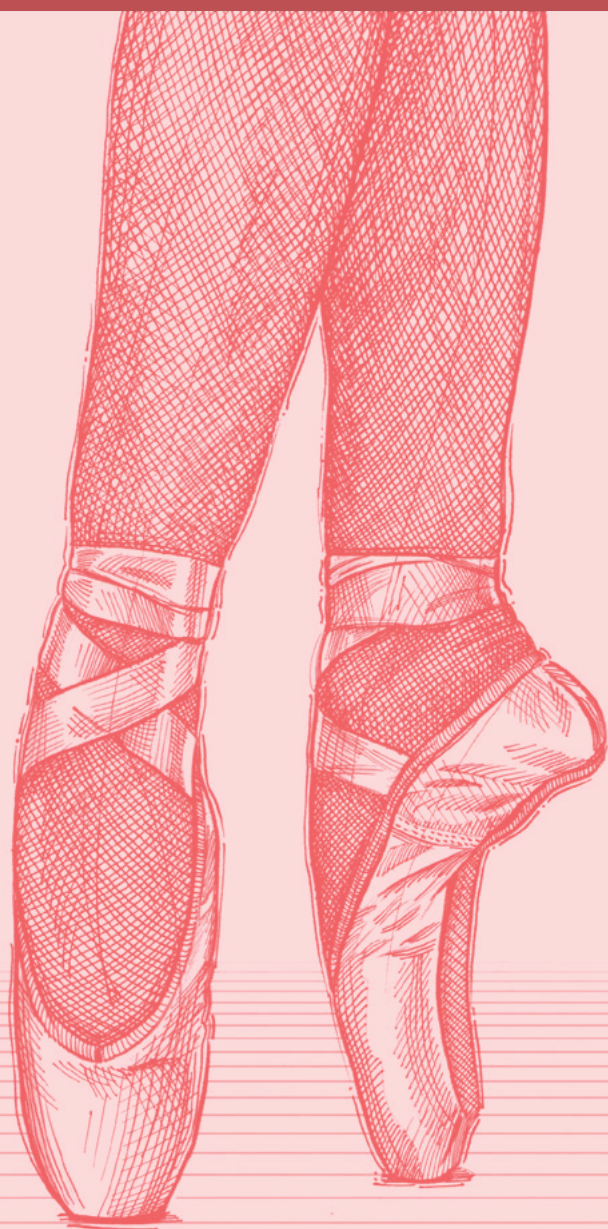


Pointe

Book
1

COMPLIMENTARY SAMPLE



An Introduction to Pointe Work for Ballet Teachers

Ruth H. Brinkerhoff, B.A.

Former Director,
Utah Ballet Academy
Registered Teacher,
Royal Academy of Dance



**the
BALLET SOURCE**

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Pointe 1: An Introduction to Pointe Work for Teachers of Ballet

The Teacher Must Decide

This manual provides information and suggestions for the teaching of beginning pointe work to students who are in the opinion of their teacher, ready for this instruction. The information in this book has worked well for the author, and for other teachers of her acquaintance. However,

the author cannot know what approach to pointe work will be appropriate and safe for any particular teacher, class, or student. Pointe work by its very nature carries a risk of injury. It is the responsibility of each ballet teacher to use his or her best judgment in interpreting, applying and using the information, opinions and teaching suggestions contained in this book.

Pointe Work

Information for the Teacher

All little girls want to dance on their toes. But little girls must not do this if they are to have normal, trouble free feet. Teachers not knowing the reasons why pointe work should not be done too soon might be tempted to let a talented child start sooner. Parents may push, and search for a teacher that will permit it.

The reasons for waiting for pointe work are usually not understood. The soft growth plates within the joints in growing feet, ankles, knees, and lower backs can be distorted into unintended shapes causing permanent damage. It is that simple. And no amount of talent can alter the softness of those growth plates.

In the fifties, ten was considered old enough for pointe. More knowledge is available now, about growth and about how physical training can alter it. Medical authorities support later ages for pointe work. They say no younger than 12, with 13-14 strongly recommended, and up to 16 for some whose growth patterns are slower.

