

Class assistant and Mini-lead workshop (update October 2013)

J.Homister

Being a classroom assistant and mini lead is a very important and appreciated job! YOU are an invaluable part of our class and we (teachers) could never do it without you. The purpose of today's workshop is to go over some basic principles and to give you some guidance in helping out in class and on stage.

Helping in the classroom:

Rule #1: When the teacher is speaking- you are not! This also means you can quietly gesture to kids to be quiet to help out the teacher!

Rule #2: Your children will look up to you so you want to be the best role model you can be! These children will come to trust you and (just like when a teacher is away) if you are away they will miss you ☺

Grooming: In class you will need to wear ballet tights and a bodysuit, and a simple chiffon skirt (so you look different from the younger kids but they are still able to see you demonstrate movements clearly). Your hair must be in a tidy bun for ballet. For Jazz or Tap please wear tight fitting attire- hair pulled back into a tidy ponytail. Again, please remember you are a role model and parents/ students will mimic how you look. No jewelry!!!

Before class/ at the beginning of class:

Before the children enter the room you can help the teacher by having the children lined up. Stay clear of the door so when one group goes out- the other (yours) can enter safely and quickly. You could take any sad/ apprehensive child by the hand to wait. At attendance time please sit with the kids- you could quietly check their shoes for drawstrings poking out and tuck them in. If a child is sad you could hold their hand, sit them on your lap or give them a hug.

Depending on the level- The teacher may do a warmup (in a circle?) or go to the barre. In low-level classes like Beg 3/ Nursery/ Primary you will do very little, if anything, at the barre. Be aware of the three year olds who want to hang on the barre or take off running around for no good reason! It is your job to retrieve them, bring them back to the group by the hand, and stay with them.

Working in a circle: Stand between two children a distance away from the teacher. It may be wise to stand between two children you know may talk or fool around. Or, you may need to stand with a child who is sad or apprehensive. Sometimes the children will race to see who can stand beside you. (This is great- it means they trust, like and look up to you!) Always demonstrate the movements to the best of your ability (stretch feet well, turnout strongly, hold abdominals in, stand tall, jump high, etc.) If a child is "not participating" try to quietly encourage them (you could hold their hand if appropriate for the movement). If sitting on the floor and doing movements like good toes/ naughty toes or butterfly adage- you could help the teacher by going around and assisting with the movement (remind to stretch backs of knees, take their arms and gently help them to do arm waves, pull legs and ankles close together/ manipulate toes). Quiet gestures without words work well- establish eye contact!

Working from corner to corner: It is hard to know what to do and where to go! Typically the teacher will either want you with the kids in the corner- helping them to stay in line or wait their turn. Or, the teacher will ask you to stand in the opposite corner to do the movement so the children can come towards you. If you are doing this please make sure to continue to do the movement (children often forget what they are doing as they go across) and ALWAYS remember to demonstrate it the best you can (good posture, stretched feet, etc.). When children reach you in the corner quietly remind them to line up in the opposite corner. I make all my dancers, no matter the age or level, finish nicely in the corner (feet together or in 1st, sometimes finishing with a bow once they are all the way to the corner).

Many classes will have two (even sometimes three assistants!) This means you all have to work together to help the teacher and different jobs may be needed in one exercise. For example: During marches from the corner- "Amy" could stay with the kids in the corner lineup, "Annie" could be at the opposite corner demonstrating and receiving children, and "Alex" could be in the next corner receiving children and getting them in line to go again/ keeping them quiet and not hanging on the barre).

Bathroom breaks:

Inevitably, you will have children who need to go to the bathroom during class. Your assistance is greatly needed with this! Please accompany the child to the bathroom if the parent is not there (ask the child- "do you see your mommy?") Often a parent will see their child needs to go and take them for you- then you can come back to class and the parent will bring the child back. If not, go into the bathroom with the child (if they are under 6) and assist them- remind them to wash their hands!

Other things you can do to help:

Help teacher put away props, take props (eg. Scarves) from the children or help to hand them out, assist teacher to line up children or get them into a circle, assist in giving out stickers or letters to parents, take children to the bathroom, encourage an upset child to come in to the class or to leave mommy (take their hand, pick them up, etc.), open the door at end of class, close door after attendance has been taken and the class is starting, etc. Always be smiling, positive and encouraging! You can, of course, not smile if they are "being naughty" but you don't need to discipline them- "redirection" is most effective! Holding the hand of a child who wants to run around is effective in keeping them in place.

