

Dance & The Symptoms of and Ramifications for Children and Adolescents in the Pandemic

Recently, parents of a young dancer addressed me that their child cannot attend ballet training anymore, because the boy's performance in school had declined. The parents had decided that he had to quit dancing, until his grades had picked up again and he is more cooperative and willing. In the course of the conversation the parents vented their frustration that their boy, who had been "such a smart, intelligent and eager student" had so drastically changed. They could not understand what triggered his so extensive loss of motivation. The parents admitted that cancelling his dancing breaks their heart, because it definitely broke his, but they had made their decision.

After a long talk with me the parents changed their mind, quite shocked at that, and the boy stayed in ballet class, which he enjoyed again many times a week – again, because the boy had admitted that even *"my feelings for my ballet I couldn't find anymore. That hurt me the most. It hurt me so much. Just like the fighting with mom and dad."*

What had happened? What had decreased the quality of his motivation so much that he left out homework assignments and preps for school to such a degree that his teachers contacted the parents?

And would it have been the solution to cancel the kid's dance classes?

The pandemic has impacted all aspects of our lives. Discussions about economy, depression, illness, consequences asf. are all over the news, blogs, (letters like the very one), dominating conversations, although everybody is already fed up with the issue by now. – The issue itself doesn't care. We know we have to learn to live with it somehow, at least for a certain time.

All or most of such discussions are focused on adults, because children and adolescents are hardly affected by the virus. And if, severe cases so far, and to everybody's relief, are the exception. Thus, our little ones run along, while the adults struggle to get their heads around job losses, home office, part time work, or the search for alternatives in hope to find a way to provide money for their families after goals were destroyed and security blankets snatched.

But is that really all? **Are kids not affected by the pandemic?**

They are. And while the virus itself spares them mostly, we forget to take closer looks.

Loss of motivation, especially when it comes to things they once cherished, are huge warning signals. They reflect the young's exhaustion in their efforts to cope with instability, loss of goals, and not knowing what tomorrow brings. Not only the very little ones watch their parents and families worry every day. Children have to deal with things like lockdowns, and so many of them don't understand, why they cannot see their friends or beloved grandparents anymore. The thought to be rid of school, or to get the chance to stay at home and just do "some home schooling" might have been grand one day. And many adults I talk to comment with phrases like "well, the kids have their fun. They don't get anything of the severity of the situation but have more holidays than ever before."

That might have been the case in the first weeks of last year, if ever, when the pandemic started. But after some months it had ceased to be amusing. Far from that. Home schooling turns out to be more exhausting than to go to school, although teachers all over the globe make the utmost effort to change all plans, adapt to the situation, in order to support the development of

their pupils as best as they can under the given circumstances. And parents finally see, what a job teachers have to do every day, assisting children in their learning.

Many of the little ones perceive their parents' worries day by day, which is one aspect that must not be underestimated! Worried and stressed parents, whose uncertainty what to do or to think in many situations, must be frightening to our highly sensitive, perceptive children. In a child's heart the parents are a safety blanket. Their grown-up certainty, with which they tackle so many things that seem scary for children, gives them comfort. It ascertains their every step, and shows them how to deal with life every day.

Even if parents and teachers try to explain, knowing the **importance of mindful, honest conversation with children** – so many questions might remain unanswered or don't make sense to them, because their young brains lack the experience to understand concepts like viruses or lockdowns. The level of stress in the young, too often than not, goes unmentioned, while the adults try to keep the world turning.

Children show the enormous impact on their little lives through all these "little things": loss of motivation even for things they once loved dearly, increase of fatigue, troubles to sleep, nightmares, pavor nocturnus in the smallest, school performance becomes instable or "unacceptable", mood swings, which bring parents in home office or after strenuous duty in masks all day long up the wall. "Little ailments" such as belly- or headaches thank God test negative for Sars-CoV-2, so they cannot not be so bad after all...

As with all illnesses, not only in the little children, the kids don't know what it is that makes them feel un-well. Neither do they have the experience nor the knowledge to communicate the reason for the symptoms they perceive. Many of the

symptoms are not even what one would call symptoms of a disease – what makes it even more dangerous.

The parents of the little boy made an effort to talk to the kid, talk to the teacher, who kindly offered all possible support – and they ended up in frustration about the fact that nothing changed. Even the opposite, because it got worse. It sure did, because the stress in school and the feeling of letting the parents, the teachers, both significant others, and himself down, worsened his situation even more.

And then, as the parents' last idea to get him going in school, he lost his ballet classes.

This is "their virus". That's how children and adolescents react. And while we worry about the aftermath of corona to kick in, with mourning deceased, companies broken, financial burden, or long covid affecting the adults, leading to depression, burnout and related worries – children and adolescents are as much in danger as we adults are to become depressive, aggressive, amotivated, or otherwise ill, silently expressing their intrinsic stress level.

These were things most of us know, or at least have feared already.

Dance classes nowadays are cancelled or held as online classes, live streamed or provided as video tutorial. Because ballet schools and studios, dance schools and children/youth dance groups, fitness centres etc. are the first to be locked down by the governments. It has been criticized that malls or shops are still open and people move and stand way closer together there as they would in their dance classes, which were but cancelled right away.

We know the effect of dance and sports on humans, how they support our mental,

psychological and physiological health. Science has provided a long list of evidence.

On of the most important things in order to prevent our children and adolescents from becoming severely ill through Sars-CoV-2, without having the illness Covid-19, therefore is **to keep them dancing, keep them moving**. Live streams or online classes are not ideal, but they keep the children moving, with rhythm, music, friends, dreams, goals, ... While the dance teachers too often than not overwork themselves alone in front of their webcams to fully perform exercises in spite of their own pain and injuries; to correct as good as they can over the wobbly screens, in order to prevent wrong technique and injuries in their dancers; to make eye contact with their students, trying to reassure them and keep the little flames alight ... So many exercises and plays to be invented anew, production rehearsals to keep going, in a wonderful attempt to keep goals and dreams alive... **Thanks to all the dance teachers, who fight every day to stay motivated in order to support the health and dreams of our children.**

The little boy came back to our dance classes. And something had changed. He had changed, to the better. He was laughing again, motivated.

During and after the talk to me the parents reflected so much, called me again twice, and changed their lives drastically. They have installed **family-minutes**, where they stop the world for a moment just to sit together at home and talk, listen to each other – with the sudden awareness that children and adolescents need help – a lot – with their very own symptoms of Covid-19. They join dance classes for families every week and dance together at home in front of their screens. It is at home, it is not the dance class we all have known and loved. But it is the best we can have right now and we have much, after all, when we have realised the alternative.

After four weeks the parents called that his work in school had improved drastically again. And some days later a letter arrived for me from the little boy himself. It touched me to my very core. Which is why I sat down to note down my thoughts on

- ✦ the importance of mindful communication with children and adolescents
- ✦ to include them in our adult dealing with the pandemic in a mindful but honest way accessible for them
- ✦ and on dance as a security blanket for mind, body and soul.

Stay safe, laughing, loving, and dancing everyone out there,

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