



The Importance of Stretching

By: Megan Bentz

Megan is a graduate of the University of Illinois where she was a four year member and captain of the Illinettes dance team. She has been with UDA for 9 years and is currently a studio director and dance teacher for Eclipse Dance Zone in Columbus, Indiana.

Stretching is the key to improving yourself as a dancer. The benefits of stretching include increased flexibility, stronger technique, improved lines and body awareness, and advanced self-discipline. A dance team's season can often get hectic and unfortunately an increase in performances will often lead to a decrease in the amount of practice time devoted to stretching and warming up your dancers. Let's look at the benefits of stretching in more detail and examine ways to improve your dancers' stretching habits.

We all know that before each practice or performance a dancer should warm-up their body and stretch out their muscles. Remember that an important reason for doing this is to prevent injury. Before performing a routine or executing technique it is imperative that a dancer's body is ready to push itself to the necessary limits which requires pliable muscles. A stretch should be held for about 30 seconds to ensure your body is benefitting the most it can. To increase flexibility dancers should also stretch after practice. Stretching at the end of a workout is beneficial because your muscles are warmed up and you will be able to go further in your stretch thus improving flexibility. Stretching can also be relaxing and help you unwind after a hard practice by clearing your mind and helping your body to cool down.

Along with increasing flexibility, stretching can also help improve your dancers' awareness of their bodies. Stretching gets a dancer in tune with how their body moves, what their limitations are, etc and can help them develop personal goals specific to their body's needs. By working on lengthening muscles a dancer can also improve their posture and their turnout through maintaining proper alignment in their stretches.

Dancers will find that stretching will improve their self-discipline as well. Improving flexibility and technique takes dedication! Encourage your dancers to set flexibility goals for themselves. Give each dancer 4-6 weeks to achieve their goal and encourage them to find two or three times each week outside of practice to stretch. Dancers can use down time at home to stretch, such as stretching while they watch their favorite TV show or holding a stretch while reading a book for school. Another great idea is stretching right after a shower. A shower elevates the temperature of your muscles and therefore simulates a cardio warm-up and will enable your dancers to benefit from a nice, deep stretch. Remind your dancers that every individual has different stretching needs and it is important that they continue to push themselves and remain dedicated to their own goals to improve their personal range of motion.

Finally, it is important that dancers strive to stretch out every part of the body. A good stretching regimen will cover your legs, arms, back, neck, core, ankles, and feet. Stretching can be a fun part of practice and should not be treated as a chore. Try to introduce new stretches occasionally and use tools or partner-work to help you stretch to keep things interesting. For example, when your dancers stretch out their feet and their pointe you can have them work with a partner to gently push each other's arches down toward the floor or you can use exercise bands wrapped over the toe to stretch the pointed and flexed positions further. You can also run your foot back and forth over a round object such as a tennis ball to strengthen the muscles in your arch. Get creative with your stretching regimen in practice and remember to dedicate enough time to stretching to really maximize the benefits of it. It is all about training your body to achieve the results you are aiming for!