

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE THE GROWING DANCER FOR DANCE FAMILIES AND PARENTS

Growth can bring a lot of change to a dancer's world. Bodies shift. Training demands rise. Pain, recovery, confidence, and coordination can all start to feel harder to understand. For many families, it is not always clear what is normal, what needs attention, or how to best support the young person moving through it all.



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A MESSAGE FROM ROB

DANCE|PREHAB DIRECTOR



Hello! I'm Rob!

*I have been incredibly fortunate to be in dialogue with some of the best minds in our field — researchers, clinicians, and educators who have dedicated their careers to understanding how to help performing artists sustain their physicality and how to keep it healthy. It has been a privilege to share spaces at some of the most prestigious dance institutions in the world, and to present to fellow colleagues at dance medicine and education conferences. DANCEPREHAB was also privileged to receive the **2023 Dance Education Organization Award from the International Association of Dance Medicine and Science (IADMS).***

The biggest lessons, however, come from the families who have trusted us with their dancers. From the students who asked the questions no one had ever asked them before, to professionals who often exclaim, “I wish I knew this when I was younger!”.

As we continue to push the needle forward in dancer health and wellness, we are reminded that no single person carries this work alone. It takes an ecosystem: dancers, educators, families, clinicians, and institutions learning how to speak the same language, ask better questions, and make clearer decisions together.

Let's move!

Warmly,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rob Tsai". The signature is fluid and cursive.



Rob is the owner and director of **DANCE|PREHAB Physical Therapy & Performance**. Beyond DANCE|PREHAB, Rob is on faculty at Chapman University's Department of Dance, as well as the Department of Physical Therapy. Rob also serves as a consultant/guest lecturer for dance programs ranging from the local dance studio to collegiate/preprofessional training, to professional companies.

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THE YOUTH ARTIST-ATHLETE

At DANCE|PREHAB, one of the ways we help families make sense of dance is through the idea of the youth artist-athlete.

Yes, dancers are artists. AND they are also asking a great deal of their bodies every day through jumping, landing, rehearsing, repeating, and performing. **Behind the artistry is a young person managing strength, coordination, endurance, recovery, and growth all at once.**

This becomes even more important during the younger years, when the body is changing quickly. Growth is not always smooth or predictable. A dancer may suddenly feel tighter, less coordinated, more tired, or a little off in ways that can be confusing for both the dancer and the adults around them. That does not always mean something is wrong. Often, it means the body is adapting in real time.

For families, this is where things can start to feel hard to read. Dance training may be increasing at the same time that confidence, energy, and physical capacity are shifting. Expectations can grow quickly. So can pressure. It is easy to feel like you are trying to keep up with a moving target.

We are not here to make this more complicated or to tell families they need to do everything perfectly. We are here to help you better understand the young human behind the dancer, and to offer a clearer way to think about growth, pain, training, and support.

When we use the term youth artist-athlete, we are reminding ourselves that your dancer deserves care that respects both sides of who they are. The art matters. The artist matters. And the human behind the artist matters too.



PHYSICAL CHANGES

GROWTH & MATURATION

When Families May Start to Notice These Changes

For many dancers, the biggest physical shifts happen during the adolescent growth spurt.

This period often begins around ages 11 to 12 for girls and 13 to 14 for boys, though every child develops on their own timeline. In general, girls tend to mature earlier than boys. The full growth spurt process usually unfolds over a few years, not just a few months.

So why does this matter?

These changes often show up right when training is becoming more demanding. A dancer may be spending more hours in class, preparing for more advanced work, or stepping into new physical expectations like pointe, jumps, turns, or longer rehearsal days.

What this can look like

Parents may notice:

- Sudden tightness in a dancer who used to seem very flexible
- More difficulty with balance or turns
- Movements looking less coordinated than before
- Postural changes
- Fatigue showing up more quickly
- Frustration with skills that used to feel easier

This can feel surprising, but it is a normal part of growth.

