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Ballet up to the barre for proper techniques

By CAROL CHILD

Special to the Sunday News Journal

ifications. "The instructor should be," says Doug Stewart, a first-degree in Tae Kwon Do and certified instructor at a Fitness Center in Newark. Stewart and international organizations certification camps where instructors a written test and a physical drill one year.

atuto, a fourth-degree black belt in rate and owner of American Karate in on and Newark, advises, "Be sure the s the proper instructional tools, such as nd practice pads. Watch how classes ook for both discipline and fun."

Perhaps most important is to choose a style that suits you. "Look at the art itself," says James Hall, who has earned black belts in several of the martial arts and teaches Shotokan karate at his Hall School of Martial Arts in Wilmington. "Diagnose the art."

Hall explains that among the styles, although the katas (stances) may be the same, the application and nce of movements within each may me styles use all parts of the body, y specific parts. Some combine circ-ear movements, while others use one er. Kenpo karate, originating in China, of all other martial arts.

re a martial arts novice, you may need o sorting out the kinds of disciplines. brief explanation of some of the

re two schools: External, which comes Shao-Lin Temple, and Internal, from Mountain. Karate, the choice of

TWO LONG ROWS of lithe bodies, clad in conservative, solid-color leotards and tights, hair pinned up snugly to the backs of their heads, stand regally — one behind the other — lining the barre along the mirrored walls of the large, high-ceilinged room. Silence reigns. You could hear a hairpin drop.

"Preparation . . . and . . . one . . ." says the teacher. The pianist begins a sweet, meditative Schubert adagio. In unison the bodies bend their knees in *plies*, and another classical ballet class for youths begins.

Whether you're interested in having your child learn ballet for enjoyment or as a possible career, it is important to choose a studio that will give your child proper training. Improper ballet training can cause permanent physical injury and damage your child's outlook on life or the art of ballet. It might also ruin your child's chances for a professional dance career.

Consider studying ballet with your child. Many studios offer adult classes.

Even "if the children don't go on to dance," says Rita Katz Farrell, teacher at the Academy of the Dance in Wilmington, "they will become an understanding and knowing audience. And they will care enough to insist that the performance be fine."

If you don't know a plie from a pirouette, how can you find a good teacher for your child? First, realize that you might have to drive a little farther than just down the street to find a

good studio. Take the time to look at several studios before deciding. The rewards of this extra effort will far outweigh the sacrifice.

To get started, "Look at the literature of the school — the biography of the teacher, the curriculum," says Marc Levy, artistic director of the Marc Levy Dance Center at Montchanin Mills. "There must be a progressive system of instruction."

Another piece of advice is observation. "Our classes are always open for parents to watch," says Marion Tracy, director of the Marion Tracy Dance Studio in Dover. "We like to have parents see what they're paying for."

For a thorough picture, "View one class on the level of your child and then view an advanced class," says Priscilla Payson, director of The Ballet Studio of Newark. "There must be a distinct difference in quality between the two class levels. If not, they're not learning as they should."

"The best schools survive through their reputations," says Victor Wesley, co-

director at the Academy of the Dance in Wilmington and a former principal dancer who has danced with Margot Fonteyn.

"Contact a major company and they will refer you," he says. "We have people coming here from [good schools] all over the world with a letter of recommendation or a phone call."

Picking a good school is important because of the seriousness of injuries, such as knee stress and Achilles tendinitis, that may result from learning improper technique or being pushed beyond developmental capabilities. Wesley says, "We get people from schools that are

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injuring their students and that's the great sadness."

Many injuries can be avoided if the dancer is given a slow, progressive warm-up during class as well as encouraged to warm up on his own before class.

The key to preventing injuries, says Jonathan Contompasis, a podiatrist, "seems to be correct alignment and technique with a respect for growing minds and bodies, ensuring that there is not too much traction or force during growth spurts. One year a student may be 5-foot-2, the next year 5-foot-6."

Contompasis adds, "Due to the prevalent use of stimulants and diet pills in today's society, the teacher must also watch for anorexia and other nutritional disorders."

Contompasis, who treats sports and dance injuries at his Milltown Road office, also warns against injuries due to floors that are either non-resilient or over-resilient.

Payson, of the Ballet Studio, says

she sometimes gets talented, interested students who lose three or four years of training because they have to go back to the beginner level to try to undo the damage of faulty training.

"INITIAL training is very important," says Jamie Jamieson, a founder of the Academy of the Dance, who recently re-created the choreography for the New York City Opera production of "Brigadoon."

"You can never force a dancer. By age 7 the body is strong enough for exposure. At age 8 or 9 you can begin to see if there's something there — in the legs, the feet and in the eyes. Start with one or two days a week at first — later, more days when they're stronger.

"You don't want them so burnt out or worn out that their careers are finished at age 24."

An integral part of Jamieson's training includes the use of live piano accompaniment to teach the dancers music appreciation.

If you're serious about a career in dance for your child, says Payson, "Put them in a school, plan as you would for a college education,

one which at age 14 or 15 will ready them to enter the competitive market where they can get the background to pursue higher education if they want to."

Higher education for ballet dancers is studying with the schools of major companies — often during summers — and participating in auditions, at first for experience, later for acceptance into a company.

The first thing auditioners look at is the dancer's body. If bodies are not properly developed, dancers are eliminated from the competition even before they have had a chance to show what they can do.

Female dancers should never be put on pointe (tips of the toes) too soon, the instructors say. Dancing on pointe requires extremely strong feet, legs and backs. It takes approximately three to four years of regular training to develop this strength. No children should be put on pointe before they are about 10 years old.

Contompasis says that because the young dancer's bones are not fully developed, pointe work will create undue stress across the front of the foot and will also cause the

student to place more force on one side of the foot than the other, resulting in a sickled foot.

The toes of the pink satin shoes used for pointe are coated with glue to form a somewhat hard box. Putting your foot inside a new one is like trying to slip your foot inside a brick. It is for this reason that dancers put their pointe shoes through all sorts of softening rituals, from ruthlessly kneading them to slamming them into doors.

It's not surprising that one teacher maintains that the inventor of the toe shoe was the Marquis de Sade. Moreover, these shoes cost around \$30 a pair and wear out after one stage performance.

"An indication of a good studio is that they have an [adjunct] performing company," says Levy. While performances are important — rewarding the dancers and giving them a sense of the professional life — they should be limited to a couple of times a year with special rehearsal time set aside for them.

"Beware of schools carrying frequent recitals, however," Levy says, "because they're only learning routines, not technique."

Linda Moores, director of the

New Dance Studio in Newark and a professional dancer with the Group Motion company, says ballet is "a relationship, a connection that exists with the student and the teacher. It's the availability of the teacher while in class and extending to after class for a student who has additional questions or needs specific points covered."

"Discouragement is natural," says a 19-year-old student who has been dancing more than 10 years. "A good teacher will show you this.

"There'd be days in class when I'd say, 'That's it. I'm never coming back.' But the next day, there I'd be — back in class ready to do it all again. And often I'd succeed. Ballet is knowing you'll never be perfect, but . . . may come close to it."

Farrell, of the Academy of Dance, who has taught a University of Delaware course on ballet technique, history and criticism, has a similar opinion.

"The child should be encouraged to work diligently and seriously," she says. "To become proud of what is a noble art form requires a sense of one's own dignity. This requires that the child is treated with respect, and so is the art form."