Corrections: Since most assistants are not teachers you don't really have the authority or skills to do hands on corrections. Student teachers are the exception and can do hands on corrections if appropriate. Simple things you can do to help out at the barre are: go around and gently "pull in" tummies, adjust hands on the barre (they may grip too tight or hold the barre oddly), gently open the toes

into better turned out positions, fix hand placement on hip or shoulder. If assisting a primary/ Jr 1. class you may do the exercise at the barre with the children (leading it-carefully showing good technique and proper timing). When children are standing in lines in the center you may either stand at the front to lead or off to the side. Often- a teacher will need your help in demonstrating the movement and timing so the teacher can be free to walk around and correct placement and give corrections.

Leading On Stage

Being onstage with the children is a huge responsibility and a tough job! Often, the children will not know their dance at all without your help. Little kids are easily distracted and will probably be a bit disoriented on stage because it is very different than being in the classroom. Here are some guidelines to help you with your job!

Waiting in the dressing room: If you are able to be with the children please assist parent volunteers with dressing kids, making sure everyone has gone to the bathroom, cleaning up snacks and activities, keeping your class' space "organized", and keeping the children quiet and entertained (you could read them a story, color with them, etc.) Do not let the children run around. When you are called to the stage have your children in the correct order to enter the stage so the teacher does not have to worry about this. Keep the children quiet backstage.

Coming on to the stage: Typically the choreography will dictate that the mini lead comes on first followed by the little people. It is almost always best to hold the hand of the child behind you (at least for a few counts) when you enter onto the stage. Remember that little ones cannot travel as well as you can and they can be distracted. If there are two mini leads then one will likely be at the beginning and one at the end of the line. The end person would have the task of "hurrying" the line, taking the hand of "stray" kids and even gently putting children into their line.

Remember that the content of the dance comes first. This means that your primary job is to lead and demonstrate. (For example;) You are acting as the only lead onstage- the children enter and the last few kids have not arrived in their line but it is the point of the music where you need to start toe taps- do not worry about the last few kids in line- demonstrate and lead the dance and hopefully they will follow suit.

What do you do if a child is upset? Onstage there is little you can do. Remember your primary goal is to lead and demonstrate. If it is easy to take that child's hand you could do so. When exiting the stage you could take their hand or even carry them off. If a child is upset before going onstage try not to say or do too much (too much sympathy sometimes makes it worse), smile, be encouraging, give them a hug, talk about how fun it will be, etc. (Mentioning MOMMY at that moment is probably not a good idea!)

If there are multiple leads onstage you can work together- always make sure one of you is demonstrating the choreography at all times.

What if I forget the dance? Don't worry this is not likely to happen, however, if it does just fake it. It's likely only a momentary lapse in memory. Smile and don't let the audience see it in your face!

Should I or can I talk on stage??? My opinion of this is YES you can. Perhaps you do not need to say every little step to them but it is fine to say some of the steps as you do them. Key places to insert words are when you have a transition ("turn and march", "hold hands", "make a circle", "STOP!") Obviously, do not talk really loudly but do remember the music will drown out your voice to the audience. If you are facing away from the audience this is a better time to use your voice.

Where to stand onstage so you are not in the way but in a useful spot:

This can be tricky! Some teachers want you to stand at the front in the middle while others may want you to stand well off to the side. Some teachers may want you to face the children while others may want you to face the audience with your back to the children. If the teacher is not specific then please ask!!!! There are benefits to all ways and different teachers like different things. Sometimes this choice is also dependent on how many leads there are, how large the class is, what level the class is, if there are other groups onstage as well, and the choreography. My personal method of choice is for leads to be off to the side and facing the children. I feel that leads can better monitor how the children are following if they have eye contact.

Things to be aware of:

You should never stand in front of a child so the parent's view is obstructed. While it is not always preventable- you may be able to gently move a child over so they are not behind you. Hopefully the teacher will address this in class and remind the children constantly. If you know a child beside you is slow to react or travels minimally you should take their hand when you transition (for example: You are in a line – all dance on the spot- and then the next movement is to turn and march somewhere).....you know the child will forget to follow so take their hand or do the "follow me" gesture.

"Chain- reaction domino sardine- line": The time when the kids following you are crashing into each other like dominoes because they are looking at grandma in the audience, or they all enter and stand together so tightly that they cannot move. Use your voice to say "spread out" or physically stop and turn and catch the shoulders of the child (or few children) directly behind you so that they do stop in good time. Use the "stop" gesture. It is not always successful but remember that young children often have very slow reaction times so this is a common occurrence. If time allows you can physically spread the children out or work together with the second mini lead onstage with you.

Remember that it can never go perfectly, small children are unpredictable, and parents are happy just to see their little one do SOMETHING onstage. Your enthusiasm, consistency, ability to "go with the flow", and commitment are so greatly appreciated! Assistant and mini lead "skills" will take time and practice to master.

THANK YOU FOR BEING A CLASS ASSISTANT AND MINI LEAD!!!!!!! ☺