Marie Taglioni made her professional debut in her early 20's. However, her debut on Pointe was not until the age of 28! Her bones were fully formed before she ever attempted pointe

work. Soft ballet shoes were stiffened with cardboard inserts, or darned at the sides to give the feet a little more support. Dancers had to condition and strengthen their feet slowly and carefully. In this century, Tamara Karsavina and others thought blocked shoes were not really needed for pointe.

Today's shoes, if fitted as tightly as is usually recommended, act like a cast on the foot. The tightly fitting shoes provide plenty of support, and the feet do not have to strengthen very much. They only have to endure.

Many believe that working one's muscles to the maximum will result in the greatest possible strength and endurance gain. They apply this to their beginning pointe students.

But, when muscles, bones, ligaments, cartilage, etc. become stressed, they actually are somewhat injured (or at least irritated) at the cellular level. Repairs must be made. A body constantly repairing itself has neither the time nor the materials to build strength. Strength cannot be forced to happen. It must be encouraged, and a chance provided for it to happen naturally. Overworking the body and its resources actually prevents best results.

Something New and Different for Pointe: A Common Sense Approach

The best possible success is what we all want for our students. Most teachers are ready to try a new way if it seems to promise better results, and especially if it also promises less problems for the students' feet.

The best way to teach ballet and pointe is to work with the way in which the body normally strengthens and conditions itself to meet the requirements that are put upon it.

We can find plenty of information about this in the field of weight training. They have discovered how to get the most strength where they want it, the most endurance with the least damage to the body.

When the known principles of physical conditioning and physical strengthening are applied to ballet and to pointe, better, faster results can be obtained with less damage to the dancer's physical self.

If you are interested in having your pointe students able to actually dance

on pointe without stress, without damage to their feet, after only a few months on pointe, read on.

This method is different. But only a little bit different. And the differences make sense.

The first difference is in exactly how the shoes are fitted, both the first pair, and the second pair.

How the pointe work itself is taught is also a little different from the usual in most dance schools. Though, in reading about some of the world famous methods, it seems that perhaps it is just more like the way schools such as the Kirov and Paris Opera and Royal Ballet school deal with beginning pointe.

The differences in this method work together and support each other. This interactive support system will not be there if only one aspect, or one difference, is tried. You will have to try the whole package to get the results that I and teachers of my acquaintance have gotten, and are still getting.

It is a common sense approach. I challenge you to try it with one beginning pointe class for six months.

The Gradual Buildup for Pointe Work

One famous European ballet boarding school's plan:

Level 1:	Demi Pointe	Pointe
1st Yr, age 11-13	2 exercises, 8 cts each	none
2nd Yr, age 12-14	3 exercises, 16 cts each	at barre only: 4 exercises, 4 Relevés per exercise
3rd Yr, age 13-15	4 exercises, 16 cts each	6 exercises, 8 Relevés each (3 barre, 3 center)
4th Yr, age 14-16	6 exercises, 16 cts each	9 exercises, 8 Relevés each, (3-4 at barre; 5-6 in center)

5th-6th Yr, age 15-17: Demi pointe and pointe included in all work as per ability, no separate exercises for either.

This chart assumes 2 ballet classes weekly the first year; four or more after that. Only one class contains pointe the second year, two classes the third and fourth years, and pointe as a natural part of the classes after that.

Note the very slow beginning, the very careful limiting of pointe and demi pointe the first 4 years.

The Kirov and Bolshoi schools have a very similar schedule, providing for a

very slow buildup on pointe the first few years.

In considering the implications of the chart and statements above, remember that the first year students in such schools come to the auditions with several years of ballet already behind them. And, only the more talented students are accepted, not the average.

Should We Follow Their Example?

If we are to believe that these famous schools produce good dancers because of how they train them, then it makes sense that we, too, should seriously consider putting strict limits on how much and what kind of pointe work we permit our students to do for at least the first two years of pointe. Two principles of physical training used in sports and therapy support this idea.

1. The "Twelve Week Rule" which applies to increasing both specific and general strengths, and to learning any new skill, discussed in the next section.
2. "Interval Training" which permits the fastest possible increase in strength by slowing down the fatigue factor in any one training session (class), discussed on p. 8.

Applying either one of these to your

pointe program should increase both its safety and its effectiveness. Applying both, with a good dose of your own common sense and experience will make it the best it can be.

