The Benefits of Pilates for the Young Dancer

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I was given the opportunity to teach Pilates to young dancers at the Gustafson School of Dance shortly after this training course began. The timing was ideal as it gave me the opportunity to practice what I was learning on two small groups of dancers ages nine to thirteen. Although I went into teaching the class with confidence I quickly realized I had my work cut out for me. Not only did I have to keep the students attention and monitor their form, I had to find ways to make the class fun. My research began immediately, and I was able to find helpful information on techniques for teaching young dancers the benefits of Pilates.
Table of Contents

Title Page……………………………………………………………………………………..1

Abstract Page………………………………………………………………………………..2

Table of Contents…………………………………………………………………………3

Anatomical Description: Transverse Abdominus and Lumbar Hyperlordosis………4-5

Introduction: Case Study……………………………………………………………….6-7

Conditioning Program………………………………………………………………….8-9

Conclusion……………………………………………………………………………..9-10

Bibliography…………………………………………………………………………….11
Anatomical Description: Transverse Abdominis and Lumbar Hyperlordosis

Many young dancers have not learned how to use their transverse abdominis correctly and suffer from lumbar hyperlordosis. The transverse abdominis is a flat muscle that forms the deepest layer of the abdominal muscles. It is located just beneath the internal oblique muscles. The primary action of the transverse abdominis is to assist in spinal stabilization and respiration. Furthermore, spinal flexion is not a product of the transverse abdominis due to its horizontal muscle fibers. When contracted the transverse abdominis pulls the abdominal muscles in towards the spine, which then stabilizes the spine. Dancers who are able to pull their abdominal wall inward by activating the transverse will have more spinal stability along with greater mobility in their appendages.

Lumbar hyperlordosis is when there is a larger curve in the lumbar spine than what is considered to be normal. An anterior tilt of the pelvis usually occurs in someone with lumbar hyperlordosis. This condition is extremely common in young dancers but can be fixed with proper training. It is also important to note that overcorrecting the pelvis into a posterior tilt can take place and should be corrected. As a young dancer I was told to pull in my stomach, which I did on command. However, I overcorrected and was left dancing in a posterior tilted pelvic position. At twenty-six I’m finally learning that this alignment is not beneficial and creates added tension in the body. Strengthening the transverse abdominis while relaxing the ribs can fix lumbar hyperlordosis, and provide the young dancer with the tools needed to master the correct anatomical posture in as well as out of the dance studio.
Introduction and Case Study

“Pull your tummy in, stand up tall, shoulders down, use your stomach muscles, open your chest,” shouts the dance teacher. These are all very common cues that a dance teachers uses in hopes of training students to use their abdominal muscles. As a young dancer my interpretation of the above cues left me with pure muscle tension unable to move like a ballerina, stiff and rigid. Recruiting the correct muscles as well as letting go of unnecessary tension has been the biggest challenge for my students. Pilates can help with this never-ending task and benefit the young dancer on multiple levels providing them with the tools they need to unlock the meaning of “pull your tummy in.”

I began teaching Pilates mat classes to two groups of young dancers in September and will continue to teach them through next year. The first group consists of ten female ballet students ages eight to ten, the second is also a group of ten ages eleven to thirteen. I teach both groups back to back and implement the same basic Pilates fundamentals into both classes. The teaching experience continues to be full of trial and errors, since the students don’t always understand or care what I’m trying to teach them. However, I have already witnessed many “ah-ha” moments, which I find to be the most rewarding aspect of teaching. Many of the young dancers have lumbar hyperlordosis, which I like to call “banana backs.” The “banana backs” begin with their misunderstanding of what it means to lift their chests. Teaching the students to softly knit their ribs together is helping, and many of them now know how to keep their ribs together while engaging their abdominals.
Using technical terms like “contract your transverse abdominus to correct your lumbar hyperlordosis” is not the way to communicate during a pilates session with young dancers (they are still kids). I found myself using lots of creative imagery to teach the dancers Pilates. The younger dancers responded well to pretending their tailbone was a Dinosaur tail while performing the standing Roll Down. Cat Stretch, Roll-Like-a Ball, Seal Puppy, and the Swan Dive Prep proved to be exercises they enjoyed most. The exercises that mimic animal movements are very clear to understand, since animals have such distinct and unique movement patterns. The Pilates fundamentals remain the same when teaching adults, but I’ve learned that the cuing and imagery must cater to the appropriate age group (Leibrock 2008). I also found that having the students create their own Pilates exercises to be helpful in teaching them the value of the basic Pilates principles as well as the creative possibilities that lie within Pilates.

I believe that helping the young dancers become aware of their bodies will not only aid them in their dance classes, it will fuel an accessible awareness that can be extracted at anytime. I have witnessed the most talkative kids focus on their breath while executing the Roll Up with the utmost control and focus. “Pilates can create a balanced musculature that can alleviate pain and reduce the potential for injury now as they continue to grow into adulthood,” claims Ken Endelman (founder and Ceo of Balanced Body Inc). I would have to agree with Ken since many of the young dancers are already working with minor injuries. It’s important for young adults to recognize their imbalances. Since Pilates is new to most of my students I have been very careful not to give any exercises I think are too advanced and could lead to injury. I instructed the students to bring a beach towel that they could put over their mats for extra padding and
decided to omit exercises that put pressure on the cervical spines. Many of the students complained about their abdominals burning but I took that has a compliment. I stress the importance in feeling “a good pain” which means the muscle is working properly.

I have created a Pilates conditioning mat program I think is appropriate for young dancers ages eight to thirteen utilizing the Body Arts and Science international Block System.

**Supine Warm up**

**Pelvic Curl.** Image: Each vertebrae is a chocolate chip and must be pressed into the cookie doe on at a time.

**Single Leg Lifts**

**Chest Lift/Chest Lift with Rotation**

**Leg Circles.** Image: You are drawing a circle with your foot while keep the torso stable as if your torso is under sand and your leg is reaching for the sky outside of the sand.

**Abdominal Section**

**Hundred Prep** (20 to 50 is a good place to start).

**Single Leg Stretch**

**Roll Up.** Image: You are reaching for something but have a magic bar of energy running across your center pulling you in the other direction as you reach for your toes.

**Sitting Stretches**
Spine Twist. Image: Pretend you are a doll and must move in a mechanical doll like fashion

Lateral Flexion/Rotation

Side Bend

Back Extension

Cat Stretch

Full Body Integration

Front Support and Back Support

Spinal Massage

Seal Puppy

Relaxation and Focus = Rest Position

This conditioning program does not include reformer work, however I would love to work with students on the reformer in the future. I would give all basic reformer exercises and once again omit exercises that put pressure on the cervical spine. Most of the students do not have the control needed for intermediate spinal articulation. The above conditioning program is working for my students as I have noticed many changes in their alignment and posture in just a few months. The abdominal muscles are now supporting their backs properly eliminating all “banana backs.” It is an exciting time, for we are all learning and improving together.
The journey of teaching these young dancers is never-ending, but I truly feel and know Pilates will help them become stronger more confident individuals. I hope they learn to love the challenging exercises if I strive to make learning fun and interesting for them. My goal is to inspire as well as teach the students the important balance between strength and flexibility and what it takes to become a strong, injury free dancer who is in control of his or her body. My research has proven that Pilates is an ideal form of cross training for the young dancer.
Bibliography


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