Continue reading to learn more about:

1. **Changes in Flexibility**
2. **Changes in Coordination and Balance**
3. **Changes in Strength**

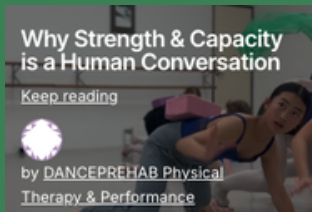
Changes in Flexibility

During a growth spurt, bones often grow faster than muscles, tendons, and other soft tissues can keep up.

That is why dancers may suddenly feel tighter, even if they have always been naturally flexible. This is especially common around the hips, hamstrings, calves, and low back. Parents may notice that stretching feels different, extensions look different, or certain movements seem more restricted than they used to.

This temporary loss of flexibility does not mean the dancer is doing something wrong.

What matters most is how that change is handled. **Trying to force the body into old ranges too aggressively can create more irritation instead of helping.** During this phase, the goal is not to chase the old body. The goal is to support the current one.



[LEARN MORE ON THE DANCEPREHAB BLOG](#)

Many dancers shy away from strength and conditioning. We believe that a strong human sets the stage for the strong dancer to thrive!

Changes in Coordination and Balance

Growth can also affect how a dancer organizes movement.

As limbs get longer and body proportions shift, balance and coordination often change too. A dancer may suddenly struggle with skills they used to do with ease, especially turning, balancing, jumping, or moving quickly through complex choreography.

This can be frustrating for everyone involved, especially when the dancer still knows what they want to do but their body feels less predictable. We often think of this as a relearning period. The dancer is not starting over, but they are learning how to move within a changing body.

Changes in Strength

Growth can also create a temporary mismatch between body size and body control.

As bones lengthen and body mass changes, strength and neuromuscular control may not keep up right away. This can show up as reduced power, shakiness, less stability, or changes in posture and movement quality.

Families may notice:

- more effort during jumps
- less control during landings
- perceived loss of performance
- more difficulty holding alignment
- quicker fatigue during class or rehearsal

Some dancers will need more support during this stage as they catch their strength and confidence up to their changing body.



Helpful Reminders for parents & families

These physical changes are not signs that a dancer is losing talent or falling behind. They are signs that the body is growing.

This is often the phase where dancers need more patience, more recovery, and more thoughtful support around their training. Growth can temporarily change flexibility, coordination, balance, and strength, but with the right support, young dancers can continue adapting well.

What families and parents can keep in mind

- growth changes timing, not potential
- temporary awkwardness is normal
- tightness during growth is common
- frustration often comes from change, not failure
- this is a time to support adaptation, not force performance

GROWTH VELOCITY AND IMPACT TRENDS

LINEAR GROWTH RATE RISK

Faster annual growth rates (specifically >7.3 cm/year) correlate directly with increased growth injury incidence.



BMI IS NOT A RISK INDICATOR

Changes in BMI percentile showed no significant relationship with injury risk in this elite cohort.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CHANGES

GROWTH & MATURATION

Psychological Changes Are Part of Growth Too

As dancers grow, emotional and psychological changes often happen alongside the physical ones.

This can show up as shifts in confidence, body awareness, motivation, stress, and how a dancer responds to correction or challenge. In dance, where so much is visible and evaluated, these changes can feel especially intense.

These responses are not separate from training. They are part of the growing dancer experience.



A changing body can feel confusing

A young dancer may be growing physically while still learning how to make sense of those changes emotionally.

They may feel frustrated that their body no longer moves the way it used to. They may feel more self-conscious, more reactive, or less confident, even if they cannot fully explain why.

This can look like:

- frustration with skills that used to feel easier
- stronger emotional reactions to correction
- fear of falling behind
- feeling disconnected from their body
- needing more reassurance than usual

This does not mean something is wrong. It often means a lot is changing at once.

