinterpreted as a reduced pointe range. Often a reduced range is due to excessive tension in the small muscle under the big toe (Flexor Hallucis Brevis), or thickening in the capsule surrounding the joint after a sprained toe. Thankfully, once identified as a restriction, these limitations can often be resolved with specific soft tissue massage into the affected muscles.

Instructions:

- Have the dancer sit with her legs out straight.
- Have the ankle in a relaxed position and bend the big toe back to its full range.

Things to watch for:

- ✓ Ask the student if there is any pain on either side of the joint.
- ✓ If the joint does not move to 90˚, try massaging the small muscles under the big toe for 2 minutes, before stretching and retesting.

Assessment Points:

Note the range of motion in the joint relative to 90˚, and note any pain or discomfort experienced by the student.

Example:

Foot Assessment				
	Left	**Right**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
1st Toe Extension	*<90˚*	*<90˚*	*Pain on top of joint left*	*Yes*
Or…				
1st Toe Extension	*>90˚*	*>90˚*	*Hypermobile*	*N/A*

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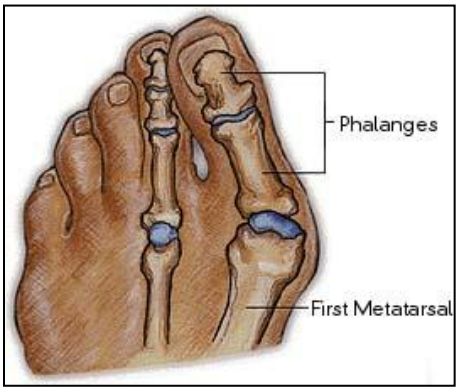
Bunions

Description:

While pointe work does not cause bunions if done correctly in well fitting shoes, it can accelerate their development in some individuals who may be predisposed to their formation. Special care must be taken in individuals with a family history of bunions on the big toes (especially on the maternal side), and those who show early signs of bunion formation from regular class work. Care must be taken to correct any technique faults that may be contributing to pressure on the side of the big toe, such as rolling or overturning in 5th position. Poorly fitting pointe shoes and street shoes can accelerate the development of bunions so warn the dancer to be particularly careful with all of the shoes she chooses to wear.

Instructions:

- Ask the student if there is any history of bunions in the family, especially her mother and grandmother.
- Look at the alignment of the big toe in relation to the first metatarsal bone.
- Measure any deviation from a straight line, or estimate the magnitude.



Things to watch for:

- ✓ Thickening of the skin in the undersurface of the big toe.
- ✓ The magnitude of any deviation from the midline.
- ✓ Any redness or swelling on the outside of the big toe.

Assessment Points:

Measure the deviation of the big toe from a straight line. Make sure to note if the bunions are painful, and if there is a family history of problems in this area. Girls with an angle of >10˚ must take special care with progression onto pointe.

Foot Assessment				
	Left	**Right**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Bunions	*-5˚*	*-10˚*	*Family History, no pain*	*No*

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Toe Formula and Foot Type

Description:

It is important to take note of the general shape of the students' foot in relation to pointe work, and the length of the individual toes. While there are now many different types of shoe to fit many different feet, some girls with very wide feet will struggle to find a shoe that fits, while others may need to be taught to pad the shoe to avoid excessive pressure on a long second toe. The following pages give examples of various foot shapes and tips in relation to fitting and padding pointe shoes effectively.

Instructions:

- Have the dancer sit with her legs out straight.
- Observe the relaxed foot, taking note of:
  - Width of the foot.
  - Level of the big toe and little toe joints.
  - Length of toes.
  - Any calluses on the top of the toes, outside of the big toe or on the ball of the foot.
  - Size of the heel in relation to the ball of the foot.

- Foot Type - There are many different foot types, but most fall into one or more of the following categories:
  - Greek or Morton's foot.
  - Egyptian foot.
  - Giselle or Peasant foot.
  - The Compressible foot.

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Greek/Morton's Foot:

- This foot type has a second toe that is longer than all the others and tends to be narrow to medium in width.
- There may be a callus under the ball of the foot if the 2nd metatarsal is longer than the first. This student may have trouble balancing on demi-pointe if this is the case, and once en pointe will often prefer turning in pointe shoes rather than on demi-pointe.
- **Suggestions:** Ensure that the dancer has enough strength to keep the second toe long in the shoe when pointing as clawing the toe will result in chronic blisters and callus formation on the knuckle of the second toe. I often suggest the use of a jelly toe sleeve on this toe for beginner students. A 'V' vamp may suit this student and give a nice line.

Egyptian Foot:

- This foot type tends to be quite narrow and has a long first toe while the rest of the toes taper off sharply.
- **Suggestions:** Be sure to protect the big toe as it may bear excessive weight without help from the other toes. A jelly toe sock will help prevent blisters on the toe, and it is important that the shank is strong enough to support the dancer's weight throughout the shoe, rather than over-loading to toe area. It is important to take note of the length of the wings of any pointe shoe to ensure that they do not extend too far above the big toe joint; this may limit the ability of the dancer to work through the demi-pointe area. As the little toe is often significantly shorter than the first, it will not be in the box and the dancer may need to tape the foot to prevent bunion formation on the 5th toe.

Giselle/Peasant Foot:

- This foot type has at least three toes the same length (sometimes more). The width tends to be medium to wide and the toes tend to be short.
- This foot is well-suited for pointe work, and although many girls will not like the look of their foot, injuries are less common in this foot type.

- **Suggestions:** Regular (not Deep) vamps often flatter this foot. However you can often use padding inside the tip of the box to allow the dancer to use a slightly longer box that her toes would normally be fitted for to allow a nice line. The weight of the dancer will be supported by the shoe in the metatarsal area, and the tips of the toes will rarely touch the end of the shoe. Use lighter colour satins to help create the illusion of the foot blending with the tights to avoid the look of a wide foot that can appear clumsy.

The **Compressible** Foot**:**

Many dancers have a foot that appears wide in standing, yet is 'compressible'. If you gently squeeze the sides of the foot at the metatarsal the bones will move easily as there is not a great deal of flesh between them. Often this foot is shaped like a Greek or Egyptian foot. Standing flat, this foot may create a relatively wide footprint, because the bones spread out to the sides. But en pointe, the foot compresses and the bones squeeze into one another. Thus the shoe that is sufficiently wide standing flat is too wide en pointe and the dancer slides down into the box, causing pressure on the already prominent big toe or long second toe. Dropping into the box too much also causes the shoe to be too long and baggy en pointe, even though it may just barely be long enough standing flat. It is important to identify this as it may alter the fitting of a dancer's first pointe shoe.

Assessments points:

Note the order of the length of toes, and note the foot shape, along with any other markings.

Example:

Foot Assessment			
	Left	**Right**	**Notes**
Toe Formula	*12345*	*12345*	
Foot type	*Egyptian*		*Very narrow, long 1st toe*
Or…			
Toe Formula	*21345*	*21345*	*Clawing 2nd toe*
Foot type	*Morton's toe*		*compressible, callous under 2nd toe*

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Turnout

Description:

Obviously control of turnout is extremely important before progressing onto pointe. Some students give an impression of good turnout by 'screwing' the feet when on flat. However, once en pointe if there is not effective turnout control from the hips the leg significantly de-rotates. The hip should be assessed in 'neutral' so testing a dancers range in a 'froggy stretch' is not appropriate. Ideally use a special 'Goniometer' to measure the exact angle of turnout for re-assessing any progress, or alternatively, draw a large semi-circle on a piece of paper with pre labeled angles of 15˚ increments marked out and tape this to the table used for testing.

Instructions:

- Ask the student to lie on her back on a kitchen table or similar with the left leg dangling over the edge from the knee down.
- The right foot is placed flat on the surface of the table with the knee bent towards the ceiling.
- Ensure that the spine is in neutral, not arched or completely flat.
- The student places her fingertips on the hip bones to ensure that they stay square.
- Rotate the left leg that is hanging down into a turned out position, using your left elbow under the dancer's ankle, making sure that the knee and thigh stay in-line with the body.
- Measure the angle of the shin in relation to a plumb line directly down to the floor. i.e. 60˚ in the photo on the right.
- After assessing the student's capacity for turnout, get her to attempt the same movement utilizing her own turnout muscles.
- Make sure that she does not flex the hip to recruit the hip flexors to assist the movement.
- Measure the angle of the lower leg in relation to the plumb line and see how much of her passive range she can actually use.
- Repeat on the other side.

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Things to watch for:

- ✓ Note how firm it feels when the maximal range is achieved. A 'soft' or 'elastic' feel at the end of range may indicate that it is simply tight muscles restricting the movement, however a very firm restriction at the end of the movement indicates that it is more of a joint restriction, and the student is nearing the maximum range of movement that it is possible for her to achieve.
- ✓ Ensure that the hips do not twist and that the pelvis stays flat to the table. By tilting the pelvis to the side the student may 'cheat' more range than they actually have.
- ✓ Also make sure that the knees do not lift in order to use the hip flexors to turn the leg out.

Assessment Points:

The range of 'normal' in this test is quite large. What you are looking for what proportion of her potential range the student is using. One student may have a range of 45˚ and be able to use 40˚ of that which is an extremely good measurement of strength for their range. In this student, increasing the range of motion through stretching and massage therapy will often result in them being able to use more turnout in class as it is a problem with her 'passive' rotation in the hip rather than muscular strength. Another student may have a range of 65˚ but still be using 40˚. This indicates a relative weakness in the turnout muscles that must be worked on.

For scoring in the assessment, mark down both active and passive ranges. Also note what muscles the student attempts to recruit to gain more turnout.

As a bare minimum before going on to pointe, girls should have at least 40˚ passive external rotation and 30˚ active. A 'good' range is between 45˚ and 60˚ passive rotation, while any measure over 60˚ indicates excellent mobility in the hips.

Example:

Hip Assessment				
	Left	**Right**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Turnout - Active	*20*	*25*	*Tries to use front of hip*	*No*
Turnout - Passive	*45*	*50*	*Good range*	
Or…				
Turnout - Active	*45*	*50*	*Excellent control*	
Turnout - Passive	*62*	*65*	*Ex. range, soft end feel*	

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Assessing the Gluteals

Description:

The 'Gluteal Muscles' are actually extremely important to a dancer, and the correct use of them will help the student in everything from jumps, to stability en fondu, her arabesque line, back mobility, and even flexibility into the splits. However, overuse of the gluteal muscles, or using them in the wrong way, can result in tight turnout muscles, poor hip mobility, and a 'too perky' bottom. The Gluteal muscles are designed to extend the hip or, take the leg derrière. The hamstrings and some of the low back muscles can also perform this action and will often be overused if the gluteals are not activating properly, especially in an arabesque and in walking. If a student complains of feeling tight in her lower back, finds it hard to flex the lumbar spine (i.e. in the 'Forward Bend Test') and struggles to keep the knee straight in an arabesque en l'air, she is probably using the hamstrings to lift the leg, rather than the gluteals. If she does this repeatedly, and especially if she uses the hamstrings instead of the gluteals in walking, all the extra contracting will tighten them up, no matter how often she stretches.

