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# Edel Quin, Lucy Frazer and Emma Redding

## The Health Benefits of Creative Dance: improving children's physical and psychological wellbeing

New research published by Laban and Hampshire Dance provides the first scientific evidence proving creative dance improves children's physical and psychological wellbeing.

David Lammy MP, Minister for Culture, attended the launch of the ground-breaking new research. David Lammy said: 'Dance is too often the forgotten art form in the UK's cultural life. And yet it can play an important role in developing the physical wellbeing and creativity of young people...the research, is a step in the right direction to put dance on the map.'

The findings from the Hampshire Dance and Laban research project have the potential to play a vital role in the Government's efforts to improve the health and wellbeing of young people and tackle the rise in child obesity in Britain.

### The Project

The unique project, commissioned by the Joint Investment Fund for the Arts, was created by Hampshire Dance in partnership with Laban. It aimed to increase awareness and knowledge of the health benefits of dance, whilst scientifically assessing the effects of participation on physiological and psychological health and wellbeing.

The project arose in response to two key factors. The first of these was the growing concern around rising levels of obesity in young people expressed in the government White Paper 'Choosing Health'<sup>1</sup> that sought to prioritise the importance of increasing

levels of physical activity for young people.

The second factor was the need for robust evidence to support the case for investment in dance. Anecdotally the benefits of dance are well known, particularly among dance teachers and practitioners. Previous research, particularly in sport, suggests that involvement in physical activity can have positive effects on physical fitness<sup>2,3</sup> and general psychological well-being<sup>4</sup>. Therefore the research aim of the project was to assess the physiological and psychological effects of creative dance, in an adolescent population.

### The Dance Classes

The dance classes had a strong focus on creativity so as to educate and inspire young people. This creative approach acknowledged the benefits of developing young people's expressive and artistic skills through dance<sup>5</sup>. A group of Hampshire-based dance artists devised the content and themes of the classes. Each session started with a cardio-vascular warm-up, followed by creative movement tasks exploring aspects of health and the body such as how the heart works and the benefits of a healthy diet.

### The Research

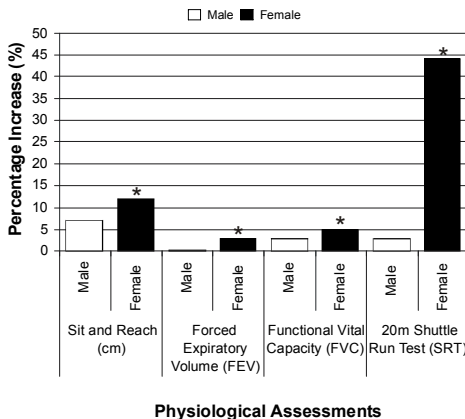
A total of 348 school children, aged 11-14 years old from across the Southampton, Hampshire, the Isle of Wight and Portsmouth regions, took part in the research. The project was structured into a

10-week programme, taking place across two school terms. A series of physiological and psychological assessments were carried out at the beginning and the end of the 10 week programme in order to assess any physical and psychological adaptations that may occur.

## Physiological assessments

Physiological assessments included lung capacity, flexibility and aerobic capacity. Psychological assessments measured self-esteem, intrinsic motivation (or participation for pleasure rather than external reward) and attitudes towards dance. There was a clear increase in all areas of physical fitness for both males and females (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Physiological percentage increase for males and females



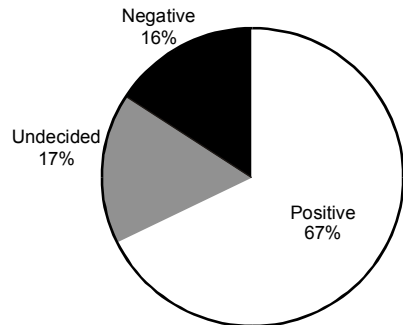
\* denotes statistical significant difference  $p < 0.05$

Statistically significant increases were found in all areas of female physical fitness, with a large 44% increase in aerobic fitness. Psychological wellbeing results found positive adaptations in all areas assessed although these were not statistically significant.

Based on responses to the qualitative questionnaire, over two-thirds of the group reported positively when questioned on

attitudes towards the dance (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Attitudes towards dance after the dance programme



Consistent with other areas assessed, the females responded more positively than the males. Despite this, the overall majority reported the dance programme as being fun, exciting and enjoyable. For example one participant commented:

"I'm now fitter and healthier. I thought it would be boring but it was a lot of fun. I would want to do it again."

## Implications

These new and ground-breaking findings show that creative dance increases the physical and psychological wellbeing of adolescents. The significant improvements in fitness levels and the high level of motivation observed in the female participants suggest that dance is of particular benefit for females. Females who 'drop-out' of most other physical activities at this age could be more inclined to engage in dance as a method of keeping active if it was more widely available to them. Therefore dance should be considered as a valid alternative to sport.

Psychologically the positive responses in the well-being assessments suggest that

creative dance has the potential to elicit positive effects on self-esteem, motivation and attitudes towards dance.

Previous research has shown active young people are more likely to become active adults and these findings will have a huge impact on dance as a means of bringing people into a lifelong healthier and more active lifestyle

## Conclusion

A study of this kind has never before been undertaken in the UK. It is therefore pioneering and forward thinking in determining, through scientific methodology, the extent to which creative dance affects physiological and psychological wellbeing among young adolescents.

This new research supports the key ambition of the 'Dance Manifesto', presented to David Lammy in July 2006, which calls on the Government to ensure that dance is an integral part of every young person's education.

Caroline Flint MP, Minister for Public Health, commented: 'Dance has a great deal to offer to people young and old, irrespective of ability and background. Dance can take many forms and embody elements of fun, creativity and performance that make it an attractive route to a fitter and healthier lifestyle. This research highlights how well people's health can benefit from dance.'

## References

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Available from [www.laban.org](http://www.laban.org) and [www.hampshiredance.org.uk](http://www.hampshiredance.org.uk) :-

Dance Science Research Report - The physiological and psychological effects of creative dance on adolescents: An experimental study - A concise report focussing on the research findings. NRG Youth Dance and Health Project 2005-06 - Evaluation Report - A full evaluation of the project and research findings.

NRG: be healthy through dance - CD Rom. (ISBN 978-0-9554468-0-1)

A useful resource for dance teachers and group leaders outlining the creative dance programme.

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