↗ **ACTIVATE**

EᴍBRACE KIDS.

Activate
Dance

Recommendations for building better body image in dance

National Eating Disorders Strategy 2023–2033

National Eating Disorders Collaboration

Evidence Experience Expertise
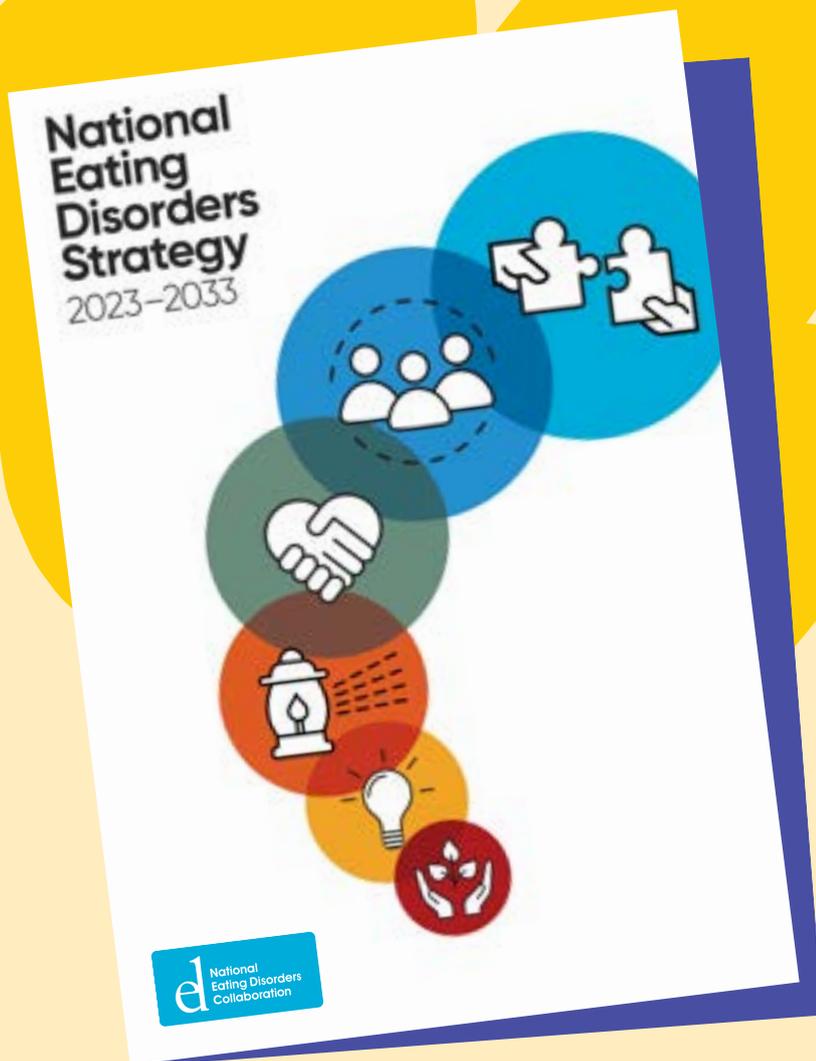
ausDANCE QLD

This resource aligns with:

- NEDC National Strategy for Eating Disorders 2023-2033

- NEDC Eating Disorder Safe Principles

- Safedance™ for Kids, Ausdance QLD

Acknowledgements

This resource was developed, based on lived experience and the latest science and evidence, by:

Please share widely and encourage people to sign up for this and other resources at **bodyimageresources.com**.

Introduction:
Body image in dance

Dance offers young people an opportunity to express themselves and experience their bodies in ways that no other activity provides. The physical and mental health benefits from moving our bodies in dance are clear and well documented.

However, dance culture, and dance settings, are also places where there can be an over-emphasis on the body and appearance, and reinforcement of cultural ideals of what a 'dancer's body' might look like. In this competitive environment, where there is close monitoring and awareness of what the body looks like, dancers can become self conscious, preoccupied with their body weight and shape, develop body image concerns, and engage in disordered eating behaviours. Unfortunately, if not identified early, eating disorders can progress to become very serious psychological conditions that can have a negative impact on health and wellbeing, and lead to premature death.