The dance environment can make body image feel louder

Mirrors, form-fitting clothing, class placement, casting, and constant observation can all increase a dancer's awareness of their body. During puberty, this can make normal body changes feel much bigger and much more personal.

Parents & families may notice:

- comparison to peers
- negative comments about appearance
- worry that their body is changing "the wrong way"
- increased sensitivity around clothing, mirrors, or being seen
- concern that physical changes will affect their dancing

This is why it matters to find a place where their worth is not tied to appearance or performance.



Constant self-observation can lead to "body objectification," where students view their bodies as objects to be judged rather than instruments of expression. Studies show that dancers taught with mirrors often feel worse about their physical appearance compared to those taught without them.

Parent & Family awareness: what to pay attention to:

Parents do not need to have all the answers. But it helps to notice patterns early:

- growing distress around body changes
- increased comparison to other dancers
- dance feeling more stressful than joyful
- signs of shutdown, withdrawal, or irritability
- rigid perfectionism or fear of making mistakes
- changes in eating, recovery, or exercise habits
- ongoing emotional difficulty after an injury or setback

These signs do not automatically mean something is wrong. They do mean your dancer may need more support, more conversation, and a steadier environment around them.

SUPPORTING THE HUMAN

RECOVERY & FUELING

Recovery Needs Change Too

As dancers grow, their recovery needs often grow with them.

A younger dancer is not only trying to keep up with class, rehearsal, and performance demands. Their body is also using energy to support normal human growth, development, and day-to-day life. **That means recovery is not just about “bouncing back” from dance. It is also about having enough support to keep growing well.**

This is why some dancers may suddenly need more sleep, more food, more rest, and more space to recover than they used to.



Growth and training both raise the body's demands

During adolescence, the body is changing quickly. Bones, muscles, tendons, coordination, and body size are all adapting at the same time. When dance training is layered on top of that, the total demand on the body becomes much higher. A dancer may be working hard in class while also using energy behind the scenes to support growth and development.

This can look like:

- getting tired more easily
- slower recovery between classes or rehearsals
- more soreness during busy weeks
- feeling strong one week and off the next
- needing more support than they used to

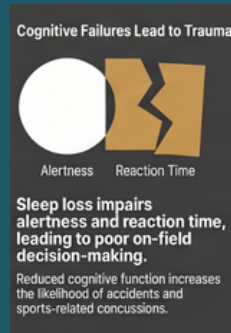
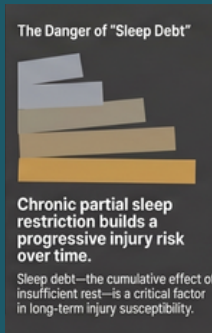
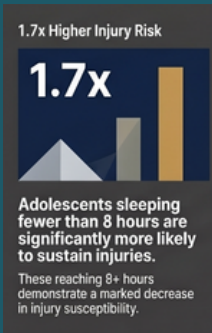
This does not mean they are out of shape. It often means their body is managing a lot at once.

Sleep and nutrition matter even more during this phase

For growing dancers, sleep and nutrition are two of the biggest pieces of the puzzle. Their body is not only recovering from class, rehearsal, and performance. It is also using energy to support normal growth, development, hormone function, tissue repair, and bone health.

Sleep recommendations

- school-age children ages 6 to 12 generally need 9 to 12 hours of sleep per 24 hours
- teenagers ages 13 to 18 generally need 8 to 10 hours of sleep per 24 hours



For active dancers, sleep becomes even more important during heavy training weeks, performance periods, injury recovery, growth spurts, and stressful school stretches. **Research in adolescent athletes has found that sleeping less than 8 hours per night is associated with a higher risk of sports injury, while getting more than 8 hours on weeknights has been linked with lower injury risk.**

Podcast Episode



Ep. 2 Navigating Nutrition for Educators - Melissa Pearson, RDN & Madison Morris, RDN

DANCEPREHAB Dialogues: Making Space for the Human Behind the Dancer

DANCEPREHAB DIALOGUES ON SPOTIFY:

Hear from our community health care practitioners as we chat about the intersection of nutrition and physical health.