Instructions:

- Ask the student to lie on her tummy with her legs out straight, in parallel.
- Have her forehead resting on her hands.
- Place your hands so that the finger tips of one hand rest on her low back muscles, both thumbs are in the middle of one buttock and the fingers of the other hand rest on the top of the hamstrings.
- "Keeping it straight at the knee, lift one leg just off the floor."

- "Lower that leg, relax it, and then lift it again."
- Move your hands to the other buttock/leg and test the other side.

Things to watch for:

- ✓ Notice what happens under your fingertips and thumbs.
- ✓ What muscles tighten first, and do the gluteals activate at all?
- ✓ Where in the movement do they come on?
- ✓ Ideally the deep abdominal and deep back muscles will stiffen sightly to stabilize the core in preparation for the movement. This can be identified by the students' waist narrowing slightly just before the movement.
- ✓ The gluteals should initiate the movement and work throughout.

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- ✓ The back muscles will then stabilize further to assist the movement.
- ✓ The hamstrings will also work to lift the leg, but should be preceded by the gluteals.
- ✓ Note any excessive gripping with the back or hamstrings.
- ✓ Make sure that the low back doesn't arch as the leg is lifted.
- ✓ If the gluteals do not work initially, ask the student if she can make them work.

Some people will find it hard to bring the gluteals on at all, while others will find that they come on at the end of the range only. Some students will be able to consciously turn the gluteals on while others will not. For some girls it will come on beautifully, automatically.

Another point is to note if the gluteal muscles come on when a student is walking. Especially up stairs or up any incline, the gluteal muscles of the supporting leg should squeeze a little in each step to take the strain off the hamstrings. If the student can master this, she will be amazed at how quickly her hamstring flexibility will improve.

Assessment Points:

Make sure to note the order of contraction of the three muscle groups. Ideally it should be;

1. Gluteals (the initial stabilizing of the deep back muscles cannot be felt on the surface).
2. Back.
3. Hamstrings.

If the gluteals do not work, place them in brackets. i.e. 23 (1)

Hip Assessment				
	Left	**Right**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Gluteal Activation	*123*	*231*	*Delayed on right*	*Yes*
Or…				
Gluteal Activation	*23(1)*	*23(1)*	*Unable to activate*	*No*

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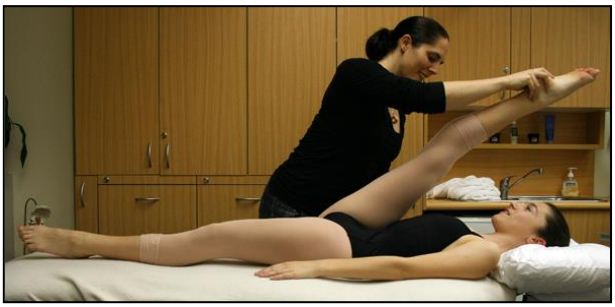
Hamstring Mobility

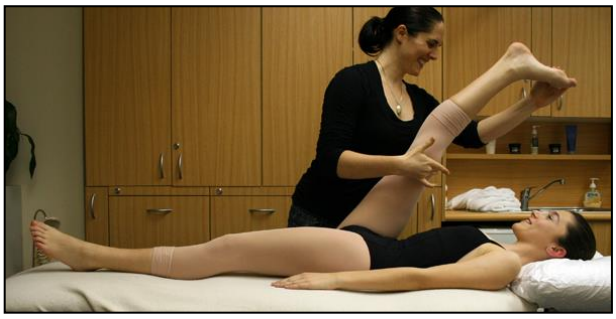
Descriptions:

While flexible hamstrings are not a strict requirement for going onto pointe, the pre-pointe assessment is a convenient time to assess their mobility and to establish any issues that may be limiting the student in this area (i.e. reduced gluteal firing, as in the previous test). Make note of where in the leg the restriction is felt, as often in adolescent dancers it is a restriction in the sliding of the nerves, rather than tension on the hamstrings that restricts the motion. If the second part of this test is significantly more restricted than the first, I recommend more upper back and gluteal stretches, rather than pushing into hamstring stretches.

Instructions:

- "Lie on your back, with your hands on your hips."
- "Make sure you keep your hips square to the front."
- "Let me lift your leg, keep your foot relaxed, and try not to use the muscles in your leg"
- Use one hand to keep the knee straight, and the other to lift the student's leg to its full range.
- "Where do you feel the stretch?"
- Lower the leg.
- Re-position your hand to hold the students' foot in a flexed position, and then repeat the test.





Things to watch for:

- ✓ Hitching of the hip of the lifted leg.
- ✓ Bending of the lifted leg.
- ✓ Twisting of the pelvis.

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Assessment Points:

- Make note of the range of flexibility with the foot relaxed (1)
- Note the range with the foot flexed (2).
- Note the students' ability to keep the hips square for testing. Inability to do this indicates poor core stability.

Example:

In the examples given below the first student has a normal response whereas the second student has a marked neural restriction. She should not be pushed into hamstring stretches, but should work on the mobility of her upper back and hips and calves to free up the pathway of the nerve that feeds into the back of the leg. This will result in a quicker and easier improvement in mobility than stretching the hamstrings.

Hip Assessment			
	Left	**Right**	**Notes**
Hamstrings (1)	*140˚*	*160˚*	*Slightly tighter on left*
Hamstrings (2)	*120˚*	*140˚*	*Slight decrease*
Or…			
Hamstrings (1)	*120˚*	*130˚*	*Pulling in calf, knee wants to bend*
Hamstrings (2)	*80˚*	*90˚*	*Marked restriction*

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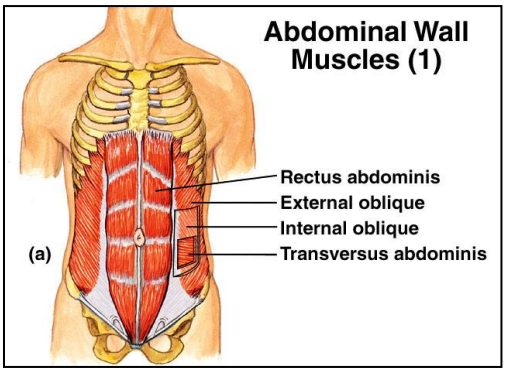
Engaging Deep Abdominals

Description:

Having stability and awareness of how to control the deeper abdominals will assist the newcomer to pointe work enormously. Stability in the core is paramount in preventing injury in all aspects of dance, and reduces the load on the hips and spine. Correct activation is important, so it is a good idea to go through this with the class as a group before the individual testing.

There are actually 4 layers of abdominal muscles, and the deepest ones (Transversus Abdominis) cannot be felt from the outside. In the picture on the right, they are only exposed by cutting away the overlying layers of the Internal and External Oblique. The deep abdominals work with the muscles of the pelvic floor and the deep back muscles to stabilize the spine and trunk.



Correct activation of the deep abdominals will result in the skin of the lower abdomen being pulled away from the leotard, making a hollow between the hip bones, while the spine is maintained in neutral. Gripping of the outer muscles may be identified by flattening of the spine into the floor, along with bulging up of the "six-pack" (Rectus Abdominis), or the lower ribs being pulled down (Obliques).

Instructions:

- "Lie on your back with your knees bent."
- "Rock your hips back and forward and feel your spine flatten onto the floor and then arch up again."
- "Find a position where there is a tiny curve in your low back, but the front of your low tummy is flat."
- "Keep your back in this position for the whole test."
- "First feel like you are trying not to go for a pee, like you are holding it in without crossing your legs."
- "Now try and make a hollow in the lowest part of your tummy, without flattening your back."
- "Hold that, and try and keep breathing normally."
- "Relax everything, and then try that again."

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Visualization Ideas:

All visualization cues should be aimed at engaging the deep back muscles as well as the pelvic floor and deep abdominals while maintaining a neutral spine.

- "Feel like you are a tube of toothpaste being slowly squeezed from the bottom up."
- "Feel like there is a piece of elastic between the middle of your low tummy, and your low back that is pulling these two points together."
- "Feel like you are trying to stop a pee mid-stream."
- "Imagine you have a hot tray resting on your hips and you don't want your tummy to burn."

Things to watch for:

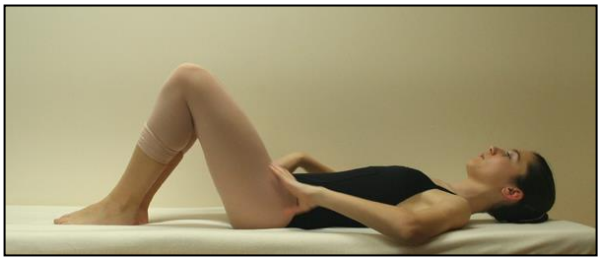
- ✓ Gripping with outer abdominals.
- ✓ Holding the breath.
- ✓ Flattening or arching the low back.
- ✓ Ribs flaring or being pulled in.
- ✓ Neck tension.
- ✓ Any sign of pain or discomfort.

Assessment Points:

0 = Unable to activate.

1 = Flicker of contraction only.

2 = Able to activate and maintain in neutral with normal breathing.



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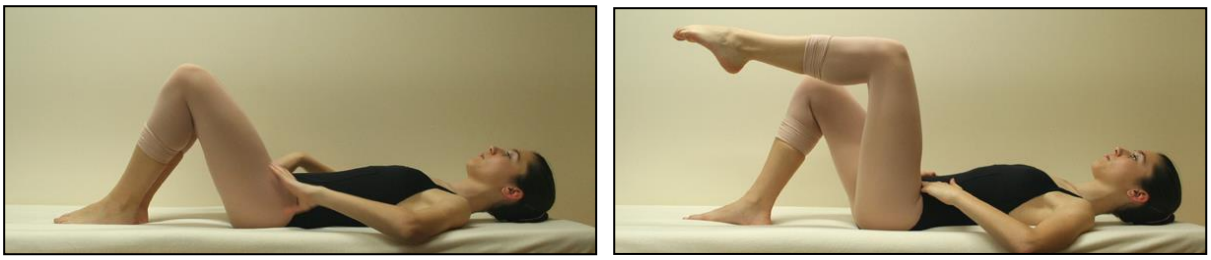
Once the student has the concept of activating these muscles, test their stability by adding in hip and leg movements. The student should be able to maintain the abdominal contraction as well as stability of the pelvis with:

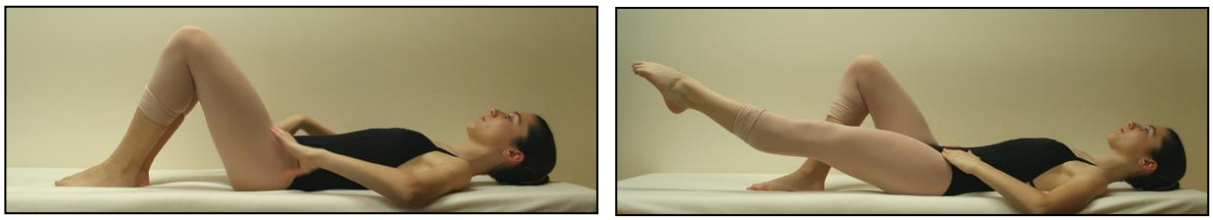
3 = Leg Slides

4 = Knee Folds I



5 = Knee Openings

6 = Leg Slides II



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7 = Knee Folds II

8 = Bug Legs

Any of these exercises may be used as exercises to train endurance and strength in young dancers, as long as they do so with perfect technique. It is best to pick the stage that they can do well, and work on that for several weeks before retesting the higher levels.

