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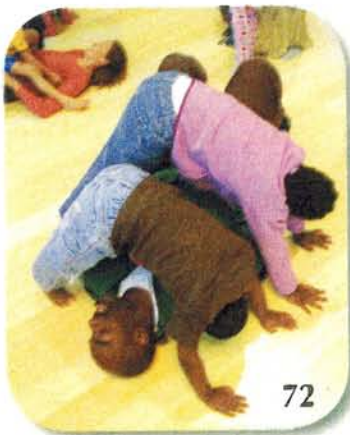
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welcome!



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Live Dance Institutes' MPACT program offers dance classes for families who are reunifying after a period of separation. *Onstage:* MPACT teachers often use relationship-based words like over, under, toward, away, through, and connect as movement prompts.

MPACT on Families

Luna Dance Institute proves the power of parent-child dance

By Bonner Odell

Several weeks into my training as a teacher for Luna Dance Institute's MPACT: Moving Parents and Children Together program, I began to understand the power of the tools I was learning. My moment of revelation came when I read the words, documented in a focus-group interview, of one woman who participated in a six-week series of parent-child dance classes at a residential center in Oakland, California.

The woman, who had experienced family dance at a home for mothers recovering from substance abuse, said, "I've been a drunk my whole life and I can't look anyone in the eye. I've been scared that my kid would be like me. But every class, she"—she pointed to the dance teacher—"says, 'Look at your mom; now dance to your mom.' Now [my son] can look me in the eye."

Moving toward trust

MPACT serves families that are reunifying after periods of separation brought about by substance abuse, domestic violence, court order, immigration, homelessness, or other hardships. In residential centers like the one where this mother lived, children age 5 and under have typically come to live with their moms after a period of time with relatives or in foster care.

In addition to residential substance-abuse treatment centers, Luna brings MPACT classes to homeless shelters, incarceration facilities, public libraries, and other settings where participants are likely not to have regular access to dance. Social-service agency caseworkers refer their clients to the family dance sessions, usually four to eight weeks long, or post flyers about MPACT at their sites.

Luna has offered family dance classes since its founding 21 years ago. MPACT was born 12 years later when one of Luna's part-time teachers, attorney Chantal Sampogna, then an Alameda County public defender, realized that the families she worked with could benefit from Luna's relationship-based approach. Luna directors Patricia Reedy and Nancy Ng concurred. They wrote grants and received funding, and the program has flourished ever since.

I taught MPACT classes for two years. Although it was a brief period in the larger picture of my dance career,

the experience changed my perspective on the role dance plays in the world. I fell in love with dance all over again when I witnessed its potential to dissolve barriers at the most fundamental level of society: the family.

Curriculum for connection

For MPACT teachers, establishing a trusting, playful rapport in highly charged environments takes not only a mastery of dance content but a lot of love and a very cool head. New teachers spend many weeks observing classes and assistant-teaching before becoming co-teachers.

Two teaching artists take turns leading the various sections of all MPACT classes. The one who isn't teaching at the time dances with the families, demonstrating creative ways to interpret the prompts. She helps those who need to modify the movement—the grandmother who has trouble making low shapes, the child with a physical disability, the mother with a small infant—and orients families who arrive late so they feel welcome. (Families in crisis require flexibility, and teachers do their best to accommodate latecomers.)

Like all of Luna's classes, MPACT units are built around the elements of dance: time, space, and energy. What makes them unique is their emphasis on relationship. Teachers frequently use words

like *toward*, *away*, *around*, *under*, *over*, *through*, and *connect*, inviting parents and children to watch and engage with one another as they dance.

The early part of class allows participants to explore locomotors (run, jump, skip, hop, roll) and simple movements, often

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Parents and children engage in playful structured improvisations, which they often perform for the group.

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using the classic Freeze Game format: dance when the music plays; freeze when it stops. This is the chance for teachers to introduce the dance concepts of the day: shape, for example (curvy, straight, twisted), or energy opposites (shaky/smooth, push/pull, tight/loose). Teachers don't teach set steps or ask families to copy their movements. Instead they challenge the kids and parents to draw on their own creativity in response to the prompts: "Try a shaky dance all around the room. Now a smooth dance. Now a dance that's sometimes shaky and sometimes smooth. I see lots of high dancing. Can you dance sometimes high and sometimes low?"

As the class progresses, prompts become more relationship based, often starting with simple body-part connections. "Do a turning dance toward your family and give them a high five. An elbow high five! A foot high five!

choices, teachers sometimes have them watch the child make a shape or do an improvised dance, and then copy it. This never fails to delight. I'll never forget the squeals and applause of one 4-year-old boy as his daddy rolled on the floor and step-touched around the room, flopping his head from side to side à la Snoopy in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*.

If families are comfortable, teachers might invite them to perform their improvisations for the group. Half the families dance while the other half watches. Some of my favorite memories of teaching parent-child dance came out of these showings. Each family has its own essence, its own creative flair. There were many moments of surprise, whether tender, bold, clever, or silly. Hands flew to chests and onlookers gasped, laughed, or sighed while family members tuned in to each other and played off

I'll never forget the squeals and applause of one 4-year-old boy as he watched his daddy roll on the floor and do step-touches around the room while flopping his head from side to side à la Snoopy in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*.

Hold this connected shape and jump it!"

Gradually, as the teachers develop the relationship concepts in that day's lesson, these connections become more interactive. "Make a connected shape with one person curvy and the other straight. A new one! Switch—curvy person straight and straight person curvy!" Structured improvisations follow, requiring families to do some playful problem solving. "Hold this connected shape and travel it around the room!"