The problem: Body image and eating disorders

77% of young people in Australia say they are in body image distress [1]

There are **1.1 million people** living with an eating disorder in Australia [2]

Eating disorders have doubled among young people aged 5-13 years since 2005 [3]

The prevalence of **eating disorders in dancers is three times higher** than in the general population. [4]

In 2023, 1273 people died from an eating disorder in Australia, more than our national road toll. [5]

Body image is a crucial aspect of a dancer's mental and emotional wellbeing, significantly impacting their confidence, performance and overall satisfaction with dance. The pressure around appearance, or feeling that they don't fit in because of how they look, could lead some young people to avoid or drop out of dance. For young dancers especially, developing a positive body image is essential for fostering a healthy relationship with their bodies, and with dance.

*For references, please see page 25.

How to use this guide

This document aims to explore the benefits of considering body image in the dance environment and provides practical strategies for dance teachers to build better body image for individual dancers, along with a more inclusive, positive culture and environment for dance.

Across all ages, styles, genres and settings, the recommendations provided here are based on the latest research and evidence, as well as the lived experience of dancers and dance teachers who have experienced body image concerns and eating disorders.

We have created this guide for dance teachers in studio, community and school settings, to provide broad guidance around some practical strategies that could achieve these goals, and ensure that dance can be for every body!

If you are a parent:

1 You can use this guide to become more informed about body image and eating disorders, and support your child at home to Embrace their body and participate in dance activities. For the greatest impact, please recommend that your child's dance teacher download this guide and implement the recommendations.

2 If you can, offer your support to do this, to create a more positive body image environment for your dancer and others in your community.

If you are a dance teacher, competition judge or choreographer:

1 We have provided general information to inform you about body image and eating disorders - you can read through this guide to update your knowledge, and follow the links to access further information if you need it.

2 Consider implementing these recommendations in your setting.

3 Use the checklist to track your progress.

4 Access the digital portal to print off the resources that you would like to display.

5 Hang your posters and celebrate becoming an Embrace Space.

Already doing everything we recommend? That's great! Display your Embrace Space signage with pride, and tell us about the great work you're doing.

The benefits of building better body image in dance

Creating a supportive environment and building better body image in dance is not only beneficial for individual dancers but also contributes to a more inclusive culture in your studio, and an empowered dance community.

Activate Dance aims to:

- Encourage dance teachers to reflect on their own body image and teaching practices that could potentially influence the dancers they interact with.
- Foster safe and supportive dance environments that are equitable, inclusive, diverse and accessible for every body.
- Create a dance world that celebrates what our bodies can do, rather than how they look, in order to improve dancers' overall health and wellbeing.

Benefits of considering body image for dancers:

1
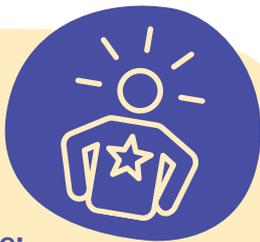
Enhanced confidence:
When dancers accept and appreciate their bodies, they generally have higher self confidence and self esteem. When dancers feel comfortable and accepted in their bodies, they are more likely to express themselves fully and take creative risks in their movements.

2

Better mental health:
Negative body image can lead to depression and anxiety, hindering a dancer's ability to perform at their best. By promoting positive body image, dance teachers can create a supportive atmosphere where dancers feel safe and free from judgement, thus reducing performance-related stressors.

3

Improved performance:
When dancers are focused on how they look, it can distract them from fully engaging in their training and performance. By shifting the focus away from physical appearance and towards skill development and artistic expression, dance teachers can help young dancers achieve their full potential.

4

Better physical health outcomes:
Encouraging a positive body image means that young people are more likely to engage in health behaviours, such as optimal hydration, balanced nutrition, adequate rest and regular exercise. By emphasising the importance of overall health and wellbeing rather than unrealistic body ideals, dance teachers can instil lifelong attitudes towards embodiment that support both physical and mental health.

It starts with you

If you are a dance teacher, choreographer or judge, we can assume you have also been a dance student. Reflecting on the messages you have received about your own body can be challenging, especially if you have ever felt excluded or 'not good enough'. Ballet in particular can be highly competitive, with professional ballet careers only attained by a very elite few.

By reflecting on the messages you received about your body when you were training, you will be more able to reframe how you think about your own body, so that you can create safer environments for the dancers in your care.