In reading what teachers in this country do with beginning pointe students, we can quickly see that they generally do what was done to them by their own teachers a generation ago, or they may be trying something different because they want something better for their students. The something different might come from their own logic, or from reading or hearing about what another school or teacher is doing.

The saddest thing I have heard was a complaint from some teachers in a neighboring western state who were using good sense in their pointe classes. They would send their students to be fitted for pointe shoes to a dance supply store in the area where supposedly the person was “trained in the fitting of toe shoes.”

But the person fitting the shoes would tell the girls how awful the pointe work would be, that their toes would bleed, and their feet would get blisters, callouses, corns, etc. and be permanently ruined. And yet, these teachers were not doing that to their students! And, the students were coming back with shoes too small for any sensible method of training.

Teachers, somehow, arrange to go with your students to the shoe store and supervise the fitting of the pointe shoes.

Read on to learn about some common sense principles you can follow in fitting shoes, and in teaching pointe as painlessly, safely, and effectively as possible.

Bleeding, painful toes and ruined feet may unfortunately be common to pointe work, but these conditions need not be a necessary part of learning and performing pointe work.

The Twelve Week Rule

A Magic Rule That Really Does Work!

The Twelve Week Rule:

It takes the body just about 12 weeks to complete any needed major repairs or major changes in structure.

This Twelve Week Rule really does work. For pointe, a student needs the strengthening of muscles to meet increased stress, the increasing of the density of bone cells to withstand increased pressure, the strengthening and thickening of ligaments to hold bones more securely in place.

When a new type of requirement is put upon the body, especially one that is not the usual, i.e. pointe work, this requires some major reinforcing of the cells in the bones, ligaments and muscles of the feet and ankles. This is why it is so very important to go slow, and to not cause pain or discomfort during the first twelve weeks.

This is why no home practice should be allowed. This is why only one class per week should contain the pointe work regardless of how many classes the student is taking.

Twelve Week Plateaus Happen for Strengthening and for Learning

Weight trainers know that their strength will show significant increase about every twelve weeks, but not much in shorter time periods. The sports world has long used this principle.

When I first tried it with a beginning pointe class, I could not believe how much easier the students found pointe work once that initial strengthening period was over.

However, the student with higher arches will need a longer conditioning period, perhaps even a second twelve weeks.

Explain this process to the students, and especially let those with the high arches know that their beautiful feet take longer to get strong. Most are willing to be patient if they know about how long it will take, and that success is possible.

The Twelve Week Rule works both ways: it takes Twelve Weeks to break a bad habit, but it also takes Twelve Weeks to permanently create one.

Therefore, we need not panic at every little mistake students make. Correct

one thing at a time. Don't overload the brains or the muscles. A firm learning of one thing is better than confusion at trying to accomplish everything at once.

The Twelve Week Rule really does work!

That's why:

1. Correct weight placement on pointe must be accomplished in parallel position the first week or two. Other positions are an extension of the principles, and an application of the principles.

2. This is also true of any other dance skill. Present it in principle, then extend it and apply it for about twelve weeks. You will find that it becomes a more permanent learning.
3. All of the pointe steps for the first twelve weeks are already learned on demi pointe or are presented on demi pointe the first two or three weeks. Don't skip any of the outlined work. Go slower if students seem to need it. but don't skip anything.

Principles of Physical Conditioning That Will Affect Pointe Work

1. Interval training enables muscles to do more work at a session, by providing short rests for the muscle groups being trained.

Strengthening can be faster when this method is used. This is the idea behind the “mixed class” format described later. However, it does depart somewhat from the traditional format of a ballet class. If you can use this principle in your ballet classes, it can give faster results.

Fatigue works against the improvement of strength or endurance, particularly when dealing with a new skill or a new type of stress to the body, such as pointe work. Successful improvement comes from a gradual buildup of the work load placed on the muscles, combined with the use of short rest periods. In a ballet class, this means frequently changing the type of movement being done, and/or the groups of muscles that are being used.

2. The joint that moves is the one that is being strengthened.

The joint being held in one position is not getting stronger, so, holding the top of a rise or Relevé may increase balance, but it will not strengthen the action of a relevé or Elevé. Moving many times against a reasonable

amount of resistance which is gradually increased to match the capacity of the muscles is what makes muscles get stronger.

