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BMJ Open Sport & Exercise Medicine

High time to enhance dancer welfare: a call to action to improve safeguarding and abuse prevention in dance

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ABSTRACT

While there is a lack of research into abuse in elite dance, numerous allegations of emotional, sexual and physical abuse of dancers can be found anecdotally in the media, legal convictions and personal accounts. As more dancers speak out, the scale of the problem within preprofessional schools and professional companies is becoming apparent. Accordingly, effective safeguarding mechanisms for preventing, identifying and reporting abuse are urgently needed. This viewpoint is intended to raise health professionals' awareness of factors contributing to abusive practices found in dance environments and the potential clinical implications of abuse to dancers' health and well-being. We also call for research and policy engagement on safeguarding and abuse prevention designed and implemented in partnership with stakeholders, aiming to promote safe and positive dance environments for all.

WHAT IS ALREADY KNOWN ON THIS TOPIC

⇒ Dance can provide many positive experiences and contribute to social development and useful life skills.
⇒ Unfortunately, there are growing number of documented cases of emotional, sexual and physical abuse occurring in elite dance environments, including preprofessional schools and professional companies.

WHAT DOES THIS STUDY ADD

⇒ Cultural norms and traditions combined with a lack of compulsory or insufficient teacher training, power imbalances and fierce competition for jobs and roles are just some of the systemic factors contributing to abusive dance environments.
⇒ Abusive practices compromise positive experiences and outcomes of dance participation and negatively affect dancers' health, well-being and performance.

HOW THIS STUDY MIGHT AFFECT RESEARCH, PRACTICE OR POLICY

⇒ Research is urgently needed to examine the effects of abusive dance environments on dancers' health, well-being and performance.
⇒ Policies and procedures need to be designed and implemented in partnership with stakeholders to prevent and protect dancers from abuse and promote safe dance environments for all.

All dancers have the right to a safe dance environment that is respectful, equitable and free from abuse.[1 2] Yet, compared with sports, research on abuse in dance is scarce. Numerous allegations of neglect and emotional, sexual and physical abuse documented in the small body of existing research,[3–9] as well as high-profile media stories and convictions in legal cases, indicate that the problem may be more widespread and deep-seated than we realise (see table 1 for definitions of key terms). In September 2023, 50 people who had been trained at the Royal Ballet School and Elmhurst Ballet School in the UK came forward with allegations of bullying and body shaming and described the immense pressures placed on children who train in these schools.[10] As another recent example, a teacher was arrested after hundreds of complaints of sexual harassment against the faculty involved in teaching Bharatanatyam at India's premier classical arts academy.[11] These anecdotal cases and convictions, combined with the small amounts of available empirical evidence, suggest a consistent pattern of abuse may be occurring in preprofessional schools and professional companies, but this still needs to be confirmed with empirical research.

Safeguarding and abuse prevention are growing concerns for the dance sector, including for organisations, teachers, judges, parents and dancers. This is evident in the growing number of national and international bodies dedicated to reducing and preventing abuse in dance for children and adults, including Dance Awareness: No Child Exploited (USA), Keep Kids Safe in Dance (Australia), Non-profit Education and Advocacy for Movement Artists (USA and Canada), Safer Dance: The Dance School Safeguarding Working Group (UK) and the Personal Safety for Dance international working group.

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Table 1 Definitions and examples of safeguarding and abuse in dance

Term	Definition	Examples
Neglect	The failure to meet physical and emotional needs or to protect from danger.[1]	Leaving physical injuries untreated, unsafe rehearsal conditions and inadequate breaks.[12]
Emotional or psychological abuse	Deliberate, repeated, non-contact behaviour that has the potential to be harmful.[30]	Humiliating and derogatory remarks, withdrawal of attention, threats, and body-shaming.[3 5 13]
Physical abuse	Non-accidental trauma or physical harm.[1]	Violence, physical force and physical punishment.[5]
Sexual abuse and harassment	Any conduct of a sexual nature, whether non-contact or contact, where a person has not given consent, consent is coerced/manipulated or consent cannot be given.[1]	Sexual communication, lack of privacy and sexualisation.[14 18]
Safeguarding and abuse prevention	Actions to protect people from abuse, harm and neglect and support their health, well-being and human rights.[31]	Training on safeguarding, policies and procedures,[29] including preventing, reporting and responding to abuse.[14]

The #MeToo movement in dance also signals that some dancers have begun to speak out about their experiences despite fears of retribution and career damage.[12–14] Nevertheless, it will take more than individual action to address the systemic issues that make dance an environment where abuse can happen.[15] This viewpoint explores some of the reasons that abusive practices may occur at elite levels of dance and the resulting mental, physical and emotional harm experienced by professionals and those aspiring to a dance career. Although this piece is focused on elite dancers, we recognise that cases of abuse have been reported at all levels of dance across its many genres and can be caused by a variety of people (eg, directors, choreographers and physiotherapists). We, therefore, also call for research and policy engagement on safeguarding and abuse prevention to inform collective action towards safer dance environments for all.