- Were you ever told you were too tall, too short, not the right shape/size, ethnicity etc? This is body shaming, and negative body commentary.
- Was your body shape or size ever compared to your peers?
- Were you ever weighed or told to lose weight? How did that make you feel?
- Did you ever feel uncomfortable and exposed in your leotard or dance costume?
- Did you ever feel uncomfortable with physical corrections from your teacher?
- Were you ever teased or excluded by other dancers, because of the way you looked?
- Did other parents or audience members make unprompted comments about your appearance that made you feel bad?
- Did standing in front of a mirror for hours ever make you feel uncomfortable?
- Did you ever feel uncomfortable doing certain movements that did not align with your personal values?
- Have you ever felt unable to participate in dance classes or performances due to physical limitations or age?
- Were you ever excluded from dance classes, groups or performances because of your appearance?

These are the things we are hoping to change...

Take a moment to reflect - did any of these things happen to you? What was the result or impact on you?

How does this make you feel about the environment you want to create for your dancers?

If reflecting on these things raises any issues for you, please contact the Butterfly Foundation National Helpline on 1800 33 4673.

ACTIVATE *dance recommendations*

The following recommendations, drawn from the latest science and research, and our lived experience experts, aim to provide practical guidance for building better body image in dance.

In brief, the recommendations encourage dance teachers (and others involved in dance) to:

Use supportive language

Ensure positive dance dynamics

Create welcoming dance spaces

Make accessible and inclusive costume choices

Allow dancers to find individual purpose and meaning

These are described in more detail in the rest of this guide.

When these recommendations are implemented, dance teachers, choreographers and judges can create dance environments that promote a sustainable passion for dance and one that nurtures the development of positive relationships between dancers and their bodies.

*When we say dance teachers throughout this document, we mean everyone involved in dance, including dance teachers, choreographers and dance competition judges.

Recommendation 1:

Using supportive language

Recommendation 1: Using supportive language

Talking about bodies - the way they look and the way they move - might feel unavoidable in dance. However, when dance teachers and choreographers make small changes to move towards more neutral language that does not make any judgement or criticism around body shape, size or appearance, it can make a big difference for dancers' body image and wellbeing. Implementing strategies to reduce the amount of body commentary - from other dancers, parents, judges and administrators - will also prevent negative influences on body image and wellbeing.

Then there are the 'unspoken' words - in dance, there is also the potential to unintentionally reward individuals with thin bodies, in decision-making around stage placement, role allocation and lifts. This may also serve to subconsciously reinforce stereotypes about 'ideal bodies'.

Practical recommendations

- [ ] Avoid negative commentary about weight, growth and appearance - criticising weight and appearance only leads to feelings of body shame.
- [ ] There should be no explicit encouragement of weight loss or changing bodies and appearance.
- [ ] Consider language used around bodies in relation to weight, size and shape. In class, use purposeful language that is centred around technique and the execution of movement. For example, "Use your core to help you balance" instead of "Suck in your stomach".
- [ ] Utilise neutral language to describe the body in cuing, providing instruction and making corrections.
- [ ] Avoid commenting on what students are eating unless you have the professional expertise to advise on this.
- [ ] Request that the feedback from judges in eisteddfods and competitions does not relate to physical appearance.
- [ ] Focus on what bodies can do, rather than how they look - focus on fun, functionality, expression and how it feels to move the body.
- [ ] Celebrate diversity so that dancers are empowered by differences - "What makes you different makes you special!"
- [ ] Celebrate process over product and reinforce values of courage, passion, strength, grit, self-expression, discipline and increased self esteem - not just aesthetics and achievement.

Language swaps

The way we talk about bodies and appearance matters! Start to become aware of how you speak about your own body and other people's bodies. The focus should be on accepting and appreciating how we look, and concentrating more on what our bodies can do rather than our external appearance.