Recovery is influenced by more than rest alone

A dancer's body does not separate training stress from life stress.

Allostatic load refers to the total wear and tear that builds up when physical, emotional, academic, and social stressors all stack together over time. In other words, recovery is not just about how much “water is in the cup.” It is also about **the current size of the cup and how much total capacity the dancer has available in that moment.**

Some weeks, the cup is simply smaller.

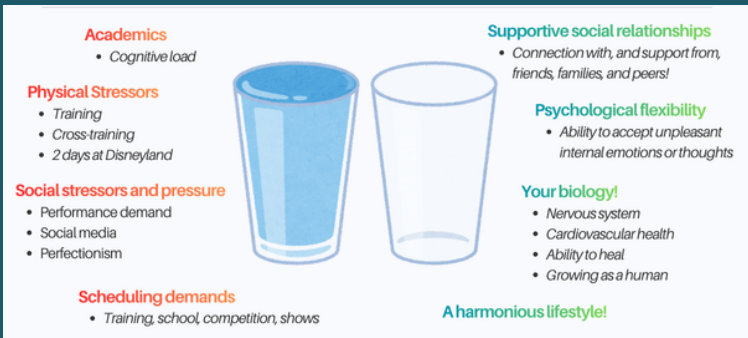
A dancer may be in a growth spurt, sleeping less, stressed about school, dealing with social pressures, under-fueled, and still expected to train the same way. Even if dance hours have not changed, their ability to absorb load may have changed.

At DANCE|PREHAB, recovery is shaped by the full picture of their life.

This can include:

- o training volume
- o rehearsal intensity
- o sleep quality
- o fueling habits
- o school demands
- o emotional stress
- o growth and maturation
- o menstrual health & bone health needs

When several of these stack up at once, the body may have less room to adapt well.



DANCE-RELATED INJURIES DURING GROWTH

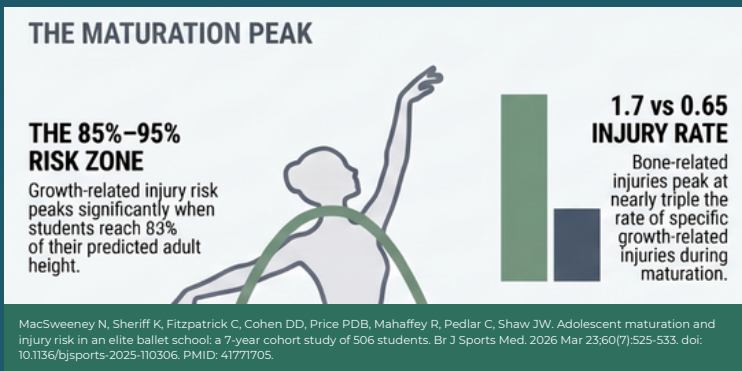
One of the hardest things for families to make sense of is why pain or injury seems to show up right when their dancer is working hard and progressing. It's often because bones often grow faster than muscles and tendons can keep up. This is why aches, pain, or overuse issues can start to show up more during adolescence.

Why parents may start seeing more pain

A growing dancer may be dealing with:

- o tighter tissues pulling more on the body
- o changing mechanics as limbs get longer
- o temporary normal drops in strength or control
- o bones and joints that are still developing
- o more total stress than the body can recover from easily

So even if a dancer is doing the same class, the same jumps, or the same repetitions, their body may not be absorbing those demands the same way it did a few months ago. That is often the piece families are missing.



Parent and family awareness: what helps most

What helps is recognizing the patterns.

- o growth can change how the body handles dance load
- o pain during this phase is not always random
- o repeated pain is worth paying attention to
- o early support is better than waiting until things escalate
- o modifying load is often part of helping, not a sign of failure
- o dance might not be the **only** aggravating factor

Dance-related injuries during adolescence often make more sense when we zoom out.