Example:

Core Stability			
	Mark	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Deep Abdominals	*0*	*Unable to activate*	*No*
Or…			
Deep Abdominals	*3*	*Gripping initially*	*Yes*
Or…			
Deep Abdominals	*7*	*Excellent awareness*	*N/A*

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Side Support

Description:

Many girls are weak in their trunk, and tend to shift the torso over to one side with various exercises, such as the single leg rises and single knee bends. This test is good to identify any discrepancy in one side compared to the other, and is easy to do in a class situation. Make sure you record the time for each side, so improvements over time can be noted.

Instructions:

- "Lie on your side on a mat."
- "Place your feet one on top of the other, and have your elbow and forearm of the underneath arm on the mat."
- "Put the other hand on your hip."
- "Now, lift your hips off the floor so that your body is in a straight line."
- "Hold that position for as long as you can."
- "Keep breathing!"
- "Make sure you keep your shoulder out of your ear by pushing your elbow into the floor."

Things to watch for:

- ✓ Sinking into the shoulder of the supporting arm.
- ✓ The hips sagging down towards the floor.
- ✓ Bending of the knees.
- ✓ Gripping with the neck and front of the shoulder.

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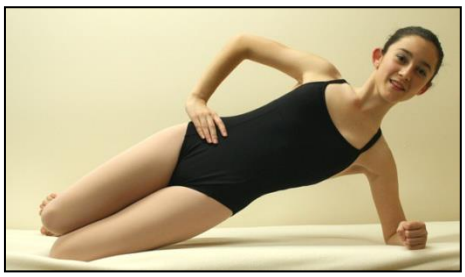
Modifications:

Make sure to note down any modifications so that they are tested the same way each time.

- If there is pain in the elbow, the student can do the test on their hand instead.

- If they are too weak to hold the body straight, try with the knees on the ground and bent to 90˚ first.



Assessment Points:

Work towards being even on both sides. There is no time requirement for progression onto pointe, however 30 seconds is a good target for 11-13 year olds.

Example:

Core Assessment			
	Left	**Right**	**Notes**
Side Support	*23 sec*	*45sec*	*Sinking into left shoulder*
Or…			
Side Support	*57sec*	*65 sec*	*Stopped by pressure/pain in elbow*
Or…			
Side Support	*24sec*	*29 sec*	*Tested with bent knees*

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What to Do If Girls Are Not Ready

If a student is not quite ready to go onto pointe after her first assessment, note down the major areas of concern in the last section of the form. Then pick the areas that, if improved, would make the biggest difference. Choose 6 exercises from the exercises in 'The Perfect Pointe Book' or your own repertoire that best activate or stretch the required areas and ask the student to do these exercises 5 out of 7 days in a week for one month, then re-assess. To make this easier, I have arranged the exercises into groups of common problems, with relevant page numbers for easy reference. Page numbers not in this manual will be found in The Perfect Pointe Book

Poor Posture:

- Take a photo from side on ..... This Manual
- Balance Exercise.....Page 45
- Bug Legs.....Page 93
- Side Lifts.....Page 53
- Side Support..... This Manual
- Cat Stretch.....Page 72

Poor Hip Mobility

- Gluteal Stretches……....Page 75
- Piriformis Stretch……...Page 52
- Hip Flexor Stretch…….Page 71
- Regular Massage

Poor Abdominal Control

- Bug Legs……....Page 93
- Testing for Deep Abdominals……This Manual
- Side Lifts……....Page 53
- Side Support……...This Manual

Rolling With Feet in Parallel:

- Tripod Foot……Page 23
- Single Leg Standing……...Page 36
- Single Knee Bends…….Page 61
- Toe Swapping……Page 27
- Piano Playing……..Page 9

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Rolling With Feet in Turnout:

- Parallel to Turnout……Page 66
- Functional Turnout…….……...Page 67
- Piriformis Stretch……..Page 52
- Turnout Exercise in Kneeling……...Page 65

Clawing

- Doming……..This Manual
- Tendus……This Manual
- Toe Swapping……Page 27
- Big Toe Stretch……..This Manual
- Calf Stretches……Page 39
- Golf Ball Massage…….Page 26

Poor Height of Demi-pointe:

- Foot Massage.
- Golf Ball Massage…….Page 26
- Big Toe Extension……This Manual
- Pointe Stretch……Page 25
- Demi-pointe Range Stretch……This Manual

Other Factors to Consider

Even if a girl can pass all of the physical assessment tests well, there are several other areas that need to be considered before true suitability for pointe can be established. These factors are harder, if not impossible to change, and may require a period of time to be 'waited through' for safe progression onto pointe. These factors include:

- ✓ **Age**
- ✓ **Hypermobility**
- ✓ **Body Type**
- ✓ **Weight**
- ✓ **Height**
- ✓ **Maturity**

It is important to remember that there are no hard and fast rules for any of these areas when considering if a student is able to progress onto pointe. A certain amount of common sense is needed and discussion with both the student and her parents is important in determining whether pointe work is in fact in the student's best interest.

For example, in the past I assessed a student who was 15 and a keen Jazz dancer, who had recently begun ballet classes to strengthen her technique. She was tall and quite strong, yet was extremely hypermobile, with a pointe range of +25˚. She had experienced numerous dislocations of other joints in her body and was prone to rolling her ankle. I explained to the student that while it wasn't impossible for her to progress onto pointe, it would demand a lot of time and attention to get strong enough to do it safely. Since ballet was not her highest priority, we decided that the best approach was for her to participate in the pointe classes on demi-pointe only, to strengthen her ankles as much as possible (as well as the pre-pointe strengthening exercises in The Perfect Pointe Book), and to instead focus her attention on her jazz dance. While she was a little disappointed initially, she was mature enough to understand the reasons for this decision, and was happy to continue to work on the areas outlined in her assessment, to strengthen all other aspects of her dancing.

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Age and Development

Readiness for commencing pointe work should never be decided on age or grade level. Despite girls at the same school doing the same amount of classes and being the same age, often some are ready before others. This may be due to genetically more mobile feet, restriction in range, or a lack of attention to technique instructions in class. Girls may also be physically strong enough on testing, however if they fool around in class, the teacher may decide that they are not suitable for pointe until concentration can be maintained throughout a lesson.

In regards to bony maturity, this does depend on the child, and there is little formal research to validate most opinions. It is generally accepted that girls should be at least 11-12 before starting pointe work. At 12 (depending on the maturity of the child) the cartilaginous portions of the foot bones that are soft through childhood begin to harden, and there is less chance of disturbance of the growth plates and long term damage to the feet. However, this by no means suggests that all dancers who are 12 are ready for pointe! Bony union is just one of the many variables that must be taken into account before progressing onto pointe.

I applaud competitions, such as the Alana Haines Competition in New Zealand, that do not allow girls to compete in competitions en pointe before the age of 13. I have heard stories of girls in other countries competing at 7 or 8 en pointe and this, I feel, is devastating. Even if the child is exceptionally talented, focus should be made on solidifying technique and strength in all other areas, not to mention artistic ability, before going en pointe. If the child is able to do no more than totter around en pointe there is really no reason for her to be there.

Many syllabi, such as the Intermediate Foundation level in the RAD syllabus, require a short amount of pointe work at the end of the formal examination. The minimum age for this examination is 11 and many girls sit it at this age. This means that they must have at least several months en pointe before the exam. It is important to note that this pointe work is very minimal, and should require just 10 – 15 minutes at the end of class several times a week to gain competency. I do not feel that girls of this age are able to sustain more than half an hour of pointe work. Pointe classes may be given with a large proportion of the class devoted to specific foot exercises and strengthening performed in bare feet or flat ballet slippers, with just one part of it actually en pointe.

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Some people propose that girls should be x-rayed prior to going onto pointe to check that their growth plates in their feet have closed. I do not feel that this is necessary in all girls, and feel that it is more important that girls develop the appropriate strength before starting en pointe, to avoid excessive strain across the developing bones. Knowing how to work their feet outside of a pointe shoe is imperative to being able to control it in one!

However, if a girl is serious about a career in dance, waiting until the bones completely 'fuse' at 16 - 18 years of age is unfortunately leaving it a little too late to 'catch up' to her counterparts, who may have started en pointe years before their bones had a chance to develop. Many articles point to the more realistic guideline of waiting at until the bones are 75% fused, typically at the age of 11 – 12. However, unfortunately, this stage of bony fusion occurs at a different age for every dancer. Some 11 year olds may be developed enough to progress onto pointe, however some 13 year old dancers may still have very immature bone structure, and must wait until this develops a little more before progressing onto pointe.

In most cases, by the time a dancer has developed the strength to pass all of the requirements in "The Perfect Pointe Teachers Manual" she will be aged at least 11 or 12 and have developed significantly in the rest of her body as well. However, in the young talented child who demonstrates excellent stability and control at a young age, or in the child who may be older, but slower to physically develop, I would consider getting x-ray confirmation of the stage of development of the bones before progressing her onto pointe. This should only be done once all other areas needed to progress onto pointe have been achieved. It is much better to delay the progression for a few months than to risk damaging the delicate growth plates in the bones. If the dancer has good control of the feet while dancing, and only progresses when she is technically able, the bones will continue to develop naturally, given the appropriate nutrition and supportive shoes when not dancing.

Hypermobility Scale

Description:

While increased mobility is obviously desirable in a dancer, too much can cause other issues, so it is wise to be aware of which of your students have very mobile joints. As these students many not necessarily be the most flexible students, formally testing the mobility of each student's joints will give you a clearer picture of their makeup.

Around each of our joints are strong ligaments that help hold our bones together. In some people these ligaments are very tight, while in others they are quite stretchy. If a person has very stretchy or "lax" ligaments we call this "hypermobility". This means that the amount of movement available at that joint is more than for a person who has tight ligaments. The mobility of the ligaments does not change very rapidly over time. However as we age, if the joints are not moved, the ligaments may stiffen a little.

Note that this is different to "flexibility". Flexibility is how much the muscles can be stretched. It is possible for someone with tight ligaments to have flexible muscles, just as it is possible for a hypermobile individual to have tight muscles. Flexibility can change very rapidly, with girls often feeling tight one day and loose the next, due to excessive exercise, attempting to overstretch, or climate or hormonal change.