The slow rise and lower (Elevé) with perfectly straight knees is a very important exercise for Pointe because it strengthens ankles and feet.

Strength comes from movement, not from lack of it. Holding a position does not strengthen a muscle except in that precise position. Getting into and out of it will be no stronger. That’s why isometric exercise went out of style so quickly!

3. A firm Ballet background is necessary for success on Pointe. Improving the Ballet work improves the Pointe work.

The groundwork of natural movement and natural coordination, and of basic Ballet principles and skills must be there for success on Pointe. Pointe is an extension of Ballet. Pointe steps and movements need to be learned first on demi pointe.

4. Wolff’s Law

Placing, or the correct alignment of bones and muscles to each other and in relation to the force of gravity is very

important, as per “Wolff’s Law”: Bones and joints assume their final shape, size and strength as a result of:

1. The force of gravity, and
2. The forces created by the actions of the muscles on the bones and joints.

The implication here is that not only do we learn a particular way of moving, but our bones tend to grow to accommodate our movement patterns. This won’t happen overnight, but it does mean that letting incorrect placement and movement habits continue over time can cause them to become permanent.

Bodies grow at their own rate, regardless of mental acuity, or natural talent. Readiness for each level of advancement in ballet is tied closely to the skeletal maturity of the body. This can be a very individual matter.

5. Teach one idea at a time. Pace the class, plan what to teach each week. Most of a ballet class is review. Make your teaching moments count.

Not all barre exercises or all center sections need to be done or covered thoroughly in every single ballet class. Pick a variety of familiar exercises that will give a good warmup. Then decide what things are to be emphasized, or thoroughly taught.

Pace the entire class physically and mentally, to prevent muscle stress and mental burnout. Do not overwork a particular movement or type of movement. The traditional ballet class is designed to change movement types frequently to avoid over stressing one particular set of muscles. Stick close to this outline for best results.

6. The “Overload Principle”

The “overload principle” talked about in sports is not a true overloading of the muscles. If it were, the action could not be done! It is a load to nearly full capacity of the muscles, using a resistance greater than usual. This is exactly what we need to do for pointe work, but not more.

Planning the Pointe Class

Advantages of the Mixed Class

The Traditional or Section Class Format

Most teachers put Pointe work for beginners all together in one place,

- At the end of the class,
- At the end of the barre, or
- In a short class all by itself following one of their regular Ballet classes.

These class formats will be called “Section Classes” because the Pointe work is done all at once, separate from the regular Ballet work.

Advantages of the Section Class Formats

When pointe work is done in one section of the class: either at the end of the barre or at the end of class, lesson planning is a little easier. Many teachers prefer the end of class, as it motivates the girls to get their shoes changed quickly, and eliminates the second changing.

Students will be less tired, and better able to do better on Pointe if it is done at the end of the barre. If the teacher does not stop the class, but continues with those students who are not on Pointe, the girls will be more likely to hurry. It also helps if they are not allowed to leave the dance studio while changing shoes.

Advantages of the Mixed Class Format

If we use the interval training* idea from page 11, we can create a mixed class where the Pointe exercises alternate with regular barre exercises. This method gives a rest to the toes between each Pointe exercise. This allows more Pointe work to be done sooner than could comfortably be done in the more traditional “section class”.

Students will progress a little faster by this method. It takes a little bit more planning at first to organize the class, but the benefits seem to outweigh the disadvantages. The shoes will wear out a bit sooner with this method, but the first pair seldom wears out before it is outgrown anyway!

By alternating the Ballet and the Pointe exercises, the time actually spent on Pointe in each class can be increased slightly more than with a section class. Toes will be more comfortable, and students should progress faster and stronger and with fewer problems with their feet.

With this method, they bring their Ballet shoes into class and wear their Pointe shoes. When it is time to change shoes they do not leave the room. They are missing one exercise as they change, and are more likely to hurry in order to rejoin the class.

Combining Beginning Pointe Class with Pre-Pointe Class

Having the Pre-Pointe students in with the beginning Pointe students helps you to keep the class moving, even while some shoes are being changed. Each teacher must decide which method suits her, her students, and her school the best, and use it. Consistency within a Ballet school is important, so if working with other teachers, there must be an agreement on the syllabus and methods to be followed within each year, each class, and each grade.