The question is not just, “What hurts?” **It is also, “What has changed?”**

- o Has the body grown?
- o Has training increased?
- o Is recovery considering human needs?
- o Is the dancer trying to do the same things with a body that is still catching up?

That is often where clarity begins.

Age	What's Changing	What You Might Notice	What to Be Aware Of
8–11	Early stages of growth and increased training exposure	Slight coordination changes, fatigue, adjusting to more classes	Focus on building movement foundation and variety. Avoid pushing intensity too early.
11–14 (girls)	Peak growth period (rapid height changes, tissues adapting at different rates)	Tightness, knee or heel pain, decreased balance or control, things feeling “off”	Higher injury risk if load stays the same. Important to adjust intensity and support recovery.
13–16 (boys)	Peak growth period (later onset compared to girls)	Similar to above: coordination changes, soreness, growth-related discomfort	Same considerations as girls. Monitor load and communication closely.
15–18+	Growth slows, but training intensity and expectations increase	Increased fatigue, overuse symptoms, pressure to perform	Focus on strength, recovery, and managing overall workload across dance and life.

MANAGING THE EXPERIENCE OF PAIN

Why young dancers may struggle to make sense of pain

Young dancers are often still developing the language and confidence to describe what they are feeling.

They may:

- worry that normal soreness means something is seriously wrong
- assume pain is just part of dance and ignore it
- stay quiet because they do not want to disappoint a teacher
- have a hard time knowing when to ask for help

The goal is not to make dancers fearful of every sensation. It is to help them notice patterns, speak up earlier, and better understand what their body may be communicating.

The emotional side of pain

When pain lingers too long without support, the body can become more sensitive over time.

This is one reason it helps to respond early, even if there is not a perfect diagnosis yet. A dancer does not need to wait until everything is fully explained before they are allowed support, symptom management, or a thoughtful plan.

Anxiety, sadness, frustration, and ongoing stress can all make pain feel louder and harder for the body to settle. That does not mean the pain is “just in their head.” It means the nervous system is part of the picture, and support needs to reflect that.

Early care can help with:

- reducing unnecessary fear through safe movement
- improving body awareness
- supporting function and confidence
- preventing pain from becoming more overwhelming over time

When *hypermobility* is part of the picture

For some dancers, pain can be even more complex because of hypermobility. A hypermobile dancer may move easily into large ranges of motion, but that does not always mean those positions are easy for their body to control or recover from. **Some hypermobile dancers are also more sensitive to pain**, may feel discomfort in multiple areas, or may have symptoms that are harder to explain clearly.

This can look like:

- pain that seems to move around
- pain in more than one area
- fatigue with stability-based tasks
- difficulty understanding why things hurt even when imaging or tests seem normal
- dancer is constantly stretching even if they are already flexible because they are chasing the feeling of a stretch.

Other hypermobility considerations:

Hypermobility can affect much more than flexibility. **For some dancers, it can show up alongside symptoms that feel wide-ranging and hard to connect at first**, including dizziness, fatigue, stomach issues, food sensitivities, headaches, sleep difficulties, and unpredictable energy levels.

Because connective tissue is involved throughout the body, families may also notice softer or stretchier skin, unusual scarring or stretch marks, dental crowding, or other **structural differences**.

Some hypermobile dancers may also experience sensory overwhelm, strong perfectionism, rigid routines, executive functioning challenges, performance anxiety, or other **neurodivergent traits** that shape how they experience training, stress, and recovery.

When several of these symptoms show up together, it may be worth looking at the **bigger picture** instead of treating each issue as separate.



Is My Dancer Hypermobile? A Guide for Parents and Teachers

[Keep reading](#)



by DANCEPREHAB Physical Therapy & Performance

Flexibility and range of motion is often an desired aesthetic trait.

How can we balance and recognize signs of when flexibility might change?