TALKING ABOUT BODIES

INSTEAD OF	USE INSTEAD
Using medical terms like 'overweight' and 'obese'	These medical terms are quite stigmatising for young people. If you really have to refer to body size, you could use 'person in a larger body'.
Saying someone is "too big" or "carrying excess weight"	These statements come with judgement - try to use neutral language that accepts bodies for the size they are.
Commenting on the size and shape of bodies and body parts - even if it relates to performance	People's bodies come in all shapes and sizes, and they can't necessarily change them. Making comments like "You would be able to lift your leg higher if you were leaner over your hips" just makes people feel shame. Instead, try not to say anything at all, and focus on how you can support dancers to improve their technique, and incorporate their unique strengths.
Compliments about appearance like "You are so thin/pretty/muscly/handsome" or "You look great - have you lost weight?"	When we make compliments about people's appearance, it reinforces the idea that the way we look is one of the most important things about us. Try to compliment personality, process and progress instead.

Language swaps

TALKING ABOUT BODIES

INSTEAD OF	USE INSTEAD
Talking about weight loss "I need to lose weight before our summer holiday."	We want to role model that we don't need to look a certain way to perform on stage, enjoy our holidays, or go to the beach or pool. Try: "I've just tried on my swimsuit and it doesn't feel good on my body anymore — I'm off to the shops to buy one that does!"
If students are saying negative things about their own appearance "I wish I had a thigh gap" or "My arms are so skinny"	You can help to shift their thinking to focus more on what bodies can do rather than what they look like. "But what can your body do? It's normal to have negative thoughts about the way you look sometimes, but focusing on functionality is much more important than focusing on appearance."
Saying negative things or making jokes about your own appearance "Oh, I can't do that anymore, I'm too fat now!"	Self-deprecating humour - particularly about our appearance - is deeply entrenched in Australian culture, but it's not helpful. It is good to role model our acceptance of the fact that our bodies will change with time and age.

TALKING ABOUT FOOD

In order to develop a positive relationship with food, we need to avoid introducing any ideas about restriction of food for young people. We want them to listen to their bodies, and learn to follow their innate hunger and fullness cues. Adolescent bodies are growing at one of the fastest rates in their lifetime, and we need them to trust their bodies as they are evolving into the adult version of themselves. We eat food for so many reasons - to celebrate, connect with friends and family, for pleasure, and to be healthy - so food and nutrition messaging should really reflect this.

INSTEAD OF	USE INSTEAD
'Junk/bad food' and 'good food'	We want to avoid categorising foods as 'good' and 'bad/junk' as it gives food a moral value. There is no good or bad food - all food is just food, and it fuels our body to do all the things we love. When we talk about food, we can encourage young people to focus on the most nutritious foods. Just call food what it is - chips, chocolate, burger, pasta, pineapple - there is no need to categorise it as 'healthy' or 'unhealthy' or 'good' or 'bad'.
"Are you eating again? You can't still be hungry!" "If anyone is feeling greedy, you can go back for seconds"	Try saying: "I love that you're listening to your body — we all go through times when we are hungrier than others. What does your body need right now?" "Just check in with your body and see if there is anything else you need right now."
"Eat the good food, then you can have some dessert/treat/junk/bad food."	Try saying: "Let's focus on fuelling your body with as many nutrients as possible so you've got lots of energy today — do you want to start with a banana or some toast?"

TALKING ABOUT FOOD

| INSTEAD OF	USE INSTEAD
"You're going to have to do twice as much cardio to work off that chocolate bar!"	Avoid implying that you have to control or 'work off' your food. You don't! Instead, talk about listening to your body when it tells you that you've had enough, rather than restricting what you're eating in an attempt to change your body shape. Try saying: "That was so delicious, but my body is telling me I've had enough now!"
"Oh no, no cake for me, I need to lose weight before my beach holiday."	Avoid role modelling restriction of celebratory foods in order to change your body.

TALKING ABOUT MOVEMENT

Moving our bodies is fun and feels good. That's what we should be talking about with young people, not 'exercising' to change our bodies, or needing to track, monitor, count and calculate anything. While there's nothing wrong with dancers aiming to do their best, in the push to encourage young people to be active, much of this messaging has gotten lost. We need to get back to encouraging young people to try things that feel good for their body, that they enjoy. If they try something and don't like it, they can try something else - there are lots of things they can do!

Young people in their teenage years are at a point of peak insecurity about their bodies - they often feel like everyone is looking at them, and judging them. Utilising any pedagogical opportunities to allow young people to try new forms of movement away from the gaze of others and in trusted friend groups can be helpful in supporting them to try new forms of physical activity. Ensuring a zero tolerance policy for any comments about bodies - even banter or 'joking' comments - will also support this.