If a dancer is hypermobile, she will often find it easier to get into some positions that others find hard. However, she must take care to keep very strong and stable around her joints to avoid injury. As there is less protection to sideways movements through the ankles and knees, girls with hypermobile legs often get injured in these areas more easily. These students should do lots of balance work on a wobble board or similar to increase their stability around these joints.

This is also true in the spine. If there is too much movement in the spine, the tissues that are trying to support it can get inflamed and this can be very painful. Stability exercises focused on the tiny stabilizing muscles of the spine and abdominals, such as Pilates can be very beneficial. These exercises should begin with very slow, controlled specific isolation of the desired muscles. Strong sharp contractions into the end of the range may be very dangerous for very hypermobile dancers.

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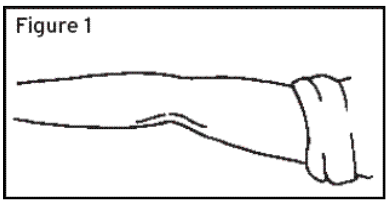
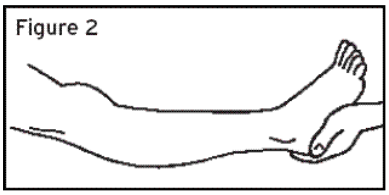
The Beighton Scale is the current diagnostic test used for hypermobility assessment. You can use this to check if a student is really hypermobile or just flexible.

Instructions:

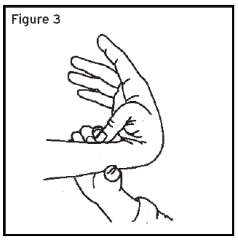
1. Score one point for each elbow that will hyperextend >10 degrees.



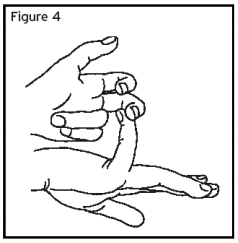
2. Score one point for each knee that will hyperextend >10 degrees.



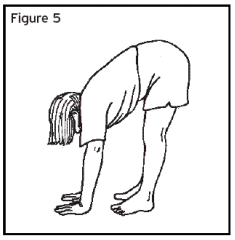
3. Score one point for each thumb that will bend to touch the forearm.



4. Score one point for each hand that can have the little finger bent back beyond 90°.



5. Score one point if she can bend and place her hands flat on the floor without bending her knees.



The maximum score that can be attained is 9. There is no universally accepted cut off point, but a score of 4 or more out of 9 is generally accepted as indicative of hypermobility.

For example:

Other Factors		
	Mark	**Notes**
Hypermobility	*7/9*	*Unable to touch thumbs to forearm*

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Body Type

"**Somatotyping**" refers to a system of classification of body types according to the prominence of different basic body tissues. We are all a combination of body types; however some individuals will display more of one type than another. Even among families, there may be several individuals who have different body types. While we cannot change our general make-up, we can use it to our advantage in choosing forms of exercise to optimize our fitness and appearance, and it is important for a teacher to understand why some girls will 'build up' more than others with the same exercises.

"Ectomorphs" are characterized by long arms and legs, with a shorter trunk and supposedly have a higher level of nervous tissue. They have long thin muscles, with a higher proportion of 'slow twitch' fibers. Ectomorphs tend to have low fat storage, get cold easily and are usually quite thin. Ectomorphs will take time to build in strength, as they must rely on hypertrophy of muscle cells (the ability of a muscle cell to grow in size). Ectomorphs can often use resistance training to build strength without the worry of becoming 'bulky'.

"Mesomorphs" are characterized by a good rate of muscular growth and a higher level of muscular tissue. They often have wide shoulders with a narrow waist. While they gain weight more easily than ectomorphs, mesomorphs can sculpt their body and increase in strength very quickly. They can get bulky muscles if trained incorrectly so need fine training of technique to avoid injury. Mesomorphs do well on programs focusing on training core stability and postural muscles, with Pilates for example, rather than working with weights. Once aware of how to use their body correctly, they can make fantastic athletic performers.

"Endomorphs" tend to have increased fat storage and often will have to watch their diet carefully. They tend to have a wider waist and large bone structure. Dancers who are prone to this body shape often do well with a low GI diet as they may have problems with sustaining efficient glycogen stores. Increasing the level of resistance training to increase their lean body mass may help in regulating body fat levels.

Remember that we are all usually a combination of at least two of the above body types, and all individuals can modify their body enormously by the type and quantities of foods they consume and exercise they partake in. All body types can be condusive to dance, however it is important that each dancer is trained according to their type.

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Height and Weight

As with age, there is no one height or weight that can be given as 'safe' to go onto pointe. However, they both must be taken into consideration when an adolescent is preparing for pointe. Some teenagers grow slowly and steadily over several years, before reaching a plateau where they will stop growing. Other individuals will grow rapidly in a short period of time, and then stall for several months before shooting up again.

It is important to monitor the growth rate of students over this time, especially when the issue of pointe work is raised as excessive activity at the growth plates in the heel and knee may be damaged by excessive pointe work. In some cases it is necessary to take a girl off pointe while she is having a period of rapid growth to avoid any damage to these delicate areas.

I suggest to all students that I see in this age group, to measure themselves on the first of every month against a door frame (or similar) in their house to monitor their rate of growth. This should obviously be done without shoes, and ideally in the same place each month. It may be a wise idea to have a ruler set up in the studio, to measure students at regular intervals to keep an eye on this.

The issue of a dancers weight is a very delicate issue at the best of times, and in adolescent dancers must be approached with caution. I do not suggest pulling out a set of scales in class, but making a casual note of how a child is progressing through puberty helps you keep an eye on her development through the tumultuous teenage years. Care must be taken with any wording in class situations, as even innocent comments such as *"Your legs are looking so strong!"* can be misconstrued by the paranoid teen as *"Your legs are fat!"*

I simply make a mark on the assessment form, giving two ticks (✓✓) for a healthy weight, one tick (✓) if the student is a little under or over weight, with an arrow to indicate if weight is increased (↑) or decreased (↓), and a dash (-) if I feel that there is cause for concern.

For example:

Other Factors		
	Mark	**Notes**
Height	*150 cm*	↑ *5cm in last month*
Weight	✓	↓

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Maturity

The social maturity of a dancer is extremely important in the decision to progress onto pointe. While a girl may demonstrate excellent strength and control in a one-on-one situation, she may struggle to keep the same attention in class when she is with her friends. In this case pointe work may be done only in private lessons, or withheld until the dancer can demonstrate that she is responsible in class.

I believe that girls who are en pointe should care for their own shoes themselves. If they are constantly disorganized and forget to bring things to class this should be addressed before progressing onto pointe. Students should learn how to sew their own ribbons onto the shoes and take responsibility for the up keep and care of the shoes themselves. I suggest that girls earn money to pay for each pair of pointe shoes. This helps to increase the care of the shoes enormously. Whether this is done through odd jobs at home or external work (e.g. assistant teaching) is up to the parent.

HOW TO WORK STUDENTS THROUGH THE PROGRAM

Integration of 'The Perfect Pointe System'

The values and threats of positive feedback

Visualization ideas for class work

Integration of 'The Perfect Pointe System'

One of the hardest challenges a teacher faces is having a class full of children with very different levels of ability. Perhaps it is even harder when students have ability and do not use it! I occasionally find this problem with some students who can perform each of the tests beautifully for me within the clinical setting however they do not perform to the same level in class. By incorporating some of the tests and exercises into the class setting, and constantly making reference to pages in the book, the connection between the two will be stimulated in the student's mind. Performing the tests alongside their peers can also help encourage some students to practice more if they are lagging behind their friends.

The following section may help to incorporate elements needed for pointe into class the year before assessing the students even becomes an issue. Many schools will have a specific pre-pointe class, and this is advisable, however integration into regular class work is also extremely important. The visualization ideas suggested also provide a way of incorporating the concepts without becoming too anatomical!

I believe that the pre-pointe stage is a very important time for helping girls to take responsibility for their own bodies and learn that they have the capacity to make a change. It is essential that each girl get a copy of the book so that they can work through the stages and mark their results down themselves. Getting a copy of the book printed out means that they can bring it with them to ballet and read it whenever they have time, which will help the students to get a better grasp of concept of the book. The new version of the book allows the girls to go through each stage as an audio visual workshop, which is fantastic as they do not need to read each part of the book which describes a stage. Going over the course several times is great practise and will increase the retention of the information given. Please encourage your students to get their own copy to work through and encourage them to bring it with them to class.

_____*Term 1*_____

The first term of the ballet calendar is an ideal time to start on all of the tests and exercises in **Stage 1** of 'The Perfect Pointe Book'. Go through the tests in class, and encourage them to do the program 3-5 times a week to really improve their range. This will help the mobility of the feet and achieve good placement at the height of rise.

1. Go through the pre-pointe assessment with each student, or as a class to let them know what will be expected of them prior to commencing pointe work the next year.
2. Do the Stage 1 tests in pairs, to encourage students to begin being critical of technique. Make sure that they write their results carefully in the boxes of the worksheets.
3. Encourage the students to arrive a little early for class to go over the Stage 1 exercises prior to their class with you.
4. Remind students to really use their full height of rise in class.
5. Get the students to perform Plié and Tendus exercises with their ballet slippers off and their tights rolled up to see the feet at least once a week.
6. Hold balances at the end of exercises. Try different visualization techniques for holding balances to see which ones work for each individual.
7. Include 'Double Leg Rises in Parallel' in sets of 20 at the end of each barre. Focus on alignment and placement. Begin with parallel, then progress to working in turnout as placement and height improves.
8. It is an essential step before progressing onto further strengthening that the girls can place their foot in a good demi-pointe position and that they have enough range through the front of the ankle. If some students find this difficult I recommend commencing some gentle massage work with a family member or a friend through this area. If this does not assist in increasing range, consult a professional physical or massage therapist for several sessions.

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Term One		
Task	**Details**	**Completed**
Introduce pre-pointe assessment	Explain to all students that they must be able to do all tests well before progressing onto pointe	
Introduce The Perfect Pointe Book	Encourage students to get a copy and work through it	
Go over Stage 1 Tests	Demi-pointe range Pointe Range Toe to Wall	
Revise Stage 1 Exercises	The Tripod Foot Calf Stretches Pointe Stretch Golf Ball Massage Toe Swapping Pointe Through Demi-pointe Seated Rises Big Toe Exercise	
Check worksheet weekly	Check all exercises done on the appropriate day	
Pre Class Exercises	Golf Ball massage Pointe Stretch	
During Barre	Note height of demi-pointe Plié and tendus without tights Hold Balances	
End of barre	20 Double leg rises in parallel Focus on technique	
After Class	Calf and Pointe Stretch	

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_____*Term 2*_____

Once the girls have been focusing on the mobility of their feet in class for the first three months you can start to get a little more specific with articulating the foot. Term 2 is a good time to start working on **Stage 2** of the program in 'The Perfect Pointe Book', given that all students can pass the levels for Stage 1. Stage 2 focuses on strengthening the foot by learning how to engage all the small foot muscles and build up their strength and endurance. All of these exercises should be done at home on a regular basis and you can get your students to bring in their sheets to check they have been doing the exercises at home.