Choosing a Format

1. Mixed Class—students wear Pointe shoes until Pointe work is finished—requires one change of shoes and wears shoes out faster. It requires a little more planning, and accurate roll keeping. Students are the least tired for Pointe work, as it is near the front of the class. They can do a little more because their toes get a rest between exercises.

2. Section Class at the end of class: requires one change of shoes, but it takes longer to put Pointe shoes on than to take them off. At the end of class students are the most tired, and least able to use muscles well in a new skill. Advantage is you can send non-Pointe students home and concentrate on helping the Pointe students.
3. Section Class at the end of the barre: requires two changes of shoes, but students are less tired than at the end of class. Beginning Pointe can be combined with a Pre-Pointe class.

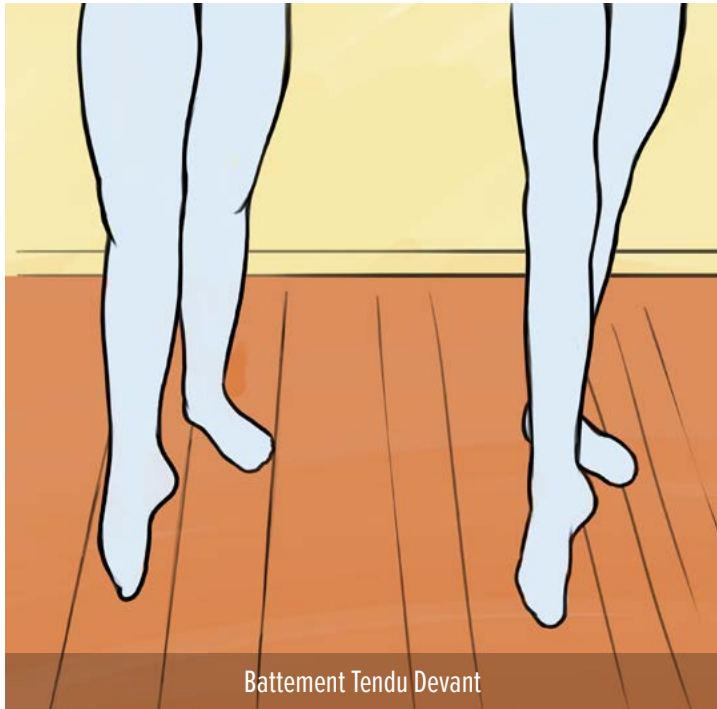
Lesson Plans

Lesson plans are included in this book for all these formats, and for a Pre-Pointe class.

*Since there is not a total body rest given, the mixed class method is not considered by some to be true “interval training.” I disagree, since the specific structures being conditioned for pointe get enough rest that it does make a difference in how much pointe a student can do in one class, and therefore noticeably increases their progress.

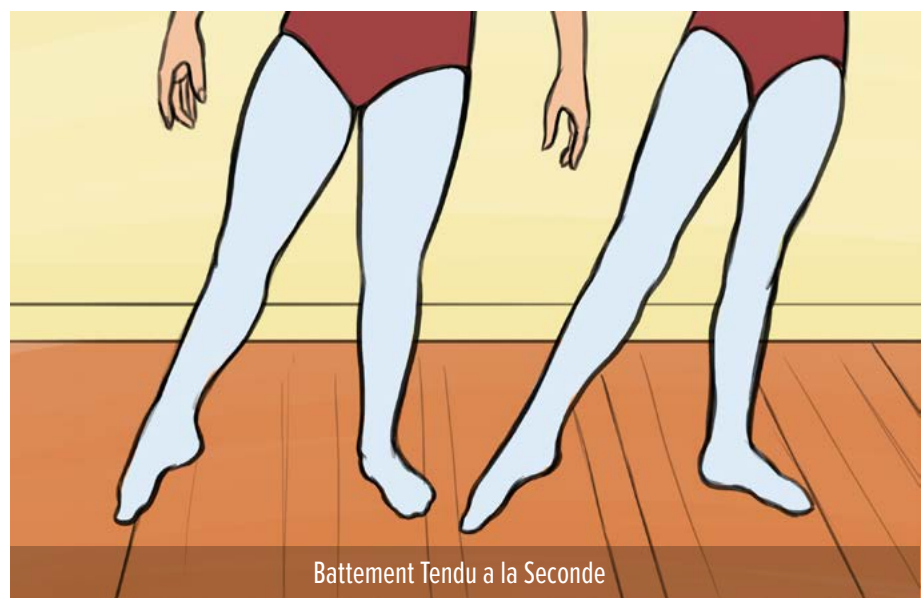
Ready for Pointe Shoes?

