

Getting Ready for Pointe Shoes

1. What is the earliest a child should go en pointe?

I do not believe there is a good set age, though many large dance organizations, particularly in the US and the UK, it seems, will say 11 or 12 years old. Traditionally, in the Russian Vaganova system, children easily go on pointe at age 9 or 10, provided they are physically ready, they are already training 5 to 6 days a week, and they are of slim/strong physique--which it is probably fair to say that all are, or at least were, in the Soviet era-ballet schools given that each student was hand picked and had to be accepted into the training program. The slim and strong physique likely eliminates issues for the developing foot, because of the reduced amount of weight the child is putting on the toes, and the strength the child already has developed in supporting herself on her toes.

2. What kind of preparations could a child make if they are not developmentally ready to dance in pointe shoes? Exercises, stretches, etc

I think it is important to realize that the child needs to be developmentally ready in not only the feet, but in the way the child moves and holds ALL the muscles in the body in the ballet class. For example, if the child is not able to hold the core muscles and with shoulders pressing down, glutes and hip flexors engaged, turned out, in a plie position on one leg, and step onto a high releve (as in a pique, or to sous sous) onto the other foot (to the front, side, or back), while maintaining all the aforementioned muscles and body placement, then the child will not be ready to do this basic transfer step on the pointe shoes. Working in class on transferring the weight onto the highest releve (rather than onto an initial low or weak releve, and correcting afterwards) will ensure the foot and body are engaged in the moments that matter once in pointe shoes.

Of course, useful exercises for the feet include sitting or standing in the 1st, 2nd, and 6th position (still engaging all the relevant muscles in the body) with fully extended knees (this extension is reached not by locking the knees, but by "pulling the knees up" and engaging the quadricep muscles by pulling them up and away from the knees), and extending the feet and toes into demi and full point positions and returning to the fully flexed position. The feet should have full range of movement with and without the use of the plie.

Other important indicators that the child is ready for pointe include gauging how the child lands in a plie position after a saute, or after a releve (does the child drop into the plie or properly press down with resistance; does the child slouch/relax upon landing, or properly maintain posture). The position immediately after standing on pointe shoes is as

important as the position while on pointe shoes, because one needs to know how to come down after you go up. Perhaps it's like knowing how to ride a bicycle, but not being able to mount and unmount the bike without constantly falling, or with a car: are you a good driver if you can't park the car? Just like with the bicycle and car, if you cannot properly maneuver the mounting/parking, you are much more prone to accidents. It is the same with pointe shoes, if you don't know how to properly rise onto them or roll down from them, you will be much more prone to accidents and injuries.

3. What are some reasons a child might be too young to be asked to start wearing pointe shoes?

As probably already covered in the above responses, a child may be too young to properly execute movements without the pointe shoes, and thus would have difficulty, whether due to lack of posture, strength (in the body and feet), or coordination, to execute those basic steps on pointe. Perhaps the child does show physical readiness, but does not show mental, or psychological readiness. The child could be unwilling or scared; sometimes slow-to-warm-up children just need a little more time to get mentally ready. The child could also still lack a conceptual understanding of ballet movements and body placement, and may need more time to become more self-aware of their body and how to use it.

4. What might be some reasons an instructor puts a child en pointe before they are ready?

I just recently had this discussion with a student who felt she was put on pointe too soon at her former school. Reasons can vary, including, promoting the school, competing with other schools that would not put the child on pointe, providing an incentive for the students, lack of understanding or skill on the part of the educator. Perhaps a common reason among semi-experienced/educated instructors would be that they notice beautiful/strong ballet feet on a child with naturally flexible feet/high arches, and they assume the child is ready based on this information alone. As noted above, watching how a child works in the ballet class in steps seemingly unrelated to pointe preparation (like saute jumps) is integral in the proper assessment and plan for moving forward. The saute jump may reveal plopping into plie without pressing heels down accompanied by slouching or condensing the lower spine. Additionally, any stiffness (for example in upper body movement) will be further exacerbated once on pointe shoes, so an inexperienced teacher may be surprised to see their budding dancer suddenly unable to "flow" or smoothly transition upper body when on the pointe shoes.