Often homework and schooling will limit the time the students have to do these exercises. However, giving the girls examples of time when they can perform the exercises is helpful. This may be when they are standing at the bus stop in their school shoes or at ballet class after they have completed their class work. Frequent attention to the small muscles of the feet will drastically improve their strength.

1. Go through the pre-pointe assessment again with the class, to see if they have improved from the previous term, and to remind them of the assessment points.

2. Go through all of the tests of Stage 2 of 'The Perfect Pointe Book' and encourage them to record their results in the appropriate chart.

3. It is good to introduce some specific toe exercises such as the 'Toe Swapping' exercise before class as this starts to wake up the required muscles. Encourage the girls to test their parents and siblings and work on this as a family.

4. Really engage the articulation of the ball of the foot through any tendus exercises.

5. Complete each barre practice with a set of 'Single Leg Rises in Parallel', start with 8-10 rises and progress to 15 or 20. Always remind the students to focus on the alignment and control of the foot. A lot of young girls will want to do the exercises really quickly but it is important for them to establish control through the deep muscles of the foot and of the calves by performing the exercises slowly and with good control.

6. Encourage the girls to massage their feet after class, or trade their Mother or Father for a foot massage in the evenings! Frequent mobilization of the small bones of the foot and relaxation of the muscles will help maintain their flexibility and prevent cramping in the small muscles that will be woken up with all the new exercises.

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Term Two		
Task	**Details**	**Completed**
Revise pre-pointe assessment	All Students	
Revise Stage 2 Tests	Single Leg Standing Single Leg Rises	
Revise Stage 2 Exercises	Balance Exercises Rises With Theraband Rises Calf Stretches Toe Swapping Golf Ball Massage Turnout Exercise in retiré Piriformis Stretch Side Lifts	
Check worksheet weekly	Check all exercises done on the appropriate day	
Pre Class Exercises	Toe Swapping etc…	
During Barre	Articulate foot and ankle in tendus Watch clawing of toes	
End of barre	Single leg rises in turnout 8 - 20	
After Class	Foot massage Pointe Stretch Calf Stretches	

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_____*Term 3*_____

Term 3 is when progression to working on turnout should occur. Stage 3 of 'The Perfect Pointe Book' discusses the true turnout muscles and helps girls identify them on their own body. As adolescent dancer's can have multiple problems with their knees due to the often rapid rate of growth at this time it is important to make sure that students are not screwing their knees to achieve more than their own safe range of turnout.

1. Go through the pre-pointe assessment at the start of term to re-align the students focus on their goal.

2. Go through the Stage 3 tests at the start of term, and then every two weeks to keep them focused on integrating the exercises into functional ballet work.

3. At the barre focus on getting turnout from the hip with all exercises especially battements tendus, battements glissés and battements frappés.

4. When performing exercises such as a developpé, it is good to reduce the height of the leg en l'air and focus more on rotating the leg correctly from the hip. Once the girls can perform this well at 45˚, they can then progress to 90˚. Then when they finally take the leg above the hip they will be a lot stronger and will experience less irritation into the front of the hip

5. Insist on height of range in rises, especially if you have seen it before on a particular girl or boy, as students can often get lazy during ordinary class work.

6. Bring in 'Single Leg Rises in Turnout' in pairs at the end of barre. At least two sets of 10 repetitions. Get students to watch their partner's feet and body to pick up any weaknesses.

7. In the centre, note control of turnout with landings in Petit and Grand Allegro. Reduce the height of the jumps for the first half of an exercise if needed, to allow controlled landings.

8. Insist on students arriving 15 minutes early to do:
   - Golf ball massage.
   - Toe Swapping.
   - Calf Stretches.
   - Functional Turnout Exercise.
   - Piriformis Stretch.

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Term Three		
Task	**Details**	**Completed**
Revise pre-pointe assessment	All Students	
Revise Stage 3 Tests every fortnight	Plié In First Position Single Knee Bends	
Revise Stage 3 Exercises	Turnout Ex in Kneeling Parallel To Turnout Functional Turnout Ex Piriformis Stretch Inner Thigh Lifts Three Legged Cat – V1 Cat Stretch Wall Press Gluteal Stretch	
Check worksheet weekly	Check all exercises done on the appropriate day	
Pre Class Exercises	Golf Ball, Toe Swap, Calf Stretch Functional Turnout Ex Piriformis Stretch	
During Barre	Lead with heel in tendus Maintain turnout with all barre Low developpé until good technique	
Centre Work	Insist on control of turnout with landing petit allegro	
After Class	Three Legged Cat Cat Stretch Piriformis and Gluteal Stretch	

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_____*Term 4*_____

At this stage the students should begin **Stage 4** of the program which works on controlling the core, and holding balance without support from the barre. Take special note of dependence on the barre when practising syllabus exercises. Especially during adage and allegro in the center, take note whether girls can retain the strength that they have been developing when focusing on barre work.

1. At the start of the term, go through the full assessment with the class as a refresher. Let them know when you will be doing the full individual assessment so that they can prepare. Some teachers like to do one assessment before summer break and another when the students return from their holidays to encourage them to continue with the program during the holiday period.

2. Introduce more challenging balances as variations in exercises (Not around exam time!), and occasionally try keeping the arms in seconde rather than on the barre.

3. Practice occasional exercises with eyes shut. (Tendu is a good place to start) This also has the added benefit of checking musicality, and those students who know the repertoire, as well as challenging the balance. Begin withdrawing correcting cues and see when the students relapse into old habits.

4. Begin the pointe repertoire at the end of each barre en demi-pointe so that the students learn the work.

5. Test some of the sections in the full Assessment at the beginning of center in each class. For Example: ‘Rises on Demi-pointe’, ‘Relevés Passés’ etc. Note points of weakness and get students to work out which exercise from the book would be most appropriate to correct these weaknesses.

6. Often studios have performances and shows at the end of the ballet year, and so time in the studio may be devoted to rehearsals rather than syllabus work. Encourage students to use any ‘down-time’ to continue to work on their foot and ankle strength.

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Term Four		
Task	**Details**	**Completed**
Revise pre-pointe assessment	Advise when formal assessment will be done	
Revise Stage 4 Tests every week	Balance on Demi-Pointe Relevé Passé	
Revise Stage 4 Exercises	Side Lifts Demi-Pointe Balance Rises With Theraband Calf Stretches Piano Playing Turnout Ex In Retiré Three Legged Cat - V 2 Piriformis Stretch Bug Legs Hip Flexor Stretch	
Check worksheet weekly	Check all exercises done on the appropriate day	
Pre Class Exercises	Pointe Through Demi-Pointe Doming Calf Stretches	
During Barre	Tendus with eyes closed Balance variations Arms in seconde rather than on the barre	
Centre Work	Do Stage 4 tests at the start of each centre practice	
After Class	Three Legged Cat – V 2 Bug Legs Hip Flexor and Gluteal Stretch	

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The Values and Threats of Positive Feedback

In this day and age parents are often encouraged to use 'Positive Parenting' skills to help their children deal with the demands of daily life. While this approach definitely has its benefits, many children now demand constant praise in all areas of life, and often struggle if a dance teacher is not attending to them as much as they would like. Many students do not cope well with criticism, and as this may be the first time you have really 'assessed' the student, it is wise to be prepared for some varied responses.

When performing any of the tests in the assessment process, it is important for the child to know how they are going in relation to progressing onto pointe. However, we must take care in how we articulate things if the child is not as competent as their classmates. While ideally the child will see it as a challenge and strive to reach their goal, not all students will respond in this way. The opposite attitude may be present in the assumption that "I am not good at this; I will never get onto pointe".

How the child has been raised and the family environment has a lot to do with this reaction and it is not a dance teacher's responsibility to change a student's attitude – however, a little tact and empathy can go a long way. Encourage the student with statements like "You are looking more stable on that foot today, keep it up" or "that's almost there" to keep them motivated. I am not suggesting that praise is the only form of feedback as often young girls can get 'big headed' with constant praise. I am simply trying to suggest that students do need to know that their efforts are appreciated.

We must also be aware of using too much positive feedback, as some students may believe that they are far better than they actually are. I often use a mirror for feedback to the student about a certain test, and ask them for their opinion on their control and stability. Some actually look genuinely surprised when they wobble around or don't look like they thought they did. If they can recognize this, it is the first stage towards improvement. If they struggle to see the issue initially, they can often see it once the weakness is pointed out or demonstrated.

Obviously you don't want to make up improvements but a little encouragement from you will go a long way to make a girl work harder. Even a small smile of appreciation from my original teacher would fill me with joy and make me strive to make it happen again, whereas any criticism I took very personally for a significant period of time following the correction. Students need to know that it is not a personal flaw if they are not able to do a test perfectly the first time, but that the tests are just tools we use to help them improve their dancing as much as possible. I explain this to all the students I assess, and warn them that I will be "very picky" before I start, to avoid any disappointment during or after the assessment.

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I caution all teachers to be careful how they display any results from the specific tests and if you are unsure of the possible repercussions, it is probably more advisable to keep a private file with each of the students results in it, rather than display the results publically. Girls of this age can be particularly nasty to their peers, and dealing with the social repercussions of a poor result may be too much for a young girl who is already sad that she cannot go en pointe yet.

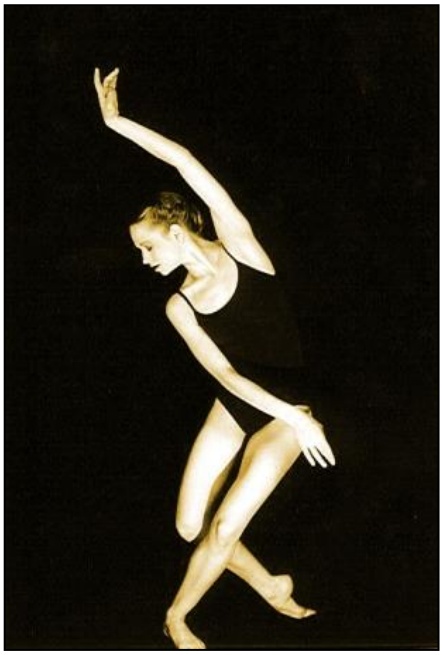
Every dance teacher will have her own style of teaching, and it is this richness in variation that encourages the best from all different types of students' personalities. If students are planning on progressing to any kind of career in dance, they must be prepared to be judged and will often face disappointment. If they can learn effective strategies for dealing with this early on, and understand that by 'not passing' or 'failing' an assessment does not mean that 'they' are a 'failure', they will survive the later years much more successfully.

Visualization Ideas for Class Work

Sometimes when an increased focus is put on the anatomy and the mechanics of the feet and body, dancers can sometimes lose a little of the natural look to their dancing and become quite stiff and mechanical. With some students I find that they respond better to visualization ideas rather than direct knowledge of the anatomy. Some students however, respond extremely well to learning the nuts and bolts of how their feet are made up and this is the best way to work with these students.

