

Dear Teachers,

The “Letters to the Editor” column hopes to encourage a dialogue with the teaching profession by answering practical problems sent in by dance educators. Please focus your questions on teaching methodology, physical training, or locating resources in the form of literary references or personnel. The *IADMS Bulletin for Teachers* is not a medical forum, and IADMS would direct those questions elsewhere. Letters can be sent to [media@IADMS.org](mailto:media@IADMS.org)

We sincerely hope this column will be useful.

The Editors

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### **Thank you and what is the best way to approach hyperextension?**

I’ve just discovered your free newsletter geared to us teacher types. Thank you soooo much. Really, thank you. What a treasure trove the first issue is. I look forward to future editions...and by the way, what is the best approach to hyperextension (in knees particularly)?

Vicki Rennaker Peck  
Ballet teacher, Snohomish, WA

Dear Vicki,

Generally speaking I encourage the student with hyperextension to limit movements of extension, until stability matches mobility and active movement is similar to passive movement ranges. In practice, this means not indulging the very mobile dancer to show off an extreme range of movement, but to only take the leg in grand battement, as high as it would go in a *développé*, for example. The general body type of the hypermobile dancer is of glorious range of movement, prized amongst many dancers and choreographers, but in actual fact, it is a difficult physique to train.

The classic highly arched foot tends to be pretty in *tendus*, and *glissés*, but perhaps not as effective at jumping and sustained landing as a less mobile foot. This foot needs to be trained to work the muscles under the arch of the foot

with pressure against the floor to increase strength. Guard against starting *pointe* work too early and ensure that the foot does not go too far over the shoes with poor ankle support.

Knees with any large degree of hypermobility should not be allowed to let the weight of the lower leg hinge on the back of the knees. Rather the bones of thigh and lower leg must take the weight of the body and this can only be done by changing the alignment so that the central line of gravity falls from the femur to the tibia, and not allowing the knees to ‘lock’ backwards. A student with a high degree of hyperextension of the knees should ideally work with the heels together when in first, and by sensing a downward pressure through the heel into the floor of the supporting (or standing) leg, they can feel the line through the leg. The dance student needs to be educated in this technique from a very early age, and it is very worth spending the time and effort to get this right so that true anatomical alignment of the leg (bone to bone) can take place. A great way for students to practice this is a technique taught by Janet Karin of the Australian Ballet School, who teaches the dancer with sway back knees to sit on the floor with the legs out straight out to the sides, then to use one hand to pull the toes of the foot on the same side upwards as far as possible. Most dancers with sway back knees will have the heels several centimeters off the floor. Then, lower the heels until the hip joint, knee and ankle are in a straight line. A partner or teacher or parent should then gently apply pressure to the heel of the foot while the dancer tries to match this pressure. When the dancer feels a lengthening sensation from the sit-bone to the heel and beyond, both hands should be gently removed while the dancer maintains the lengthening sensation through the leg. This way, all the whole leg muscles can be re-educated to feel a straight line down the inside leg and through the heel. Once standing up, this imprint of how the leg should work in good alignment will remain with the student and a much more stable base will occur. I have used Janet’s technique with many dancers with sway back legs and all have found it incredibly

helpful.

Finally, a word about hyperextension of the spine; again, mobility must be matched by stability and much work must be done on strengthening core muscles to support the huge range of movement sometimes found in the lumbar curve. Particular attention should be paid to establishing reliable postural good habits and not allowing the pelvis to tip backwards. It is also important to check daily ordinary use of posture as many bad habits remain outside the dance studio and good spine health relies on good core strength.

Whilst artistic directors and choreographers find the highly mobile body a great beauty, it may be prone to in-

jury. Careful training and plenty of education and plenty of time spent early on in training to develop good habits is vital.

To sum up:

- Match flexibility with strength
- Good alignment means bones transmitting weight, not back of knees
- Posture, posture, posture.

Rachel Rist

Chair of the IADMS Education Committee (and ballet teacher)