AVOID	TRY INSTEAD
"Let's work to get those long lean legs."	Focus on functionality rather than appearance. For example, "This exercise is great for developing leg strength."
"You can do 100 sit-ups for saying that."	Moving our bodies is fun and it feels good - it's not a form of punishment.
"You are burning so many calories right now!"	It's not about energy in and energy out - it's about exploring and celebrating what we can do with our bodies.
"You looked so good when you were dancing today."	"How did that feel today?" or "Your turns have really improved."
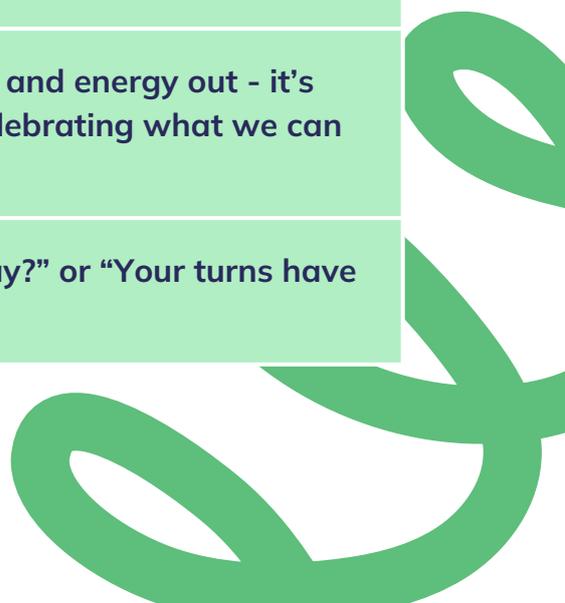
Recommendation 2:

Ensuring positive dance dynamics

Recommendation 2: Ensuring positive dance dynamics

A positive dance culture is one where all young people feel like they belong, and feel included by their peers. This is created through the explicit conversations and commentary between dancers and with dance teachers, as well as the less obvious choices that are made about bodies that might still impact on whether young people in all bodies feel a sense of belonging and inclusion.

Young people can be so cruel to each other, and not realise the impact of their words. We know from the research that young people who have been teased about their body are more likely to experience eating disorders - even 20 years later! Words can do a lot of damage and any sort of negative commentary, criticism, teasing and body shaming between dancers needs to be taken seriously.

While body shaming is often obvious, there are other conversations and comments that happen between dancers that can be problematic too. When dancers compliment each other only based on their appearance, instead of their performance, commitment or improvement, this reinforces the 'ideal' look and appearance in dance. Look out for things like, "Oh my gosh, you are so thin Maddy, I wish I had your thighs" or "I want to be next to Stephanie, she is so pretty". This contributes to the pressure that dancers feel around their weight and shape, and to dancers dropping out if they feel that they don't meet the 'ideal dancer's body'.

Practical recommendations

☐ Create a culture that is inclusive and welcoming.

☐ Shut down conversations so they don't say negative things to each other, in particular about each other's bodies and appearance, or engage in any sort of teasing or body shaming.

☐ Encourage dancers to compliment each other about their improvement, passion, commitment, technique or performance - not just their appearance.

☐ Ensure that dancers are featured and showcased for their individual strengths, talents and abilities.

☐ Create opportunities for the social benefits of dance and dance friendships to be expressed.

☐ Don't ignore the 'drama' - nip it in the bud.

Involving parents in creating a positive dance culture

Appearance commentary by parents in dance communities can be common. Some parents will judge, scrutinise and criticise their own child's appearance - which is known to be harmful for body image. More commonly, parents sometimes comment on other dancers' bodies in their child's presence, and often use joking language, both of which subtly reinforce 'ideals' around bodies and appearance.

It is recommended that dance teachers manage parents by:

☐ Setting expectations that parents don't say anything about other people's bodies and appearance, and reminding parents of this in communications.

☐ Managing parent expectations about performance/career opportunities in dance and maintaining an overall focus on enjoyment, participation and embodiment.

☐ Share body image resources and information with parents to support them in creating a positive home environment that aligns with dance studio culture around bodies.

☐ Share your concerns about negative body image in dancers with parents as relevant, so they can support their child.

☐ Encourage parents to focus on balanced nutrition that focuses on food as fuel, rather than restrictive or fad diets without the guidance of a qualified dietitian.