When including visualizations in class it is often helpful to note which students respond to what visualizations. Often the same wording will not produce the same result in two different students, even if they have the same issue. Therefore it is good to have several ideas to explain each movement so that this can address the different learning styles of the students. Some students are ***kinesthetic*** learners and respond to 'feeling' something, whereas others are more ***visual*** learners and will respond better to mimicking the shape of another structure or movement. Some students will respond extremely well to a demonstration of the right and wrong way of doing something. Some students will respond to hands on corrections, while others may freeze up when touched.

On the pages describing each of the assessment tests I have included several ways of encouraging students to achieve the correct core movements for getting ready for pointe work; however these lists are by no means exhaustive. There are many books on visualization for dancers and Eric Franklin is generally regarded as the authority in this area.



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AFTER THE ASSESSMENT

Choosing shoes

How to ensure that pointe shoes are fitted correctly

Padding for pointe shoes

'Breaking-in' pointe shoes

Sewing on the ribbons

Caring for pointe shoes

Hours of training

Pain en pointe

Dealing with 'Pushy mothers'

When to say 'No'

Choosing Shoes

There are many different brands of pointe shoes and there is no one shoe that is fabulous for everyone. Different girls have different shaped feet, with some having very long toes while others may have narrow heels. Most brands make several different shapes and styles of pointe shoes, which are designed for different people and different uses. It is however extremely important to find a shoe that is suitable for each dancers foot. This may be quite hard the first few times as she will not be sure of what it should really feel like. As she works in several different pairs, she will learn what aspects of each she likes, and will often settle on one brand and style of shoe.

One way to find the shoe that is best for each student is to direct her to a store that has several makes of shoe to find the one that suits her foot the best. Once she find which brand suits her, she may find a specialty store that stocks only that one brand will probably have more shoes around her size to get a great fit. Some dance teachers like all their girls to have the same brand; however the chances of all those feet needing the same shoe are pretty slim! It is better for each girl to find the shoe that fits them the best, and then find ways to make the satins appear the same for performances.

The strength of the shank is important, yet controversial. Some people like beginners to have a stronger shank to help support them en pointe until they get stronger, while others believe that the learner needs a softer, medium density shank to learn how to work through the shoe properly. I feel that the second option is usually the best, especially when a girl has strengthened her feet and ankles properly before starting pointe. Typically, when girls are beginning pointe work they are only doing a few minutes at the end of class, and so do not need a super strong shoe to last the rigors of a professional class. This is especially true if they do not have much body weight. A medium density shank will allow the shoe to be broken in enough to help them get onto pointe, and work the foot in the shoe, while still supporting the foot while en pointe.

However, if you have an adult or older teenager starting en pointe, then they may require a stronger shank to help support their weight. Breaking in the heel as I demonstrate later in the manual is essential to be able to work the foot correctly en pointe, yet will leave the lower part of the shank strong enough to help stabilize the main part of the foot.

How to Ensure Pointe Shoes are Fitted Correctly

Having pointe shoes that fit well can make all the difference in a dancer loving or hating pointe work, so it is important to get it right from the beginning. Ill fitting shoes can result in not only pain and discomfort while dancing, but also black toenails, blisters and even stress fractures in the foot. As there are so many different types of pointe shoes this is often very confusing for first time buyers, so if at all possible go to the first fitting with the student, or get an experienced older student to go along. Once you have found a fitter in your area that you trust, send the girls directly to them, and advise them to book an appointment ahead of time.

While the person who fits the shoes should check all of the following things, always make sure you check the fit of the shoes with each child before they sew on the ribbons, break in the shoe or dance in them. If the shoes get dirty by wearing them around the house, they may not be able to be returned to the store, and it can become a very expensive exercise. She should always try the shoe on with any padding or 'Ouch Pouches' that she will wear while dancing, so advise her of what padding you feel is suitable before the fitting. Going over the following areas with the students in class, before their fitting, may help them choose an appropriate shoe at the fitting. After the student has bought the shoes, or several pairs for you to check, check the shoe in each of the following positions.

a Check the fit of the box:

The foot should fit snugly in standing; with the toes not too squashed in (They should be able to lie flat). There should be no bulging of the skin over the top edge of the shoe in standing. The top of the box should sit against the skin of the top of the foot. You should be able to just slide the first section of your finger inside the shoe. If the box is too high for a flat foot, there will be more space here. You can flatten the box slightly, but this will also alter the width.

b Look at the length of the wings:

The wings should come up to the side of the big toe joint. If they are too short, the box will pull the big toe in on an angle and may cause a bunion to form. If they are too long, it may be hard to work properly through the demi-pointe.

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c Check the position of the heel of the shoe:

The satin of the heel should come 7/8 of the way up the heel bone. Too high, and the student may get problems with the attachment of the Achilles tendon attachment. Too low, and she will get frustrated with the heel of the shoe popping off when she tries to rise.

d Watch the length of the vamp:

This is the depth of the front of the shoe. If the vamp is too long you will not be able to rise through the demi-pointe effectively. If it is too short for long toes however, you will feel like you are falling out of the front of the shoe.

e Plié in first and seconde position:

When performing a plié the foot is at its longest and widest, so it is important to check that there is enough room in the shoe for the foot while dancing. The toes should stay long in the shoe, and only just touch the end of the shoe at the depth of the plié. If she has very short toes, she may need to pad up inside the box of the shoe to get a nice line of the shoe, and a correctly fitting box.

f Placed en pointe:

It is important to check the fit of the shoe in an upright position before putting any weight on it. Place the tip of one shoe on the floor, with the other foot flat on the floor. Press down slightly to check the fit of the box. The foot should be supported in the box, and not sink down too much. Check the amount of satin at the back of the heel. If the foot has slid forward in the shoe, because the shoe is too wide, there will be more satin. If the top of the foot is bulging out, or the shank is twisting, the box is too small. Make sure that both the big and little toe knuckle joints are supported by the wings. If they are too short the

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top of the wings will cut in and give an unsightly line to the toe of the shoe and may increase the likelihood of blisters.

g The length of the shank:

Check the length of the shank by peeling the satin of the shoe off the heel and folding it back under the shoe. Place the foot back en pointe, and check where the sole finishes. The end of the sole/shank should be just short of the end of the heel. If the shoe is too long there may be bagging of the satin at the back of the shoe, as the satin is cut to cup the heel. If the shank is too short however, the foot will tend to wobble more, and the satin will pull too low. This results in the back of the shoe often popping off when rising from demi to full pointe and can be very annoying.

h Weight-bearing en pointe

Once you have a good fit, she may try weight-bearing through the shoe by stepping up onto pointe. Have her hold onto the back of a stable chair or bench, and place one foot en pointe. Put some weight through that shoe and then bring the other foot up onto pointe. Make sure the toes are pointed long in the shoe and that there are no areas of severe pressure on any toe. Look to see that the shank sits in line with the sole of the foot when the foot is en pointe. If the shank of the shoe is twisting, check the alignment of the foot first. As long as the box is sitting square and the foot is in good alignment, it should be ok. Often twisting of the shoe is due to the shank not conforming to the shape of the arch and can be remedied by breaking in the heel of the shoe before wearing. However, the shank may also twist on the foot if the box is too narrow, so recheck this area again.

Padding for Pointe Shoes

The battle continues to wage on what is the best type of padding, if any, to use in pointe shoes. Many dancers use nothing at all, and believe that this helps strengthen their feet, and thicken the skin, however this can be extremely painful.

Especially with beginners, I like to use a fine layer of gel padding, encased in fabric to cushion the tops of their toes from the under surface of the box. If pointe work is painful, the dancer will not feel relaxed about it, and this will show in any performance. If you are opposed to using a product such as 'ouch pouches' she can shape a piece of foam rubber from a basic shoe inner-sole (available from the supermarket for a few dollars) to fit inside the shoe, over her toes, to cushion the top surfaces of the toes. This allows the toes to still be free in the shoe, allowing more 'feel' for the more experienced dancer.

Traditionally many dancers have used lamb's wool or similar fleece to cushion the toes. Natural fibres are good, due to their absorbent qualities however many other products can be used. Options include:

- Alpaca wool
- Jelly tubes for individual toes
- Small strips of a thin dishcloth wrapped around each toe
- Medical tape
- Cloth band-aids

Dancers who do not like to use padding use various products to help harden and thicken the skin on the toes to prevent blisters. Methylated spirits, alum and various other liquids may help protect her skin; however the best insurance against blisters is to keep the toes long in the shoes. This is achieved by strengthening the small intrinsic muscles of the feet, as described in The Perfect Pointe Book.

'Breaking-in' Pointe Shoes

Every dancer and dance teacher has her own method of breaking in her pointe shoes for wearing. Some dancers simply soften the box a little, some insist on working the shoe with the foot in it, while others bang, cut and bend various parts of the shoe in order to make it wearable. I concur with those that feel the shoe should be worked in on the foot; however I find that a little judicial softening of two crucial points before wearing will actually extend the life of the shoe. If done incorrectly however, it can weaken the shoe too much, so it must be done with caution. When your students are progressing onto pointe, make sure you tell them to watch the free video I created to show them how to do this on www.youtube.com by searching for "Lisa Howell" or "breaking in pointe shoes"

Initially the shank (supportive sole of the shoe) is reasonably hard. If the shoe is worn like this, without prior softening, it will tend to break in the middle of the arch, where it is under most stress. Once this happens the shoe is usually labelled "dead", and may be pulled apart (or "broken down") to make demi-pointe shoes. However, if the shoe is pre-weakened further back towards the heel initially, it will continue to weaken at this point when worn, preserving the rest of the shank. It also gives a much nicer line to the foot, and offers much more support.

Some dancers also like to soften various other parts of the shoe, and most dancers develop quite a ritual as to how they like their shoes prepared for wearing. Some repeatedly tap the tip of the box against a firm surface to soften the glue to make it quieter (especially for romantic ballets). Some need to massage the box to make it softer in certain areas to accommodate a larger pinkie toe or bunion. Girls will learn these tricks through years of working in pointe shoes, however usually this is not necessary when she first starts en pointe. She should be warned to avoid some of the more drastic techniques often shown in dance movies such as slashing the shoes with a knife or slamming them in a door, as this can destroy the shoe very quickly. She may also like to wear the shoes, with socks over the top and gently walk in them at home to soften the glue with her body heat, to allow the box to conform to the toe. Working the foot correctly, in simple barre work, without going up onto her toes, is one of the best ways to soften in the shoes in all the right areas as well as helping to strengthen the foot.

