



# BOP, HOP AND BOOGIE

## *Dance to the Beat of Your Own Drum*

*By Tina Dealwis*

***Like music, dance is a universal language that connects people and breaks down barriers. For kids with disabilities, it's fun, social, and builds confidence and self esteem. It teaches poise, grace, teamwork, respect and cooperation. It opens minds and hearts to possibilities.***

World-renowned dancer Spirit Synott says she was probably dancing before she was born. "It's in my genes," she offers. "My mother and grandmother were teaching it long before I came into the picture," Synott explains.

Synott was born with spina bifida and uses a wheelchair. As a teenager she loved going to concerts and moving to the music. "I'd do wheelies in the aisles or if it was too crowded, just move my arms to the music," she remembers. Her moves did not go unnoticed. The outgoing teen was spotted by a production company and invited to take part in a documentary about people doing what they love called *In Search of Joy*. Synott jumped at the chance to be in the film. Dance classes ensued and a professional dance career was born. Today Synott is a well-respected artist, doing what she loves to do most.

"Dancing professionally has brought many blessings into my life," shares Synott. She says she feels called to use her gift of dance to not only break down barriers, but inspire those who may be unfamiliar with people with disabilities. "I work hard to encourage others to see us in a more positive light, and perhaps challenge themselves to try something that they wouldn't have considered before seeing me perform. If a picture is worth a thousand words," adds Synott, "then movement has the ability to articulate volumes."

Whether living with a physical or cognitive disability, dance can help kids improve confidence and become more spatially aware. "Psychosocial benefits include better self-esteem and a lower sense of social isolation," says Sarah Dobbs, artistic coordinator of the Centre for the Arts at Bloorview

Kids' Rehab in Toronto. Danielle Strnad, founder and director of DramaWay, agrees. DramaWay is a Toronto-based arts organization that teaches a dance program called Rhythm-Works. "Dance provides a safe and fun environment for kids to express themselves," Strnad explains. "There's a lot of communication going on and when kids can retain a sequence of moves, it's quite an accomplishment. Because it's physical, it's very healthy for their emotional state too."

"It's an hour of non-stop laughing," beams 13-year-old Erica Watson, who takes wheelchair dancing at Chance Dance Centre in Newmarket, Ontario. In addition to helping her stay active and fit, Erica says that through her dancing she's made lots of new friends which gets her out socializing and doing things. "When you have an event and you're nervous, there's always someone there who can say 'Oh, I know how you feel.'" Sergey Muretov, owner of Chance Dance Centre, says dance gives kids a chance to shine. "Kids can showcase their abilities through teamwork and cooperation."

Nancy Clarke is an adult wheelchair dancer at Chance Dance Centre and declares that dancing has changed her life. "It's made me more social; it's made me more fit. I feel better about my body, the way I look. I'm stronger."

Parents and friends are invited to be partners with the students at Chance. "I enjoy the dancing," says Andrew Watson, Erica's father. "I go out for fun and when you get down to it, that's what it's all about." Andrew confirms that dance has been great for Erica socially. "For kids with disabilities, it's sometimes hard fitting in at different places. There are barriers. Dancing offers a different perspective. Erica has videos on YouTube, photos, and friends see her on Facebook. It's a source of pride for her."

Synott agrees. "Wheelchairs and dance are not things that people readily think of going together. It's great to teach kids that dance is something they can do." Adds DramaWay

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dancer Nicholas Herd: "It's a great way of being free and a great way to celebrate life."

Catherine O'Mara, dance facilitator at DramaWay, teaches students with cognitive disabilities such as Down Syndrome and autism and notes that dance offers an alternative way of communicating for kids who have difficulty relating verbally. Robin Gertin, leader of Bloorview's dance theatre program, agrees. "All of the arts, but most certainly dancing, represent another language. When kids hear the music and move to it, they suddenly discover a language to express their voice... that's an extraordinary outlet."

When seeking a dance studio for their child, parents should consult with their child's physician first, advises Muretov, emphasizing the importance of having an instructor who will work with a child's individual needs. "If I see someone who can't do something, I try to create a different way of doing it." Erica Watson attests to that. "If you can't do something physically, we try it a different way or we go to a different move. We always figure out stuff."

Parents should explore what fits their child's needs best. Many programs will grant a free lesson, or allow the child to come out and watch first. Gertin cautions against dance studios that are focused on the end product, rather than the process. "Traditional dance classes work on the end product, looking for something synchronized, coordinated, crisp and clean – everyone doing the same thing – which is challenging when you have a group with different needs," she warns. "Bloorview's program emphasizes process, supporting what the individual brings to the room, which is particularly important for beginners."

Of course, beginning a new program like dance can have its share of challenges for kids with disabilities, ranging from carpeted studios to inaccessible venues or restrooms, finding knowledgeable instructors at reasonable rates, and "disability-friendly" attitudes. Despite the challenges, Syntott promotes the benefits. "In my opinion, dance has been around longer than language, and is a basic need. It's fun, it's physical and it's potentially life changing. Why not give dancing a try? It's for everyone!"



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