It is a good idea to periodically check students' feet without shoes to see exactly how the feet and ankles are being stretched in the pointed positions.



These pre-pointe students understand that the toes need to extend straight, and not curl when pointing.

In pointing to 2nd, the girl on the left has allowed her supporting leg to turn in.



Is The Student Ready for Pointe?

General Requirements:

- Age: no less than 12, older is better.
- Training: 3 or 4 years of ballet, since age 8.
- Advancement: strength and technique to about a Ballet Grade 3 or 4 level. (Cecchetti or Royal Academy or ISTD grades)
- Currently taking ballet at least twice weekly.

Medical Advice

Student should ask the family doctor:

1. The student's skeletal maturity needs to be at the level that is usually expected by age 12 or older.
2. There should be no pre-existing conditions of poor foot and ankle alignment, or other medical problems which might be made worse by pointe work.
3. Alignment of bones in ankles and feet needs to be such that correct weight bearing on pointe is possible to achieve.

Classroom Screening Tests

Students like to have "tests" they can look forward to passing off for permission to get pointe shoes. These are a few of the possible ones you can use. Of course, you are making private observations of your own in much greater detail, and are knowing about

when each student is or will be ready.

1. When the student can hold the supporting thigh fully turned out in all barre work.
2. When the student lands correctly from jumps with thighs well turned out, and feet in perfect alignment with knees, every time.
3. When the student can do the Pre-Pointe exercises on Demi Pointe correctly and well. Echappé Relevé to 2nd in the center is an excellent test to use. Strong legs and feet, no wobbly ankles, no straining of arms and shoulders.
4. There are many other tests that can be used; you may already have one in mind that you like, or have used.

If the full pointe position is not fully possible at first, the potential to achieve it within a year with slow and careful exercising of the ankles and feet needs to be there.

Posture Checklist for Ballet Students

As presented by Alan Hooper, ARAD at a teachers workshop in 1986

1. Stand evenly on the triangle* of the foot, with weight evenly distributed between the two feet.
2. Insteps must be lifted, and foot correctly aligned with the leg.

3. Thigh muscles should be pulled up, especially across the hip joints in front, and above the knees.
4. Thighs are turned by the use of the outward rotators; hamstring muscles are held firmly.
5. Tailbone is pressed gently down; pelvic bone held level and square.
6. Stomach (abdominals) is gently lifted.
7. Keep an open feeling between ribs and full pelvis.
8. Shoulders are relaxed and sitting on top of the rib cage; shoulder blades are flat against the ribs in back.
9. Arms are relaxed, but held in a position, not loose and floppy.
10. Neck is relaxed; head is balanced over the neck and spine.

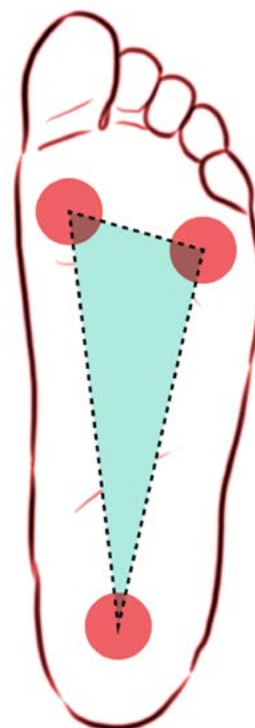
11. Spine and head stretch gently upward.
12. Eyes look ahead, with expression!
They must have life!

“The total picture of a dancer: legs, arms, head, hands, feet, expression, can be compared to a chord on the piano, with all of the correct notes striking at the same time.” — Alan Hooper

This posture checklist is a good prerequisite for beginning pointe students.

*The Triangle of the Foot

Weight bearing for ballet is considered correct when divided evenly over three main weight bearing points on the plantar (sole) surface of each foot: one third is on the heel, two thirds on the ball of the foot.