HOW THE DANCE ENVIRONMENT CAN FOSTER ABUSIVE PRACTICES

Dance training is steeped in history and tradition, with longstanding practices and standards passed down through generations. Teacher education is not regulated or compulsory and is often sporadic and insufficient, with many high-level performers becoming teachers without any training in pedagogy, child development or safe physical and psychological training methods.[16] As a result, dance training has been slow to modernise its teaching practices and embrace innovations in dance science, medicine and safe practice. The abusive cultural practices embedded in the hierarchical and authoritarian teaching styles of dance are often misidentified as educational issues. Cultural norms have also shaped significant power imbalances in the teacher–student relationship, with dancers conditioned from an early age to be silent, obedient and endure having little autonomy, even relating to their health and well-being.[13 15 17]

With a scarcity of jobs and fierce competition for roles, tradition also dictates that a harsh environment is necessary for success; dancers often perform through pain and injury, push their bodies to extremes and maintain restrictive weight practices. Instructional methods based on fear or shame or relationships that are inappropriate, sexual or exploitative are too often permitted, unquestioned, minimised and normalised.[3–5 18] Professional dancers have reported shame and humiliation from being constantly compared or criticised in class, as well as from being on the receiving end of inappropriate touching by their teachers. They have also described how sexual favours can be rewarded with role promotion and job opportunities by those who hold much power over the dancers' careers.[3] Out of fears of reprisal, shame and even self-blame, dancers faced with these frightening and abusive environments may feel unable to speak out about unfair, abusive or even dangerous conditions to keep on dancing, deeming it 'the price one pays' to succeed.[3–5 18]

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS OF ABUSIVE DANCE PRACTICES

Although dance can provide many positive experiences and contribute to healthy development and useful life skills,[19] abusive practices compromise these outcomes and negatively affect health, well-being and performance.[2] There is a lack of dance-specific research, but preliminary evidence suggests dancers who have experienced emotional abuse are likely to continue dancing through pain and injury, adopt maladaptive emotion regulation strategies and experience emotional pain and suffering.[13 18] In one study, feeling unjustly criticised or humiliated led professional ballet dancers to experience persistent self-blame, more injuries, symptoms of anxiety and emotional stress.[20] In sports, emotional, physical and sexual abuse by youth athletes has contributed to both current mental health difficulties and psychological distress and a lower quality of life in adulthood.[21 22]

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Another reason for concern is that dancers are already an at-risk group for developing mental health problems due to the high physiological and psychological demands placed on them.[23 24] In addition to long hours of training, rehearsal, performing and touring, dancers face stressors such as competition for roles and the renewal of contracts, financial difficulties, the drive to reach perfection and pressures to achieve a perceived ideal body shape and low weight.[18 20 25] One study found that 92% of dancers, including professional dancers and dance students of various dance styles (eg, ballet, jazz, modern and musical theatre), experienced at least one mental health issue within a year.[26]

Health professionals working with dancers should be aware that harassment and abuse are severe threats to dancers' health and well-being. Following the phrase 'the show must go on', dance environments may espouse negative health approaches that prioritise performances over people, leading dancers to silence emotions and push bodies to the limits or into injury to achieve dance-related goals.[13] Dancers may, therefore, need support to recognise forms of abuse, especially where it has been normalised; for example, they may have been directed to dance through pain and injury, instructed to participate in long rehearsals without breaks or expected to maintain an unhealthy weight.

Early intervention to address post-traumatic symptoms is vital to support dancers in navigating the aftermath of abuse experiences, and health professionals can be influential in suggesting this care. With appropriate and evidence-based trauma-informed training, health professionals may be helped to recognise when a dancer is being affected by trauma and to engage safely with them, reducing the risk of retraumatisation.[27]

HOW RESEARCH AND POLICY ENGAGEMENT CAN HELP

For widespread cultural change to be achieved and as part of promoting equality, diversity and inclusion, collective action is necessary across the dance sector. We must work to effectively implement safeguarding and abuse prevention measures and mechanisms for reporting and handling abuse allegations. However, dance lacks research evidence and statutory governing documents, making it compulsory for organisations worldwide to protect dancers from abuse and authoritative bodies to enforce these regulations. Safeguarding advice and guidance is beginning to become available from organisations such as the UK's National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC).[28] However, regulations are needed to ensure that all stakeholders know what is expected of them to promote safe dance environments. Adding to these challenges, few resources currently exist to support organisations in developing and implementing policies and procedures.

Researchers need to work in partnership with stakeholders, including those harmed by abuse, to shape a research agenda that will not just fill evidence gaps but also hold relevance and credibility for those it is intended to benefit. Dance is a diverse sector, ranging from grassroots participation to elite levels and involving many genres. Including dancers from more marginalised groups will also be important because they may experience more and/or different harms. Addressing and resolving these concerns will also need to be considered in each dance form's unique context and history, working to change norms and traditions that contribute to abusive dance environments. Importantly, some organisations have already developed best practices to support safe and positive environments where dancers' voices are heard and considered.[29] These efforts need to be valued, supported and developed.

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