

Why Concept-based Creative Dance for Babies and Toddlers?

By Rachael Carnes, Founder and Director of Sparkplug Dance

Movers and Shakers

Babies and toddlers love to move! Any parent or caregiver can tell you that. For further demonstration, just look at the happy expression on their little faces as they flap their arms like a bird or their sheer focus and determination as they scoot across the floor on their tummies: kids just seem to have fun exploring their world through their own bodies. And as they play, stretch, curl, reach, grasp, teeter, cruise, crawl and run, they're also learning.



What do we mean by the kinesthetic sense?

When asked to list the human senses, most of us would rattle off sight, touch, taste, smell and hearing. From the shape and color of an apple in a picture book to the smell of grandma's pumpkin pie or grandpa's curried tofu, to the feel of daddy's scratchy beard or the sound of mama's heartbeat, or the subway screeching into the station or cow mooing on the farm, babies and toddlers get lots of sensory experiences that they will begin to recognize, sort, differentiate and assimilate.

As babies and toddlers grow, their sense of their own movement, called kinesthesia, will expand. Some movement educators, physical therapists and developmental psychologists refer to the kinesthetic sense as the "sixth sense." It represents not only the sensation of your child's own body, either still or moving, but also his or her growing ability to

abstract cause and effect among objects ("if I kick the ball, I know it will roll," etc.) As children develop a greater awareness of their own bodies in space, their knowledge about the ways things in their environment feel, move and react will also develop!

That's where concept-based creative dance for little movers comes in.

The vocabulary of creative movement is not mysterious. It is a basic language of opposites to which young people easily relate such as high/low, forward/backward, big/small, curved/straight, fast/slow, sharp/smooth, strong/light, and over/under. As a teacher, I find this vocabulary invaluable, since it can unite a group of varying language backgrounds and levels of dance experience. The creative dance vocabulary seems inherently fresh and experimental, inviting the kind of play and possibilities of a science lab. And that seems fitting when you work with the smallest inventors -- babies and toddlers -- as they play every day with the way things work!

By using simple movement vocabulary as you play, you will be giving your child an intellectual foothold in this new world. Why? Because s/he *feels* the concept, physically, which is the way s/he's learning most everything under 24 months, concept-based creative movement can help even a pre-verbal child begin to better understand and relate to her environment. Let's simplify, scale back, and try to look at things the way their little brains are processing: through conceptual ideas.

The idea behind the concept-based creative dance method we use in classes is that in building a common conceptual vocabulary that relates to every day objects, activities and environments, we afford even the smallest dancers a new mode of communication and understanding. Today, Early Childhood Experts emphasize that the play babies and toddlers do that is at their developmental level, that is safe and fun and gives them a chance to test and master new modalities is not only important, it's essential for healthy brain growth, physical development and emotional well being.

But Wait, There's More: The Conceptual approach moves creatively outside the studio with you!

We live in a culture that promotes what some educators refer to as "Baby Consumerism." Sure, you can buy toys, music and games for every age group that say right on the box that they will enhance your child's growth and development. Toys are great! As a parent, I love picking out and playing with fun new things with my daughter. But I also believe that the greatest activity kit you can offer your child is your own creativity! Your imagination is portable and free of charge! A dishtowel becomes a puppet, your knees an airplane. The only limits are your imagination and stamina! For ideas on how to apply these concepts to everyday activities, or to create special activities with a concept-based approach, see the activity pages for babies, older babies and toddlers at www.sparkplugdance.org. Your local library will have books in the parenting section that emphasize playing with babies and toddlers. And you can always check your favorite Creative Dance websites or come to a class!!

When you focus on concept-based movement fundamentals, you can effectively anchor your play in conceptualized ideas. Babies and toddlers will delight in your animated voice, the way you sing off-key and how you crawl on the floor with them like a little lizard. (Okay, it may seem like it's time to check your pride at the door! Or is it...?)

Maybe parents and caregivers need encouragement to believe that what they know, from cheesy 80's song lyrics, to the best way to roll a pie crust, to how you hang a picture or throw a baseball, is wonderful for their little ones to learn. And when you're actively engaged with your child, doing a special activity or just one of the many feedings, diaperings, soothings, or cuddlings of having a little child, you can feel good about providing your kiddo with a new, exciting way for you two to connect.

The spark for learning!

We can help to enhance the learning process in babies and toddlers by supporting their interaction with the world through their kinesthetic sense.

The goal is not to build Uber--Kids who are performing neurosurgery or reciting Shakespeare in diapers.

Rather, the approach focuses on their developmental needs, addressing their curiosity and desire to comprehend all the ins and outs of their small world and the larger environment. In children under two, the majority of learning experiences can be somatic ones: physical play, songs and rhymes, dance and making music will be a wonderful and affordable jumping off place for anything else you want to study with your baby and toddler.

Through movement play and the use of movement-based vocabulary, books can become more interactive and engaging. ("I see a giraffe. Does a giraffe have horns? How does a giraffe like to move? Can you be a giraffe moving through the grass? Do you like to reach up high to eat the leaves of the trees?") Day-to-day errands can take on a new thematic level. ("Let's find all the big fruit. Great! Now let's see if we can find the small ones.") Even household chores can become more game-like and fun for little ones. ("This shirt goes in the basket for washing. Can you put it in the basket? Do you think you can throw it in the basket?") For more ideas about activities for different age groups, check the activities section of sparkplugdance.org, or talk to your fabulous Creative Dance Center teacher!

I hope that every parent, whether you work primarily in the home or at a job place, will find joy in expressing yourself creatively with your little one. Even without silly songs or rhymes or special books or tapes, you have lots to offer your little one. Trust your instincts and enjoy this time with your small person! As our child's first teachers, we hold in our hands not just the responsibility to help our children learn, but to encourage them to love learning for a lifetime.