



# Ah! A dose of dance, medicine for the body and soul

**Jacqueline McCormick**, Dance Artist and Dance Director for Cheshire Dance, on the health benefits of family-based dance practice in their recent initiative Dosage

**Researchers studying happiness continue to find that when people say they want - money, possessions, social status - they don't reliably lead to experiences of wellbeing.** By contrast, learning to find joy in the present moment increases life satisfaction, improves health, and allows us to live longer, more meaningful lives.

At Cheshire Dance we were

interested in how families could experience dancing together and how that might affect their health. Immediately we needed to focus on a continuing professional development (CPD) dance opportunity that satisfied both a cross generational and health training for dance artists which would, in turn, lead into a fulfilling experience for families. Alongside this we needed to establish a robust and valid

measuring system without compromising the quality of the experience we wanted to create. Bubbling up came the Dosage residential, the gateway to a Cheshire Dance Family Health project of the same name.

What Dosage has cemented for me is the positive impact moving together has on relationships, especially family relationships. We focus a lot on our



Above left: Kristina McDermott and Orla Shine with participants, Cheshire Dance's Dosage Project. Above: Cassie Carpenter and Sarah Gough with participants, Cheshire Dance's Dosage Project. Left: Jacqueline McCormick. All photos: Adam Holloway

young people but if they come home and get a different message it's hard for them to make progress.

Beyond all the fantastic health benefits of being active, the non-verbal communication that dancing together brings can have a powerful effect on the human psyche. Witnessing and working with each other in playful activity allows the body and mind to be present. It allows us to see other

members of our family in a new light.

The Seils-Clarke family decided to take part in the Dosage residential to help the family spend more time together doing healthy activities and to connect with each other. A staff member from the local Children's Centre thought that Libby, their daughter with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), would benefit from dancing. So on a warm

summers evening in July 2010 they packed everyone in their car, Kerry (Mum), Mike (Dad), Libby-Louise aged seven and Cameron aged three-and-a-half to the weekend Dosage residential. They joined nine other family groupings across a weekend residential at Trafford Hall in Cheshire, joining two health professionals and a group of artists who had already spent three days immersed in a dance and family- >



health learning environment.

We spent the first hour or so with the families playing games because we saw play and games as a route to engagement and if we didn't engage each family group we would be in trouble. Game playing also relates to curiosity, trial and error, risk taking, learning and discovery. Plus it allows non-dancers a way in through something familiar.

Kerry says she knew she was overweight but didn't realise just how much until working with both the dance and the health professionals during Dosage.

"They gave me a better outlook and things to do."

One of the activities that stayed in Kerry's mind from the residential was laying down on a large piece of paper while Mike drew around her body. It was clearly a very rare moment for Kerry, a busy woman, to relax and let someone see her still. Each family member was drawn around on the same piece of paper until there was a picture, a bit like those Russian dolls, one inside the other, right down to the smallest. The image created stuck with Kerry, now she's using it as a continuing reminder and stimulus for change.

"We sit down together now at mealtimes which is good and turn off the telly, asking 'what have you done today?' We spend more time at the park, swimming and riding our bikes.

We've even been going for days out as well. I think Libby has gained most from the experience, the dancing and music are an outlet for her ADHD."

Husband Mike also got a wake up call. He said he used to be unhealthy, working 60 hour weeks. He ended up in hospital. Since then he had worked on becoming healthier. He lost two stone but then returned to old habits as the stress of work took its toll again. While at Dosage he got to try on a vest in which you can put various amounts of weight to simulate carrying extra fat. When he put the two stone weight on his reaction was immediate. "Wow! That's heavy." "I'll eat healthier after this."

He said he had been finding it hard to do anything with the whole family because of work. He also wanted to continue with the ideas and activities he learned at Dosage and try them at home. Since the residential Mike has taken an opportunity to work closer to home and spend more time with the whole family. He has limited his treats and is keeping off the pounds so far.

"When we're all getting a little stressed, we put the music on and just dance. It really works".

The weekend of fun-filled dance activity and health advice, to a small group of families like the Seils-Clarks, rejuvenated and created experiences to replicate in the future.

As part of the project, dance artists learned how to inspire families to get

more active together through a residential training course that immediately preceded the family weekend. This provided a unique opportunity to translate the training and materials immediately into hands-on experience working with the families. The first three days of dance artist training looked at understanding good practice in Dance and Health alongside gaining skills and knowledge to deliver specific health outcomes through dance. These artists were training to deliver on the main Dosage pilot project outcomes, which included ongoing provision for families in Ellesmere Port as well as sessions for particular age groups.

Dance artists met their families as they arrived on Friday afternoon and buddied them throughout the weekend. Our approach was family led, responding to the needs of the families, encouraging movement through play, exploration and improvisation. This non-stylised dance activity led to a more inclusive and non-judgemental environment, empowering family members without imposing movement. This was counterbalanced by evening social dance events of jive and a ceilidh where much fun was had by all!

We set out to collect data that would indicate how active families were beforehand and what activities worked for them. National health service (NHS) national indicators were used for the



From far left: Jody Morgan and Sam Brown; Katy Taylor and Leanne Cardill; Cassie Carpenter and Sarah Gough with participants from Cheshire Dance's Dosage Project.  
All photos: Adam Holloway

baseline data gathering and will be used again for mid and end-point assessments of impact. And beyond the measuring, we also wanted to roll model an experience in moving they would want to continue beyond the residential.

Keen for the dance artists to develop their ownership of the work, their process was about questioning and pursuing their own lines of enquiry, informed by the families and using the grounds of Trafford Hall with the families exploring site-based dance.

Much of the work was around differentiation, altering activities according to people's needs in order to provide a challenge and enable learning to occur. We looked specifically at ways to differentiate by:

- Setting different tasks for different groups or individuals
- Outcome: open-ended tasks enabling people to respond at different levels
- Offering appropriate support within the task.

There were ongoing conversations around what activities needed differentiating for their family groups. How would the activity change? How can the learning outcomes be met for individuals within their family? How do we identify the different instructions, tasks, adaptations that needed to be made? Sometimes this had to be reflexive, in the moment, adapting material for a three-month-old baby

and a 70-year-old grandmother.

During the preceding CPD sessions focusing on differentiation we looked specifically at the family groupings that would be attending the Dosage weekend. General outlines were created of each age group that included their Physical development, Movement diet, Relationships and Needs. These categories were invaluable for the dance artists to prepare for enquiring with and delivering to the families.

#### **Wild Geese**

You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees

For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body

Love what it loves.

Mary Oliver

This is the beginning of one of my favourite poems describing, encouraging letting the body lead, getting in touch with what the body loves, listening, trusting, and following the body. In a way this was the message for artists and the families... to reconnect with their bodies.

Health continues to be a huge topic within the Arts at the moment. There is lots of work going on looking at different aspects of health work. We wanted to focus on healthy living and

well being, encouraging a different relationship with the body, how to engage with the soma.

The families expressed how much they enjoyed being together as a family, they felt closer to each other. For most the experience changed their perspective on life and our work now is focused on continuing to support transformation.

And what did the artists learn? "To step back and observe the families", that "simplicity is the best way to go", "don't plan too much", "working outdoors can be transferred into a garden or park" and the importance of "taking training into reality".

"Having the opportunity to relax and learn before the families came on the Friday gave us time to bond and feel like a team."

"Training straight into action...BRILL."

"What worked for me was time to reflect on what is needed and how simple tasks can be without being directed. TIME FOR PLAY!"

Both groups were exposed to rich experiences, special moments that will reside in their cells. Experiences that they might call 'feeling well.' Experiences not situations are always what we really want.

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