Recommendation 3:

Creating welcoming studio spaces

Recommendation 3: Creating welcoming studio spaces

Considering the physical settings and space of a dance studio is important in understanding the pressure that dancers might feel about their appearance. Creating studio environments that are welcoming for every body, and ensuring that every body is represented, can lead to spaces that are more welcoming and enhance wellbeing.

While mirrors are useful, and at times essential for immediate spacial and technical feedback, they may lead to an overemphasis on scrutinising appearance. Research has found that the presence of mirrors in the instructional dance environment leads dancers to compare their bodies to others more, and to engage in more negative self-talk about how they look, which can distract them from performing at their best. Mirrors also lead to more objective self-awareness, which can lead to negative body image. A study of dancers performing without mirrors found that this improved body satisfaction - particularly for high performers.

The physical environment of the studio also includes the imagery and posters on the walls, and the dancers that are represented in photographs in the studio, as well as those featured on the website and social media for your studio. Research shows that when we look at images of other people's bodies, we automatically compare the way we think we look to the way we think they look, and feel bad if we think they are closer to the 'ideal'. Reducing the number of images of 'ideal' bodies that are on display in the studio might support young people to focus more on their own performance rather than their appearance. Ensuring that a diverse range of body sizes, shapes, ethnicities, identities and abilities of dancers are represented on the walls and online can help all young people see themselves in your studio. This will likely make them feel more comfortable in taking part, increasing enrolments and retention - a win-win!

Practical recommendations

- [ ] Review the imagery utilised in the studio, and include imagery of diverse bodies.
- [ ] Consider the representation of dancers' bodies on your social media.
- [ ] Use faces instead of full body shots wherever possible and ensure that thin bodies are not over-represented. Highlight the achievements of dancers of all sizes.
- [ ] Aim to include individuals of all abilities, body types, genders, sexualities and ethnicities in class and in marketing material.

Recommendation 4:

Accessible, inclusive and comfortable costume choices

Recommendation 4: Accessible, inclusive and comfortable costume choices

Dance costumes are often tight-fitting and revealing. While some dancers and teachers believe that fitted costumes are necessary for the body to be evaluated effectively, this may also contribute to the pressures on dancers to literally 'fit in' to the standard when wearing costumes in competitions, performances, rehearsals and classes. In addition, revealing or over-sexualised costumes can make dancers feel vulnerable, exposed and uncomfortable, which can not only affect their performance, but also increases their risk of harm.

Research has shown that, when costumes don't fit well, there is mental effort and stress for dancers who then engage in dieting to enhance the fit of the costumes, but may come at a cost to health and performance (Doria et al. 2022).

Ultimately, costumes and clothing have the opportunity to enhance embodiment and self expression, particularly when dancers feel empowered to make choices over costumes that they feel comfortable and confident in.

Practical recommendations

☐ Consider the inclusivity of costumes, and whether it might be possible to include options that work for a wider range of bodies. Allow choice wherever possible and for students to cover up if it makes them feel more comfortable.

☐ Consider which costume and makeup choices might be appropriate for each age group, and ensure that explanations around costume and makeup choices have been made based on performance, character expression and art - not just for appearance reasons "to look pretty" or "to look better".

☐ Consider the ways in which flexibility could be allowed in relation to clothing choices so that dancers feel comfortable and confident - especially for rehearsals.
Avoid white costumes as a rule, as developing dancers during puberty may already be self conscious enough about menstruation.

☐ When measuring dancers for costumes, try to avoid categorising dancers into sizes, and any conversations about fit and sizing that imply that dancers are 'too big' or 'too tiny' for their costume. Utilise more neutral language that is centred around comfort and coverage - so instead of saying, "Hmm, you're way too big for the size 12" you can say, "Let's find something that you feel more comfortable in."

Recommendation 5:

Individual purpose and meaning in dance

Recommendation 5: Individual purpose and meaning in dance

When the main goal is 'to win', and to be better than others, this creates a culture of comparison and cut-throat competition. These environments have been associated with anxiety, disordered eating and, ultimately, dancers dropping out because they feel as though they 'are not good enough'.

While a professional career in dance might be the goal for some, ultimately dance is a way for young people to express themselves, enjoy moving their bodies, increase fitness and enhance social connection.