Guidelines For Starting a Student On Pointe

Reminder: Pointe work carries some risk of injury. Teachers must use their own judgment in applying these guidelines, and in using other ideas and information in this book. When in doubt, or if problems occur, seek medical advice. Even the best rules will have exceptions.

Planning

The minimum age recommended by most authorities for starting pointe work is 12, with 13 strongly recommended, and 16 listed as not too late to begin pointe, even for a professional career. Student should have had 3-4 years of weekly or biweekly ballet classes since age 8.

Student must be able to maintain strong and equal turnout to her ability during all barre exercises, and have the strength to land correctly from jumps with thighs well turned out, and feet in perfect alignment with knees.

Strength, coordination and muscle tone must be good, and technical progress at about a Ballet Grade 3 or 4, (such as R.A.D, Cecchetti or ISTD grades).

Student must take two classes per week. Pointe will be included in the second weekly class, and only if the first weekly class was attended. No home practice for the first year.

Shoes are worn only with teacher's supervision.

The teacher needs to keep a detailed record of each student's attendance so that the rule of not wearing pointe shoes when the first ballet class was missed can be enforced.

Fitting The Pointe Shoes

Each student must get the style, shape, and brand of pointe shoe that is best for their foot structure. Find the one that is best. No one shoe will work well for all students.

The teacher should supervise the fitting. The first pair should be fitted 2 widths wider and 1/2 size longer* than for an advanced dancer. This allows the muscles, bones, and ligaments involved in pointe work to make the necessary increases in strength and size during the first three months.

*Early teens will need the 1/2 size growing room because the first pair will probably last six months to one year. If this extra room is not provided, the toes will begin to buckle and curl under as the feet grow. Students whose feet are fully grown will not need the extra length.

A New Idea for Fitting the First Pointe Shoes

Fit the first pair of pointe shoes with a pair of medium weight ankle socks over the tights, and foam toe pads over

the ankle socks. This takes up the extra width and length. The shoes will give sufficient support if the student is kept at the barre, and if they are instructed to put as much of their weight as is needed onto the barre, especially the first few weeks.

This method of fitting is appropriate for the method of teaching beginning pointe outlined in this manual, but may not be appropriate for other methods. If you fit the shoes this way, then stick to this teaching program as well.

As the feet increase slightly in size due to the conditioning of the bones, ligaments and muscles in the toes and metatarsal joints, the socks are discarded, usually after 3 or 4 weeks.

When the shoes again become tight, the foam pads are exchanged for a more advanced padding: gel type pads, lambs wool, or a strip of ace bandage, whatever the dancer likes best.

The second pair is fit to the student's comfort and ability to dance in them both flat and on pointe. The student decides (with the teacher's approval) which size and style helps them the most to stand correctly, and to dance comfortably. Pointe work that is comfortable will be more artistic, and more correct.

Do the Shoes Fit?

1. Toes must be able to lay perfectly flat in the shoe when the student stands flat in the pointe shoes.

2. The student must be able to stand on demi-pointe (or nearly so) in the pointe shoes.
3. There should be no "pressure points" of pain caused by the shoes when standing on pointe or flat, other than what is felt on the very ends of the toes. The pointe shoe should feel somewhat like it is a hand holding the foot in place when it is on pointe.
4. The student must be able to place her weight correctly onto the ends of the pads of the toes when on pointe, not on the nails. The toes must "feel the floor" through the shoes. At first there will be a feeling of "pins and needles" on the ends of the toes. This will go away in a few weeks when the nerves on the ends of the toes get used to being stood upon.

Using the Pointe Shoes with the Teacher's Supervision

1. Phalanges (toe bones) need to be as exactly perpendicular to the floor as possible when the student is on pointe:



These drawings are intended to show approximately how the phalanges or “toe bones” can be perpendicular to the floor when on pointe regardless of the shape of the foot above them.

High arches will need to make a slight dorsiflexion at the metatarsal-phalangeal joint (note the arrow) in order to get the weight exactly on the ends of toes, and not over onto the nails, while stretching the ankle and arch of the foot. This will take more strengthening, a longer conditioning time at the barre.