To encourage parents to pay attention to their child's

one another's creative choices.

After each performance, teachers invite the audience to reflect on what they saw. "Who saw a toward-and-away dance? What kind of connected shapes did you see?"

One of the last—and most anticipated—parts of class is the Kids Only section. Kids are asked to help find their parents a seat, and parents are asked to watch their children as they dance. Afterward the children are told to run to their parents, hug them, and ask, "What did you see me

Every reflection session gives rise to new ideas;
the curriculum changes each week in response to the
needs of the families and the teachers' curiosity.

do?" Kids often sit in their parents' laps, and parents tend to whisper to their children as if sharing a secret.

After class the co-teachers spend about 20 minutes reflecting on the class and documenting their observations about what worked, when the families were engaged, and what they could change to encourage more engagement. This protocol is at the heart of MPACT's success. Every reflection session gives rise to new ideas; the curriculum changes each week in response to the needs of the families and the teachers' curiosity.

Freeze frames from the journey

One of my most treasured memories of families dancing and creating together involves a mother and her two daughters, ages 7 and 4, who came to a class at an Oakland library. The older daughter, Emily, is autistic, and a behaviorist who had been working with the family came with them. The mother told us that Emily was antagonistic toward her sister and extremely jealous when her mother gave her sister attention.

During the first few weeks of class Emily did not want to dance. When she did participate, she was angry and aggressive, at one point slapping at her mother when the children were asked to give their parents a high-five. But over the course of the session Emily slowly began to join in and, eventually, to smile occasionally when responding to

some of the more playful prompts. In time she started dancing more eagerly, both on her own and with her family.

I will never forget the first time Emily participated in an improvised performance. She and her sister leaned against each other with their full weight, danced through each other's shapes, and ended in an elaborately interconnected pose. Both girls beamed when the families who were watching applauded.

Since that time Emily has received a series of scholarships from Luna to study in its after-school Studio Lab program for children. According to family services manager Erin Lally—my longtime MPACT co-teacher—Emily has "grown beautifully as a dancer and dancemaker. Her confidence has increased. She's now comfortable performing in front of large audiences."

Another enduring MPACT memory is the group dance choreographed by families at a residential center. I never would have expected such an exuberant finale to this session. During the first class, one mom parked herself sullenly on the couch. Others joined in reluctantly, as if doing so only because they were required to by the residential staff.

However, over the course of six weeks, two moms emerged as leaders and rallied the others. The leaders combined the phrases they had learned with their babies

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Teacher Bonner Odell (with drum) leads the class while another teacher dances alongside the class and offers assistance.



MPACT's classes—held in substance-abuse treatment centers, homeless shelters, incarceration facilities, public libraries, and other settings—encourage families to connect.

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and toddlers (sway, turn, bounce), into a dance complete with canons, alternating moments of stillness and motion, and variations in tempo and level.

When the group was ready to perform, they invited the residential center's staff to watch. The staffers were so impressed that they insisted on learning the dance. The class ended with the entire group—moms, kids, residential staff, and Luna staff—performing the dance together several times and all but collapsing in laughter and applause at the end.

At Luna this joyful communal dance has come to exemplify the importance of MPACT's work, because it epitomizes the unifying effect that dancing together can have on a community. As Reedy puts it, "The professionals in these centers are often overworked and underappreciated, and have their own notions of power and relationship to bureaucracy. In this instance power was turned on its head, and happiness prevailed."

Spreading the seeds

After refining MPACT over the last decade, Luna's founders are now expanding its reach. Workshops on parent-child dance are taught throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, and Luna offers a two-year MPACT internship for those seeking training and mentorship. Agencies and organizations that serve families can also hire Luna to bring professional development to their staff and design family dance programs to meet the needs of those they serve. Luna has trained staff how to design and teach parent-child curriculum to clients as diverse as the Asian Women's Shelter in San Francisco, a dance company in Flagstaff, Arizona, and a parent center in Marin City, California.

More recently Luna has started working with dance educators in Southern California who want to bring family dance to their communities. One of those teachers is Ruth Ramos, a dance specialist who teaches in elementary

schools throughout the Los Angeles Unified School District. After witnessing the hardships faced by many of her students in the largely poor, gang-dominated neighborhoods where she works, Ramos partnered with one principal to offer a monthly family dance class during the school day.

"We close with a reflection circle, and some moms cry," says Ramos. "It means a lot to them to get to spend this time with their children. Many of them are working two or three jobs and hardly see their kids."

Reedy and Ng—who oversees MPACT as Luna's director of community engagement—are also getting the word out about the MPACT model within the dance-education world. Last year Luna partnered with dance scholar Ted Warburton of UC Santa Cruz on a research project to study levels of engagement among returning MPACT families. The research team presented the results at the 2010 and 2011 National Dance Education Organization conferences.

Reedy is also writing a booklet on the MPACT approach, which will be targeted to those who want to teach family dance or start programs. She plans to pilot the booklet's curriculum at Luna's first-ever Family Dance Teaching Intensive in January 2014, then make it available at workshops, conferences, and for purchase to the public through the Luna website. In the meantime, the culture of parent-child dance continues to spread through parents, teachers, dance educators, agency staff, and others who have witnessed its power to unite families.

Family dance teachers tend to become its most passionate advocates. Ramos says she dreams of launching a Family Dance Initiative that would extend the monthly classes to every school in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

"Why not dream big?" she says. "If you want to transform communities, you have to start with families. These classes give parents a chance to be present with their children. They look at each other. They touch each other. They solve problems together. This," Ramos says, "is joy." ♦