



## **The Male Myth**

By Anne Green Gilbert

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I teach teachers all over the world and they always ask me the same question: How can I get more boys into my dance program!? I have been teaching dance to boys (and girls) for over 30 years. In that time, I have thought a lot about this so-called problem. When I teach creative dance in public schools grades K-6, all the boys are fully engaged! When Kaleidoscope, my dance company of children ages 8-14, performs in schools, the boys in the audience are the ones asking how they can join! This leads me to strongly believe that boys are not resistant to dance. So why do we think they are? And why aren't more boys dancing in the private studios? I believe that the way we teach dance and the stereotypes surrounding dance are the roots of the problem.

### **Thinking Outside the Barre**

The way we train dancers in the traditional studio model may be a reason why many boys are not drawn to dance. Standing at a barre for long periods of time, learning steps through a rote method, and receiving negative criticism is not conducive to productive learning for either gender. However, young girls may be willing to put up with conventional methods for a time if they dream dreams of becoming a ballerina. Boys, on the other hand, will not, because they have not been encouraged to pursue dance in the first place.

I teach modern and creative dance based on the principles of Rudolf Laban. I have adapted these principles into 15 movement concepts, most of which are pairs of antonyms, such as high/low levels, strong/light weight, and curved/straight pathways. These concepts are effective because children learn easily through opposites. Each dance lesson focuses a movement concept, rather than on movement skills, a theme or story. The students find these concepts meaningful and engaging. They love learning the movement vocabulary, which relates to the other arts, to school subjects, and to their activities.

This vocabulary of concept pairs, also forces me, as the teacher, to move out of my personal movement signature. A movement signature, in short, is the way a person prefers to move. In general, many boys prefer movement that is

sharp, strong, fast, and on a low level (close to the ground). Many girls prefer movement that is smooth, slow, light, and on a high level. My movement signature may be opposite of many boys' movement signatures. When we explore all 15 movement concepts we, teacher and students together, move with strong and light force, sharp and smooth energy, fast and slow tempo, free and bound flow, single- and multi-focus, in curved and straight pathways, on and off balance, over and under each other, together and apart, floating and punching, swinging and shaping, rising and falling, growing and shrinking and much more. Who could resist dancing in so many wonderful ways?

Along with a conceptual approach, I have designed a lesson plan format that alternates teaching dance skills with improvisation and choreography. This format encourages students to grow and develop as they learn new ways of moving. Students find this format emotionally engaging, because they are empowered to construct their own learning.

Boys are not resistant to dance; they are resistant to the way we often teach dance. I believe that if we teach dance in the studios and schools in a brain-compatible way, boys will be fully engaged. I say this because everyday I see the boys in my classes jumping for joy and asking for more! When we teach in a brain-compatible way, we:

- provide a safe environment where feedback is timely and positive
- engage the emotions through joyful and meaningful dance experiences
- provide the tools for creative dance making
- encourage social interaction
- provide challenging but achievable goals
- present developmentally appropriate activities
- offer experiences for all types of learners – kinesthetic, visual, auditory and read/write
- allow the students to construct their own learning

### **The Value of Dance For Boys**

Brain-compatible dance education can be a positive alternative to highly pressured competitive sports that are not fun and can actually be harmful. When a person is in stressful situations the brain releases a chemical called cortisol. This chemical destroys brain cells. However, when a person moves with ease and joy in an engaging dance class the brain releases serotonin, a chemical that produces a feeling of well-being and self confidence!

On the other hand, dance classes can be an excellent complement to sports activities. One of my student's mothers was telling me a story about her

son's soccer practice. The coach was trying to describe some complicated plays when finally my student said, "Oh! You mean we move through the general space in a curvy pathway and then we hold our position in self space." The coach looked at him and said, "Yeah, I guess that's right." This helped my student, as well as the other boys, execute the play properly. He had a movement vocabulary learned in dance class that his teammates understood. He also had lots of practice moving his body in many different ways that complimented and reinforced his soccer skills. He was already a step ahead of the boys who hadn't danced. Being involved in brain-compatible dance classes enhances all other physical activities by making us aware of our movements.

In his book, *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myth of Boyhood* (1998), William Pollack discusses the problem we have in America of not allowing our boys to cry, show tender feelings, or discuss emotions. These boys feel alienated from society and are unable to share their problems with others, leading them to confusion, anger and often violence. Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence* (1995), writes about the importance of understanding and using our often-ignored emotional intelligence. And according to Eric Jensen's *Teaching with the Brain in Mind* (1998), "the affective side of learning is the critical interplay between how we feel, act and think. There is no separation of mind and emotions." While our logical side tells us to "set a goal," it is our emotional side that gives us the passion to achieve that goal.

Dance classes boost emotional intelligence. When boys explore *all* movement concepts and reflect upon them, they become whole and healthy individuals with many varied movement possibilities with which to deal with life. Exploring movement concepts, creating dances and working collaboratively with a diverse group of people has a very humanizing effect on our boys. Creative dance brings balance to a boy's life and schedule.

### **Beyond Stereotypes**

Several years ago I asked a Seattle-area choreographer, Tom Truss, to work with the nine boys in Kaleidoscope on a new piece about boys in dance. These boys participate in a two-hour dance class at the Creative Dance Center, of which I'm the artistic director, once a week, and also have a two-hour company rehearsal. The company performs every three weeks or so for elementary schools and presents public concerts four to five times a year. These boys have also traveled abroad to perform at international dance conferences. Tom encouraged the boys, ages 7-1/2 to 14, to talk and write about their experiences and feelings about being a dancer. Their writings and discussions

were very informative and the dance that Truss created with them was very powerful.

Most of the boys had been teased by their classmates. Very few of their peers had heard of modern dance and wondered if they had to wear tutus. Only one of the boys, who was home-schooled, had not been teased. The boys had different reasons for wanting to dance: exercise, a creative outlet, an alternative to highly competitive sports, to become better at sports, to meet interesting people, a love for performing. Because they had each other as a support system, the boys were not bothered too much by the teasing. The boys encouraged their friends to attend concerts and started a process of educating them. Once their friends attended a Kaleidoscope concert, they were very appreciative of the boys' talents. Occasionally one would ask to join the group.

My two sons, who were also in Kaleidoscope, had a different experience because I volunteered to teach dance in their elementary school classes weekly from Kindergarten through fifth grade. All their peers had creative dance classes from ages 5 to 10 and thought dance was great and quite the norm, so my sons were never teased. Several of the boys in my sons' classes even wanted to join Kaleidoscope, but most parents would not allow them either because their sons were already busy with competitive sports or because they felt that dancing was not an appropriate activity for boys.

These stories and our own experience show us that, sadly, stereotypes about boys in dance deter the boys and their parents from enrolling in private studios. I have found that there needs to be a critical mass of boys in any one class to attract other boys. Many years ago I taught a "Just Boys" class to bring more boys into the studio. But after a few years I realized that I taught these classes exactly as I taught a coed class. I did not want to discourage the important social aspects of boys and girls playing and collaborating together. Why should we continue to alienate the sexes? Why do we want girls to have grace and boys to have strength? Why can't boys and girls have strength and grace?

Rather than offer boys-only classes, I decided to embark on a campaign to educate parents. I wrote articles in our studio newsletter, spoke with parents and sent boys' parents free tickets to Kaleidoscope concerts. Although I reached a few parents, I believe that the majority of parents in the U.S. do not get the message or do not believe it. But although my studio classes are still filled primarily with girls, boys in my public school classes are clamoring for more dance. It is the boys themselves who have experienced good dance classes who will ultimately change our society's beliefs.