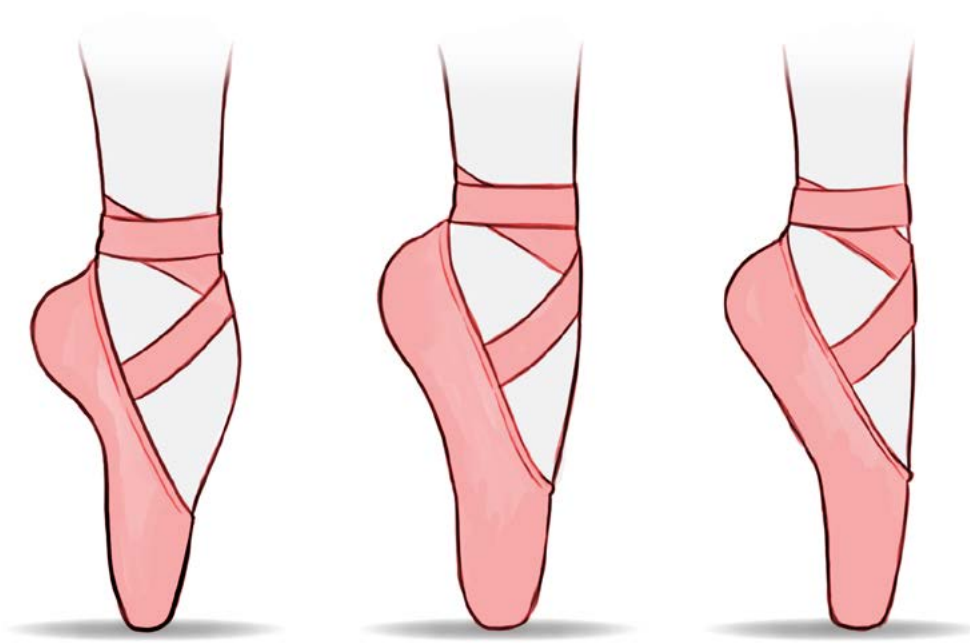
2. When on pointe, the ankles and arches must be fully stretched, and then the weight is placed on the ends of the toes, and never on the toenails or knuckles, and never supported entirely by the shoes.
3. Students must learn to roll up and down through the demi pointe position in 1st and 2nd positions. All rises go through the demi pointe, and do not displace. The relevés to 1st and 2nd go quickly through demi pointe and do not displace.
4. It is quite all right to put considerable pressure straight down on the barre until the toes become used to being stood on, and the student gets used to the more careful posture control needed on pointe.
5. For the first twelve weeks, the students leave their pointe shoes in a securely locked cupboard at the ballet studio, or with the teacher. Then they are not tempted to wear them at home!
6. If the regular ballet class is missed, they do not wear pointe shoes in the next pointe class. If several classes in a row are missed, they must take that many classes (both count) without pointe before wearing them again.
7. A student showing unnecessary strain in the shoulders, neck, face, etc., or appearing to be in pain, or showing wobbly ankles, or unsteadiness on pointe, should remove her pointe shoes for the rest of that class.
8. If the feet are uncomfortable, the shoes should be removed, and the class is finished on demi pointe. Shoes that are too small should not be worn, as damage to feet can occur.
9. Pointe shoes should not be worn if the feet are injured or blistered, or if there is any slight injury to ankles or knees. Toenails need to be kept trimmed slightly shorter than the toes, and well-groomed at all times, now. Students having ingrown toenails may need some medical advice on how to care for them.
10. There is no need to deliberately create callouses on the toes.

Gradual, correct training on pointe should gradually toughen the structures of the feet that need it.

11. There should never be any need for a student to use “pain deadening” medications on the toes. If this is needed then the student needs to stay off pointe until whatever is wrong is fixed , or healed.

12. If correct weight placement is learned, and the rules above are followed, students should not have difficulty or extreme discomfort with their pointe work. If they do, there is a problem that needs to be found and fixed.

The first twelve weeks are very important. This is when the initial buildup of strength and endurance at the cellular level in bones, ligaments, and muscles should take place. The skeletal structures involved must not be over stressed before the strength is there if the best results are to happen.



Correct Weight Placement on Pointe

Thank you for taking *Pointe 1: An Introduction to Pointe Work for Ballet Teachers* for a test run!

If you buy *Pointe 1* before August 19th, 2015, you will receive our special 10% off prelaunch price!

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