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Sewing On the Ribbons

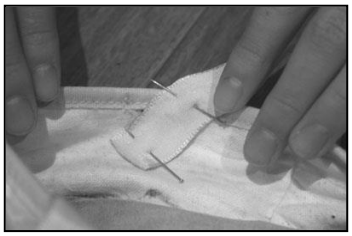
I believe that one of the very first things a dancer should learn when going onto pointe is how to sew her own ribbons on. Far too often, this job gets left for Mom to do, however I feel that girls need to take responsibility for the care of their shoes if they are responsible enough to be en pointe.

Having the ribbons pulling up at the right angle is very important in keeping the satin of the shoe snug around your heel. Many girls have all kinds of elastic contraptions to hold the heel of the shoe on. However, this is not usually necessary. Many of the issues with their shoe can be solved by simply adjusting their ribbons, or by choosing a slightly different shoe. Make sure that they use a high quality ribbon. The cheaper ribbons do not have as much give and can 'strangle' the ankle a little en fondu! Some girls like to use ribbons that have a small piece of elastic in the part of the ribbon that crosses the Achilles tendon. This can be helpful if they have had problems with the Achilles, or if the ribbons cut into the back of the ankle. You do need to make sure that the elastic is at the back of the ankle though!!!

a. Fold the back of the shoe in, where the back of the heel would sit.

b. Use the angle of the fold to guide where the ribbon will be placed.

c. Place the back edge of the ribbon along the fold (on the inside of the shoe) and pin in place (make sure the good side of the ribbon is facing out!)



d. Check the position by putting the shoe on (be careful of the pins!). Place the foot flat and then en pointe and test the position by pulling the ribbons to check that the satin is held flat.

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e. Take the shoe off again and have the dancer sew the ribbons on carefully, around all four sides of the end of the ribbon with tiny stitches.

f. Take care not to sew through the casing for the draw-string as she will not be able to adjust the tension again!! However, make sure they do a row of tiny stitches to hold the top if the casing against the ribbon to keep it in close to the foot.

g. Make sure that the stitches do not go all the way through the satin, but just catch a few threads of the canvas inside the shoe. You should not be able to see the stitches from the outside of the shoe.

h. Test the stability of the stitching by pulling the ribbons firmly in several directions. It is better to find any weak stitches at this stage, rather than when en pointe!

i. Put the shoes on and tie the ribbons neatly. Tuck in the ends on the inside of the ankle. Test the stability and placement of the ribbons by working through the demi-pointe, and onto full pointe several times

Remember; this is a simple guide for students to use to learn how to attach the ribbons when first starting pointe work. Each dancer has a certain angle they like to use so they may need to try several slightly different angles until the satin is held snug at the heel.

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Caring for Pointe Shoes

A few hints in how to care for their pointe shoes can make a huge difference to the life of the shoes for young students. This is obviously good for the parents who will not need to buy shoes as frequently, and will get the girls in good habits for life.

- **Always remove any padding from the box directly after use**.

  As the feet sweat in the shoes, any slightly damp padding left in the box of the shoe may prematurely soften the glue of the box and weaken it.

- **Hang the shoes up to dry thoroughly after use.**

  Again, damp shoes weaken very quickly, so pointe shoes should be hung in a warm dry area with plenty of air circulating to maintain their strength. Shoving them in a ballet bag or throwing them in a locker is not advisable!

- **Wear socks over the shoes when breaking them in out of the studio.**

  While it is unsafe to dance with socks over the top of pointe shoes, thin socks may be worn over the top of pointe shoes when softening a new pair. This helps keep the heat in and stops them from getting too grubby.

- **Have two pairs and alternate them.**

  Once a child is doing more that 3 pointe lessons a week, it is a wise idea to get an additional pair, and alternate them for class. This ensures that shoes get dried out thoroughly between wears, and also means that the student has a spare if a shoe dies in a performance.

- **Use shellac if possible.** Some new styles of shoe do not absorb shellac, however with some older styles the shank may be reinforced with several coats of shellac once worn several times. This helps extend the life of the shoe, especially if done before it ‘dies’.

Hours of Training

While girls who are new to pointe work will typically want to wear their beautiful new shoes as much as possible, be careful not to over-do any lessons en pointe in the first few years.

- Initially, new pointe students should only be doing 10 – 15 minutes en pointe at any one time. As they are still developing the stability in their bony growth plates, confining the foot in a pointe shoe and placing load through it has the potential for injury no matter how strong the child is.

- Once a student has been en pointe for a year or so, lessons en pointe may be extended to half an hour. Under the age of 13 I do not feel that it is necessary for girls to have more than 30 mins at a time in their shoes, and should spend the rest of the lesson working on other foot exercises, or on general technique, outside the confines of a pointe shoe.

- Over the age of 13 to 14 students may be to gradually increase their hour's en pointe as long as there is no sign of pain or injury. It is better to pull back over periods of growth, and at the first sign of any injury, to sort out any issues in technique before they become established. Once a student has developed a bad habit en pointe, it is very hard to break the pattern.

Pain en Pointe

Many older dancers claim that it is part of the territory to have sore, blistered, bleeding feet when dancing en pointe. However, this is simply not necessary. If her feet and toes are strong, and they have well fitting shoes with a small amount of padding in the appropriate areas, your daughters' feet should stay in pretty good shape. I am so passionate about getting this realization out in the world, so that we can save so many young dancers from ruining their feet to become 'real dancers'.

That being said, pointe work is not like wearing slippers! The feet are held firmly in the shoes, and there may certainly be a little discomfort for new students initially, as the feet are held in a position that they are not used to. This however should not be painful. If any student is experiencing real pain, she should be encouraged to let you know, so that together you can determine if there is an issue with the fit of the shoe, inefficient padding strategies, a strength issue or a technique fault. Most often I find one (or more) of these four areas is the issue and most discomfort can be easily resolved.

One of the most common causes of pain and of blisters forming on the knuckles of dancers' toes en pointe is 'clawing' of the toes in the shoes. I feel that it is essential for girls to master maintaining the position of their toes correctly before starting en pointe to help prevent this common problem. If girls can keep their toes "long" when pointing, there is must less chance of the blisters developing, and therefore less pain! Carefully preparing the girls for pointe using The Perfect Pointe Book and the system described in this manual will help reduce the likelihood of this happening.

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How to Deal With Pushy Mothers

Many studio owners are very used to dealing with parents who believe that their child is extremely talented and beyond their actual ability. It can often be quite hard for the teacher to explain why one student is not able to progress onto pointe when others in the class are ready. The objectivity of the tests in this method of assessing children for pointe can help the parent understand why one student is being held back or pushed forward in relation to others in the class. I do find it helpful to have the parent present while I conduct the assessment so that they can see the level of strength that is required to pass each stage of the assessment. There are however, several 'do's' and 'do not's' to cope with a demanding parent wondering why their child is unable to progress onto pointe and I have outlined a few below.

Do Not:

- Say it is because the rest of the class is not ready.
- Promise a date that it will happen (The child may not be ready).
- Avoid making it anything to with the students' personality.

Do:

- Allow the parent to watch the assessment and explain what you are seeing.
- Let the mother read the articles in this book.
- Point her to a 'Mothers' Discussion forum on the internet (www.dancemom.com)
- Show her photos of feet damaged by early pointe.
- Assure her that you are doing it for the students' best interest.
- Recommend that she downloads the 'Perfect Form Physiotherapy Parents Guide' from www.theballetblog.com.

Ultimately, all parents do want what is best for their child, and once she understands why you are being cautious, she should feel comfortable with your decision. The worst that could happen is that the child is taken to another school, however this will rarely happen. If it does, then it is much better for the responsibility to be taken by another teacher rather than you compromising your standards of letting a child en pointe too early.

When to Say "No"

There are of course some students that should never be en pointe. This is often the hardest decision for a teacher to make, but it is important that children are not put in danger if they really should not be en pointe. Situations where pointe work should be excluded include:

- **Excessive uncontrolled hypermobility.**

  While good mobility is important in a dancer, excessive mobility in the feet and knees, without the appropriate control has the potential for serious injury.

- **Immaturity in class.**

  If a child is unable to maintain her attention on her body in a regular class she should not be allowed to progress onto pointe. Students who may disrupt other students in class risk injuring not only themselves, but other dancers as well. This is an ideal time to insist on disciplined behavior in class.

- **Lack of responsibility for self.**

  If a student can't be bothered to do her exercises, or is disorganized with regular classes, she will be unlikely to complete the required strength training while en pointe. Insist that she prove she is dedicated by obtaining the appropriate strength before progressing en pointe.

- **Marked restriction in range.**

  Any student with less than -5˚ pointe range will struggle en pointe. It is better to work on her range prior to starting pointe, and if it does not respond to all the treatments in 'The Perfect Pointe Book', she should be referred to a medical professional for assessment.

- **Bony disorders of any kind.**

  Some students may have had previous foot or ankle injuries that have damaged the joint surfaces in their feet. Extreme caution must be taken with these students and a medical opinion should be sought.

BEGINNER POINTE EXERCISES

Foot placement in parallel and first position

Single leg balancing

Seated rises

Prances at the barre

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Foot Placement in Parallel and First Position

Before the girls get too carried away with pirouetting across the stage, it is important that they know how to correctly work the foot in their pointe shoes, and can hold their balance in standing. The base of the shoe is quite different to regular ballet slippers so it takes a bit of getting used to! They should always go through any exercises with you before they try anything alone.

- Get the student to put her shoes on, correctly tie the ribbons, and stand in parallel, with the feet slightly apart.
- Ask her to feel where her weight is, and roll the foot in and out to find a neutral position.
- It is very easy to roll in when wearing pointe shoes so make sure that her arches are gently activated.
- Get her to try moving the weight forwards and backwards and feel how the pressure changes.

- Repeat in first position. Ensure that the legs are turned out from the hips, and there is no twisting force through the knees.
- Ask her to perform 8 demi-pliés in first position
- Then ask her to repeat all of the above exercises with her eyes closed.

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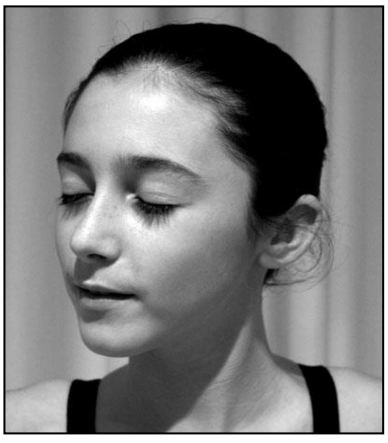
Single Leg Balancing

- Ask the student to stand on one leg, in parallel.

- Make sure the ankle is stable, the arches are on, and the knee is facing forward by turning the leg out from the hip.
- Make sure she keeps her hips level, and her deep tummy muscles on.

- The weight should be slightly forward, with 60% of the pressure on the ball of the foot.
- Hold for at least 10 seconds, and repeat three times each side.
- Repeat in turnout.



- Then ask her to do the balances in parallel again, this time with her eyes closed (have the fingers resting on a bench or the barre the first time she does this as it is a little tricky!).
- Do at least three repetitions of ten seconds on each side.

