

How ballet training could learn from football and rugby, says report

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Could biobanding be the answer for ballet? Credit: pixabay

A new study from the Universities of Bath and Bristol (UK) suggests that current practices for grouping and evaluating young dancers in ballet could be counterproductive, potentially placing late maturing girls at a significant disadvantage during important phases of their development and at greater risk for injury.

The researchers behind the study published in the *Journal of Adolescence*, point to a new approach to training known as 'bio-banding', something that groups individuals by their biological rather than chronological age and is growing in prominence for other sports including football and rugby. The researchers also stress the pivotal role of the teacher at this time and how the provision of further education for dance teachers regarding the implications of puberty upon dance training may be helpful.

Dancers in vocational training are grouped by age and can begin full-time training from as young as 11, often training for up to 6 days a week.

Girls of the same age do, however, vary greatly in biological age with some maturing in advance or delay of others. Therefore, differences in the timing of maturity have important implications for talent identification and development, as well as self-esteem.

Ballet traditionally favours late-maturing girls, who tend to be slimmer, have lower body fat and comparatively longer legs relative to their torso, but, as the new study highlights, late maturation poses challenges for dancers too whereby auditioning and an increase in training intensity often coincide with key developmental stages. This in turn can place young dancers at increased injury risk at a crucial point in their development.

Lead researcher and former ballet dancer, Siobhan Mitchell PhD student from the University of Bath's Department for Health and ESRC-funded South West Doctoral Training Centre, explains: "Traditionally many people have assumed there is a bias in ballet towards late maturers, but the reality is less clear.

"Of the teachers we spoke to, many saw late maturation as a disadvantage, as later maturing girls experience their growth spurt at a

point where training schedules become more intense and when auditions take place, which can often make performance difficult. Similarly, others considered early maturation as advantageous, as those dancers had already 'got most of the growing out of the way' and were better placed to perform and cope with a heavier [training](#) load during this time. These findings point to the importance of further research in this area with the aim going forward to apply these findings to enable dance teachers to better support young dancers as they transition through puberty."

Co-author from University of Bristol, Dr Anne Haase, commented: "The ability of dance teachers to manage maturation in dancers can reflect through the girls' self-esteem and confidence in their own abilities. By finding more positive approaches for dance teachers to support girls through this stage will allow for development of improved self-esteem and confidence in dance."

Dr Sean Cumming, also of the University of Bath, is currently working with major sports teams and the English Premier League in developing new bio-banding approaches to selection. He explained: "We think there is potential for vocational dance schools to apply some of the elements of bio-banding not only to improve the experiences of dancers and reduce injury risks but also to ensure talent is not wasted.

"This is not about favouring late or early maturing girls, but rather levelling the playing field and providing the most developmentally-appropriate learning contexts so that dancers, irrespective of physicality, have the same opportunity and aren't put under undue stress at the wrong points in their development which can cause injury."

Working closely with One Dance UK - the national body for dance in the United Kingdom - the researchers are now looking to develop further education resources on the topic of growth and maturation for dance.

More information: Siobhan B. Mitchell et al. The role of puberty in the making and breaking of young ballet dancers: Perspectives of dance teachers, *Journal of Adolescence* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.adolescence.2015.12.007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2015.12.007)

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