

## **The Power of Dance and Movement**

### **By Sajit Greene, MA, LPC, DTR**

Cultures around the globe have traditionally used dance to bring people together, enact rites of passage, promote healing, and provide an emotional outlet during times of celebration and times of sorrow. Dance and movement can also have a powerful role in the lives of adopted children. Even if you don't consider yourself a "dancer," any parent can use simple and fun dance-like activities to cultivate their relationships with their children. For young children and adolescents, movement games and dance opportunities enhance social development and encourage creative self-expression. For children in need of extra support and healing, dance can even be used as a profound form of therapy.

Movement is every child's first language, and it is a dialogue in movement that first brings parent and child together in the dance of attachment. The attachment process is a spontaneous dance where touch, facial expressions, body movements, vocalizations, and subtle rhythms are used to communicate a sense of understanding, empathy, love, and connection. This early dance of relationship creates the template for building and sustaining relationships, throughout life.

Regardless of the age of your child, you can consciously use the power of movement to enhance your communication and strengthen your feelings of connection. Especially with infants and toddlers, take time to tune in to how your child is moving. Observe the subtle and not-so-subtle rhythms of her movements as well as seeing the shape of how her arms, legs, and torso are moving through space. Listen to what your child is saying without words. Engage in the dance by matching the quality of your child's movements, her rhythms, and level of intensity. Is she clapping? Twisting? Throwing things? Jumping? Does she want to play chasing games? Become like a mirror, reflecting back what you see and feel. You can make it a playful game, and you can use music to make it even more like a dance.

When you join your child in her dance, she feels understood and accepted, and it can be a lot of fun for both of you. When a child's movements are distressing or disruptive, you might need to find creative ways to help your child modify her dance. For example, gentle stroking that is done in the same rhythm that your baby uses when she sucks on her bottle may help a fussy infant fall asleep. Or, a child who is biting or hitting can be encouraged to channel that energy into banging on pots and pans or tearing up pieces of paper.

As children begin to spend more time with their peers, they engage in social games that are based on movement. Remember "Ring Around the Rosie," "Follow the Leader," "Red Light/Green Light," and the "Hokey Pokey?" Through these games, children learn important social skills, develop body awareness, and master developmental tasks. You might encourage a shy child to join in when other children are playing these types of games, or you might need to seek out opportunities for your child to learn and participate in such games.

Movement games and social dances can also be incorporated into family playtime. You and your family might enjoy coming up with your own ideas for movement games, or you might create your own dances. For example, you might put on music that your children enjoy and gather the family together in a circle. Everyone can take turns leading the movement, or you can take turns dancing in the middle of the circle.

Of course, dance can also be an art form and a means of creative expression. In most cities, there are many types of dance classes available for young children and adolescents. You might take your child to see a few different styles of dance and find out what type of dance she likes best. While many people are familiar with ballet, tap, and jazz, your child might want to connect with her cultural roots by studying Chinese dance or Tai Chi. Maybe she will feel the call of the drums of African dance. Maybe she wants to learn yoga, martial arts, creative dance, or hip hop. Learning movement-based disciplines can build your child's self-esteem and confidence while enhancing physical prowess, coordination, and grace. Dance also provides a creative outlet for the expression of feelings and lets your child experience the sheer joy of movement.

Adopted children who are faced with attachment difficulties, post traumatic stress disorder, developmental delays, physical disabilities, emotional problems, behavioral problems, or issues related to cultural and racial identity may benefit from the therapeutic use of dance. Dance/Movement therapy is a form of psychotherapy that provides a non-verbal, playful, and creative approach to healing, and it works very well with children of all ages. It can be used for individual or group therapy, with parent-child dyads, and with families.

When dealing with attachment problems, a dance/movement therapist can help parents better attune to their child and bring more awareness and harmony to the relationship-building process. In dance/movement therapy groups, children learn social skills and develop the ability to identify and express feelings that perhaps they can't put into words. Moving together, in a group, also gives children a powerful experience of acceptance and belonging.

Whether working individually or in a group, dance/movement therapy can help children become more aware of their body boundaries, gain more self-control, improve communication skills, and improve their ability to modulate their emotions. Because dance/movement therapy uses non-verbal interventions and works with the parts of the nervous system that are involved in the processing of traumatic experiences, this is an effective modality for healing early trauma.

In Denver, the Red Thread Counseling Center offers "Creative Dance" support groups for girls ages 7-12, and a "Moving Together" support group for parent and child (ages 3-5). To find a dance/movement therapist in your area, contact the American Dance Therapy Association ([www.adta.org](http://www.adta.org)).

Perhaps you always thought of dance as a sophisticated art, a fun social activity, a silly children's game, or simply a way to get some exercise. While dance is all of these things, it is

so much more. It is the ability of dance to strengthen relationships, facilitate developmental progress, enhance self-expression, and heal wounds that makes dance a valuable resource in the lives of adopted children. Enjoy the dance!