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Seated Rises

Working through the demi-pointe area of the shoe is a great strengthening exercise for the toes, and is important in softening the shoe before beginning any harder exercises. Focus on the basics when commencing pointe work will assist the student in developing good technique early.

Get the student seated on a chair or standing at the barre. Push one foot through demi-pointe and up to full pointe.

- Make sure she works through the demi-pointe on the way up, and on the way down.
- En pointe, make sure that the tip of the box is flat on the floor and the ankle is nicely aligned. (No fishing!)
- Ask her to push slightly over full pointe, using the muscles in the arch, to get the foot used to working to the end of range.

- Work the foot slowly back down, really trying to feel how she can tell the foot to move in the shoe.
- Repeat at least twenty times each foot.

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Prances at the Barre

This exercise helps newcomers to pointe work, learn how to articulate through the demi-pointe correctly. This is important to avoid jumping onto pointe which can cause many common foot injuries.

- Get the dancer to stand facing the barre with the feet in parallel and slightly apart.

- Roll one foot up onto pointe, working through the demi-pointe.

- As she brings that foot back down, ask her to begin rising through the other foot so they meet on the demi-pointe.

- Continue working through both shoes, so that the one toe comes onto pointe as the heel of the other foot touches the floor. Repeat, alternating feet each time for at least twenty repetitions.

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APPENDICIES

Pre-pointe questionnaire

Pre-pointe assessment sheets

Growth table

Growth chart

Term 1

Term 2

Term 3

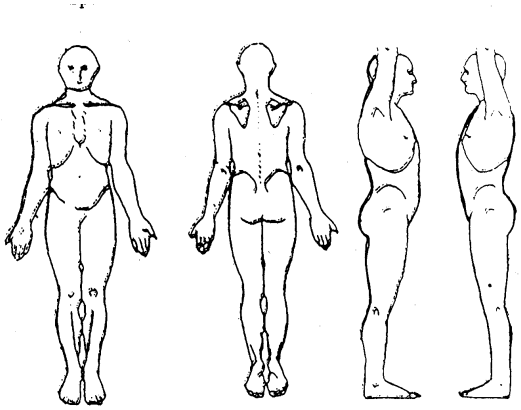
Term 4

Pre-Pointe Questionnaire

Personal Details	
Name	
Date of Birth	

Dance History	
Age Started Dance	
Hours of Dnce/wk	
Styles of Dance	
Other Sports	

Current Injuries



Injury History

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Pre-Pointe Assessment

Postural Assessment			
	Mark	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Head			
Upper Back			
Low Back			
Abdominals			
Hips			
Knees			
Right Foot			
Left Foot			

Functional Assessment				
	Mark		**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Fwd Bend				
Back Bend				
1st Position				
Demi-plié				
Grand Plié				
Rise in 1st				
Sauté				
Échappé				
	Left	**Right**		
Single Leg Standing				
S K Bend - Parallel				
S K Bend - Turnout				
Tendus en croix				
Retiré				
Relevé Passé				

Single Leg Rise				
	Left	**Right**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Strength				
Height				
Toes Flat				
Weight Placement				
Maintains Turnout				
Controlled Lower				
Hips Square				
Abdominal Control				
Knees Straight				

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Foot Assessment				
	Left	**Right**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Toe To Wall Test				
Toe Swapping				
Piano				
Doming				
Pointe Range				
FHL Thickening				
Bunions				
1st Toe Extension				
Toe Formula				
Foot Type				

Hip Assessment				
	Left	**Right**	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Turnout - Active				
Turnout - Passive				
Gluteal Firing				
Hamstrings – R1				
Hamstrings – R2				

Core Stability			
	Mark	**Notes**	**Corrected?**
Deep Abdominals			
Side Support - Left			
Side Support - Right			

Other Factors		
	Mark	**Notes**
Age		
Hypermobility		
Body Type		
Height		
Weight		
Maturity		

Suitability for Pointe?

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Growth Table

Name	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Jane. A	141	142	146	146	146	148	151	152	152	152	152	152

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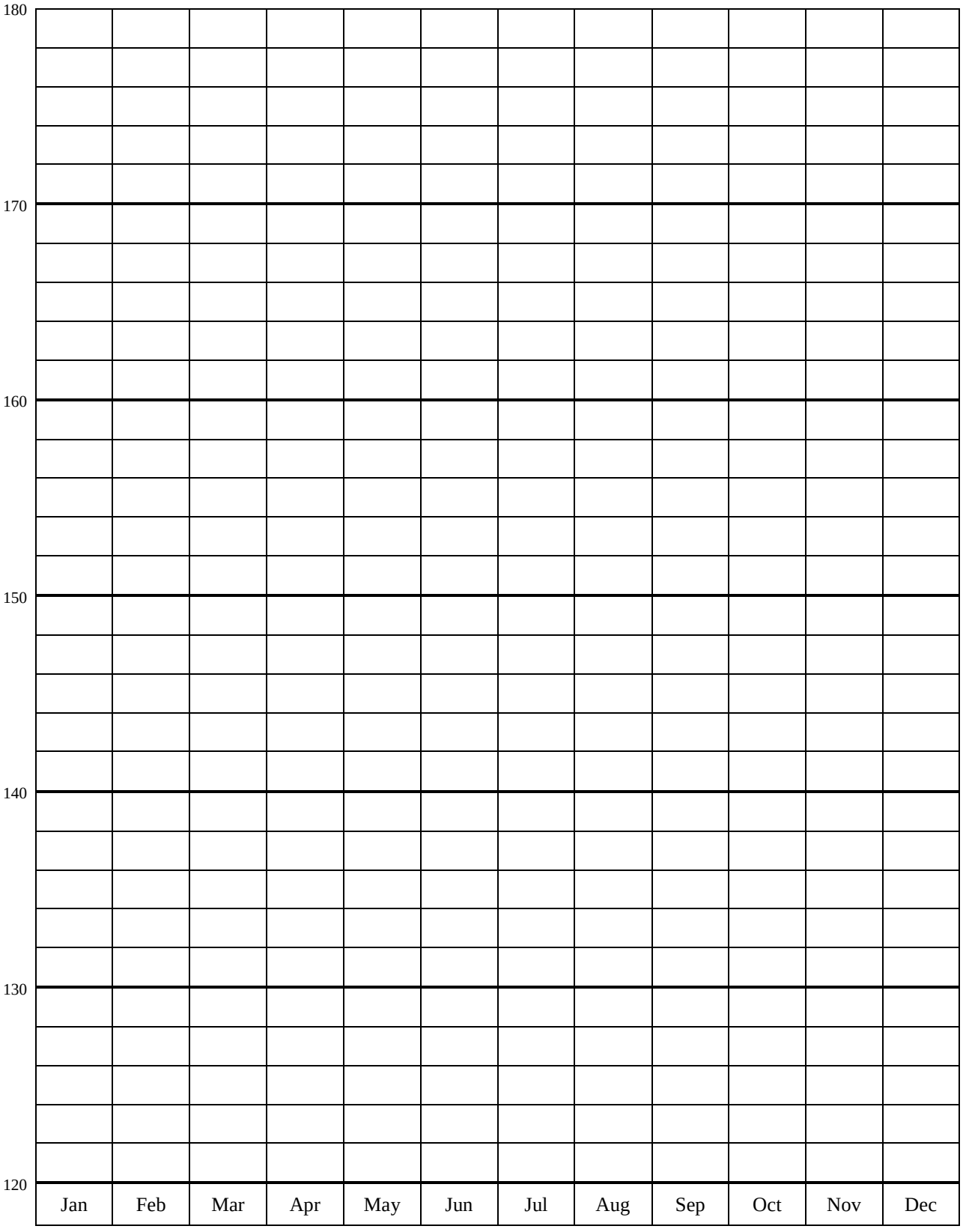
Growth Chart



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Term One		
	Details	**Completed**
Introduce pre-pointe assessment	Explain to all students that they must be able to do all tests well before progressing onto pointe	
Introduce The Perfect Pointe Book	Encourage students to get a copy and work through it	
Go over Stage 1 Tests	Demi-pointe range Pointe Range Toe to Wall	
Revise Stage 1 Exercises	The Tripod Foot Calf Stretches Pointe Stretch Golf Ball Massage Toe Swapping Pointe Through Demi-pointe Seated Rises Big Toe Exercise	
Check worksheet weekly	Check all exercises done on the appropriate day	
Pre-Class Exercises	Golf Ball massage Pointe Stretch	
During Barre	Note height of demi-pointe Plié and tendus without tights Hold Balances	
End of barre	20 Double leg rises in parallel Focus on technique	
After Class	Calf and Pointe Stretch	

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Term Two		
Task	**Details**	**Completed**
Revise pre-pointe assessment	All Students	
Revise Stage 2 Tests	Single Leg Standing Single Leg Rises	
Revise Stage 2 Exercises	Balance Exercises Rises With Theraband Rises Calf Stretches Toe Swapping Golf Ball Massage Turnout Exercise in retiré Piriformis Stretch Side Lifts	
Check worksheet weekly	Check all exercises done on the appropriate day	
Pre-Class Exercises	Toe Swapping etc…	
During Barre	Articulate foot and ankle in tendus Watch clawing of toes	
End of barre	Single leg rises in turnout 8 – 20	
After Class	Foot massage Pointe Stretch Calf Stretches	

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Term Three		
Task	**Details**	**Completed**
Revise pre-pointe assessment	All Students	
Revise Stage 3 Tests every fortnight	Plié In First Position Single Knee Bends	
Revise Stage 3 Exercises	Turnout Ex in Kneeling Parallel To Turnout Functional Turnout Ex Piriformis Stretch Inner Thigh Lifts Three Legged Cat – V1 Cat Stretch Wall Press Gluteal Stretch	
Check worksheet weekly	Check all exercises done on the appropriate day	
Pre-Class Exercises	Golf Ball, Toe Swap, Calf Stretch Functional Turnout Ex Piriformis Stretch	
During Barre	Lead with heel in tendus Maintain turnout with all barre Low developpé until good technique	
Centre Work	Insist on control of turnout with landing petit allegro	
After Class	Three Legged Cat Cat Stretch Piriformis and Gluteal Stretch	

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Term Four		
Task	**Details**	**Completed**
Revise pre-pointe assessment	Advise when formal assessment will be done	
Revise Stage 4 Tests every week	Balance on Demi-Pointe Relevé Passé	
Revise Stage 4 Exercises	Side Lifts Demi-Pointe Balance Rises With Theraband Calf Stretches Piano Playing Turnout Ex In Retiré Three Legged Cat - V 2 Piriformis Stretch Bug Legs Hip Flexor Stretch	
Check worksheet weekly	Check all exercises done on the appropriate day	
Pre-Class Exercises	Pointe Through Demi-Pointe Doming Calf Stretches	
During Barre	Tendus with eyes closed Balance variations Arms in seconde rather than on the barre	
Centre Work	Do Stage 4 tests at the start of each centre practice	
After Class	Three Legged Cat – V 2 Bug Legs Hip Flexor and Gluteal Stretch	

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Personal Notes