Building a culture of movement and dance for fun for all dancers, while retaining opportunities for the elite dancers who are interested in a career pathway is a balance that can be found in the studio environment with some consideration to individualised goals, and shifting perspectives as studio owners and directors.

Practical recommendations

☐ Explore pedagogies that allow dancers to experience individual capabilities and talents and share these within the class.

☐ Know students well and set learning goals that are personalised, and aligned with student motivations, goals and ambitions.

☐ Be aware of the broad range of emotional, social, physical and vocational goals of each dancer in the class.

☐ Shift the emphasis to meeting individual goals rather than comparisons to others or unrealistic external standards. Celebrate authenticity and dancing for personal expression, story-telling, connection.

☐ Have discussions about options for dance futures, including diverse career options, but always with the ultimate goal of fostering a lifelong love of dance that encourages body acceptance throughout the dancer's lifespan.

Explore our Activate Dance Posters!
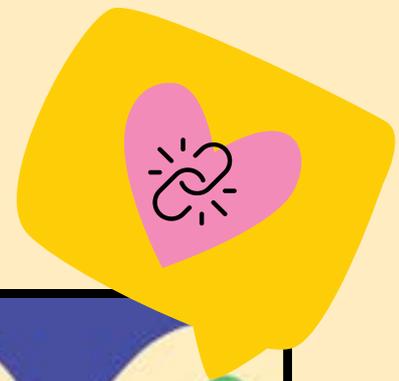
ACTIVATE *dance recommendations*

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THIS IS AN *Embrace space*

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About The Embrace Collective

The Embrace Collective has a vision for a world where young people are empowered to grow and thrive, free from feelings of judgement and shame about their bodies. Through our suite of age-appropriate programs and resources, we can get in early to teach the message of body appreciation to young people; and educate their parents, educators and coaches to embed these positive messages in the environments where young people live, learn and play to minimise their lifetime risk of issues like eating disorders, depression and anxiety. Led by 2023 Australian of the Year, Taryn Brumfitt, and International Body Image expert, Dr Zali Yager, The Embrace Collective reached 1 Million children in 2023 with the Embrace message and resources.

ABOUT TARYN BRUMFITT

Taryn Brumfitt is an award-winning filmmaker, bestselling author, internationally sought-after keynote speaker and the 2023 Australian of the Year. She is the co-Executive Director of The Embrace Collective and director of the inspiring documentaries EMBRACE and EMBRACE KIDS. Taryn is a fiercely passionate advocate for social change and her message has reached more than 200 million people around the world.

ABOUT DR ZALI YAGER

Dr Zali Yager is an internationally-recognised body image expert who has worked in research and academia for nearly 20 years. She is the co-Executive Director of The Embrace Collective and an Adjunct Associate Professor in the Institute for Health and Sport at Victoria University. Zali co-authored the Embrace Kids book with Taryn Brumfitt and was the body image expert advisor on the EMBRACE KIDS film.

ACTIVATE PLAYBOOK

Looking for a broader sport-based body image program? We have that! Follow this link to download the Activate Playbook for sporting organisations. We can help you keep kids in sport for longer by building better body image in your club environment.

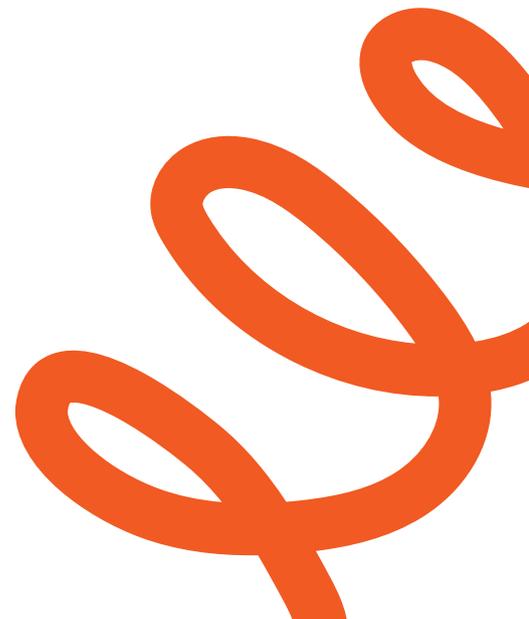# CONNECT WITH US!

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Web
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