

“When is my daughter ready for Pointe shoes?”

By Samantha Scotto, Artistic Director/ Owner, Arizona Dance Artistry

Right after Nutcracker season or recital, with visions of the lead Sugar Plum Fairy role or Clara in their future, I often get asked by excited young female dancers when it will be THEIR turn to receive their first pair of satin slippers, formally known as “pointe shoes”.

What are pointe shoes and why are they so exciting?

To give you a brief dance history lesson, the first pointe shoes were invented in the 1800’s and Marie Taglioni danced the premiere role of “La Sylphide” in 1832 with the aid of these newly constructed ballet shoes, made from only satin and leather. Pointe shoe construction has come a long way since the 1800’s but they still haven’t found a way to eliminate the blisters after a 6 hour rehearsal...

Pointe shoes now are available in over 60 different styles, brands, shapes, widths and vary in price depending on brand. Pointe shoes are a hardened version of a ballet shoe, providing strong and stiff support versus a soft canvas or leather ballet shoe. A pointe shoe has a certain structure that keeps a dancer “en pointe” without crushing their toes: box, shank and sole. These are the variable parts of the shoe that make the shoe a more custom fit for each dancer. For more details about Pointe shoe structure go to: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pointe_shoes

Pointe shoes are the highest level of achievement and recognition in ballet for young students. This is not to say that other technical elements such as mastering fouette turns or intricate petit allegro aren’t great achievements. Pointe shoes require an extreme amount of determination, work ethic, strength and maturity to be able to work through each class and rehearsal. Dancers that are invited to begin Pointe are given a very special honor and a classical tradition to uphold.

When does my daughter get invited and how old should she start?

At Arizona Dance Artistry, my Pointe classes are invitation only. This is because pointe work requires a certain level of physical development *unique to each dancer* in the following areas:

1-Strength and control of legs, ankles, feet and toe articulation

2-A strong foundation in general ballet technique

3- Understanding of how to use their rotation in the hip also known as “turn-out”

4- Difference between releve and pique

5- General class maturity and proper body placement

6- Minimum age of 9yrs*

*There is no pre-defined age for starting pointe, this is AZDA’s minimum age requirement, dancers around the world have started pointe as young as 9 and even younger in Russia. Dancer’s body type, strength and growth should be taken into consideration when placing a young dancer on pointe. Consult with ballet program director before beginning pointe to fully understand the commitment and risks.

Every dancer is different, it is hard for students and parents not to compare, some students may start at 9yrs and others may not have the minimum requirements listed above until they are 12yrs. It all stems from their dedication to their craft and what their individual goals are. Pointe work is very serious and dancers who do not take their warm-up and strengthening exercises seriously may injure themselves.

Each dancer receiving an invitation to begin pointe at Arizona Dance Artistry will be accompanied by me, for their first pointe shoe fitting and shopping trip. I require all students make an appointment with me so I may attend and ensure a proper fit and style for each dancer’s unique needs.

Dancing “en pointe” can be very rewarding for dancers as well as painful at the beginning. Give them the support they need to continue and stick with their special achievement. After the first 6-8 classes the shoes feel more comfortable, the dancer feels less awkward dancing 5 inches taller than normal, they get used to the shoe and the initial pain go away as the feet toughen to the experience.

Going forward, all of my students beginning pointe will start during a 2-week, minimum Ballet Summer Intensive running all day, 4 days a week. This gives them daily focus on pointe work, allowing them to advance at 5 times the rate they would if they began during the regular school year, which only allows once a week class for an hour. Dancers that get deep into their training earlier in the process learn faster and are more efficient in weekly class. The weekly class is really designed for maintenance and practice, the real work happens in rehearsal during Nutcracker season!