SEEING A DOCTOR? THE DANCE FAMILY CHECKLIST.

Seeing a doctor can be stressful. For many families, the hardest part is not just the injury itself, but knowing how to explain what is happening and how to leave the visit with real clarity. At DANCE|PREHAB, we know these conversations can feel confusing, which is why we encourage families to prepare ahead of time, ask genuine questions, express themselves clearly, and keep the conversation going after the appointment.

Let's help your dancer feel heard, helping the provider see the full picture, and making sure the next steps feel clear and useful.

Before Your Visit

- Dress comfortably and be ready to move.
- Bring your dance shoes or any footwear that feels relevant.
- Have a list of your goals.
- Think about what events or activities are important to get back to.
- Bring a video if it helps show the movement or issue more clearly.

During Your Visit

- Be a student of your own body.
- Be ready to learn what your body may need right now.
- Ask genuine questions and express yourself clearly.
- Ask, "What can I do while healing?"
- Ask what movements, training, or activity can still be maintained safely.
- Ask about virtual or telemedicine follow-up options if needed.

After Your Visit

- Build your team.
- Think about who is part of your dancer's support system.
- Continue the conversation.
- Keep communication open so the plan can shift when needed.



FINAL THOUGHTS FROM YOUR DANCE|PREHAB TEAM

Thank you for the trust it takes to let us be part of your dancer's world. It is never something we take lightly. To care for a young dancer is also to care for the hopes, concerns, questions, and commitment that surround them. It is a privilege to support not only the dancer, but the family and community helping shape their path.

If there is one thing we hope this guide leaves you with, it is this: **you and your dancer is not meant to navigate growth, pain, training, recovery, and uncertainty alone.**

At DANCE|PREHAB, we believe that the healthiest dance environments are built through teamwork. Dancers, parents, teachers, and healthcare providers all see different parts of the picture. When those parts are disconnected, families are often left trying to make sense of fear, mixed messages, and too much information. When those parts begin to work together, things become clearer. This is the heart of **a dancer-centered health ecosystem.**

As parents and families, you are an essential part of this team!

You do not need to have all the answers. You do not need to become the expert in everything. But **your perspective, your observations, your steadiness, and your willingness to ask questions matter more than you may realize.** In our work, we continue to emphasize that parents are part of the dancer's ecosystem and part of the shared language that helps young dancers feel supported rather than isolated.

Our hope is that this resource gives you more than information alone. We hope it gives you a little more confidence, a little more direction, and a clearer sense of how to move forward when things feel uncertain.

We are here to shed light on the areas that feel hard to navigate, provide clarity where there has been confusion, and help build the kind of support system our dance community deserves.

Let's keep our dancers healthy, happy, and moving!

Thank you!
Your DANCE|PREHAB Team



HELLO FROM DANCE|PREHAB!

Hello and a pleasure to meet you!
DANCE|PREHAB is the intersection of our team's ongoing experiences as dance student, professional dancer, dance educator, and now dance performance physical therapists.

DANCE|PREHAB has always been more than a physical therapy clinic - **it's a response to the words we've heard and the needs that have been expressed in our dance community.**

At DANCE|PREHAB we are dedicated to supporting artist-athlete health in a constant shifting and changing world.



HOW CAN WE SUPPORT YOU BEST?

PHYSICAL THERAPY & HEALING

For dancers moving through pain, injury, recovery, or return to dance. We help bring clarity to what is happening, support the healing process, and guide the next steps back into training and performance.

PERFORMANCE PREHAB & SUPPORT

For dancers who want to build strength, mobility, control, and confidence before pain becomes the main conversation.

EDUCATION WITHIN THE DANCE ECOSYSTEM

Workshops and learning for dancers, families, and educators. We make health topics in dance more accessible, more relevant, and easier to apply in the spaces where dancers actually live and train.



**BOOK A COMPLIMENTARY
DISCOVERY CALL**



**KIND WORDS
FROM OUR COMMUNITY**