

# **INFORMATION FOR POINTE STUDENTS AND THEIR PARENTS**

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## **When a student is ready to go on Pointe:**

Usually in Cecchetti/RAD Grade 5 you begin actual pointe class which will lead to you getting your pointe shoes after a few months of doing pointe work in soft shoes. A student must be conscientious, serious, and physically strong before actually going on the toes or damage can be done to the body. Reasons for which a teacher will withhold pointe shoes include the following:

- not being able to control turnout strongly on flat foot or on demi-pointe
- not being able to hold a strong basic posture. This includes alignment of head, spine, hips and legs and maintaining strength through the back and abdomen, and hamstrings.
- Rolling ankles and sickled feet.

Students and parents must understand that the teacher is withholding pointe shoes for the student's safety. When a student understands the exact reason why, she can start to work at correcting and strengthening the problem area so that soon she, too, will be on pointe!

## **Choosing and Fitting of Pointe Shoes:**

The teacher will usually suggest which brand and make of shoe might best work for the individual.

All pointe teachers will expect that the student brings the pointe shoes (before sewing ribbons) to the teacher to be checked, after having been fitted at the store. This is for the student's safety and the parent's pocketbook. Often, the teacher will have a different idea than the store about the proper fit of a shoe on a student. We have also had many shoes where the shank is crooked from the manufacturer and the shoes need to be taken back. Gaynor Minden shoes are not allowed on young dancers.

\*Shoes need to fit snugly; the ends of the toes should touch the end of the shoe (without the joints buckling), the heel should be very snug against the foot, and along the sides there should be no extra room. This is very important in order to support the foot on pointe. On pointe, because of the bend in the arch the foot will become shorter and if there is any extra room the foot will slide down into the shoe with no support along the sides. A good shoe acts as a brace along the outside and inside of the foot while standing on pointe. A dancer's shoe must be softened slightly across the box and the metatarsals, and the shank should be made malleable before she goes on pointe in her new shoes. Ask your teacher how to do this.

## **Ribbons**

Ribbons should be sewn on at the teacher's direction. Get the teacher to mark in the shoe exactly where the ribbons should lie. They must be sewn on at an angle in order to lie flat over the ankle. It is important that the dancer learns to sew the ribbons on herself. Heavy duty thread or dental floss is the most secure. The tying edges of the ribbons should be singed with a lighter or match so that they do not fray.

Ribbons must be sewn deep into the shoe with the bottom edge of the ribbon sitting just above the sole. Elastics (1/2 inch) may be used to hold the heels of the shoes on the foot, but must not interfere with the Achilles tendon. Again ask the teacher to mark on the shoe where the elastics should be sewn.

Most pointe shoes have a drawstring which can sometimes pinch the back of the heel if too tight. To prevent this:

- loosen the drawstring so that the back heel of the shoe lies flat and the drawstring is not gathered.
- stitch across the drawstring about 1/4 inch on the outside of each side of the centre back seam.
- pull the drawstring tight around the rest of the foot but the back edge will remain flat and relaxed.

## **Care of Shoes**

In years gone by, a dancer used to darn the platform edge of the box. This was to prevent the satin from fraying and also to give better grip on the floor. This isn't being done so much these days but when the satin begins to fray, it is cut off and a line of chain-stitch darning is done around the edge of the box where the satin meets the canvas (which is under the satin that was cut off). This prevents any more fraying of the satin. Little bits of thread or fabric should be cut off so that the shoe always looks tidy.

**Soiled pointe shoes** can be gently cleaned with a very soft toothbrush and hand soap. Alternatively, shoes can be sponged with Calamine lotion to give a new, clean look. This is also done before performance on stage as it gives the shoe a more professional look - removing the shine and making the dancer's line of leg and foot look longer. You must allow the shoes 24 hours to dry.

After using pointe shoes they should be placed somewhere to dry - not in a locker or dance bag, but in a place where a lot of air can circulate around them. Sweat from the dancer's feet will soften the shoe and it will break down more quickly than if left to dry for 48 hours. Dancers who are doing pointe two or three times a week should have two pairs of pointe shoes and switch them over so that they can dry between 'wearings'. This will prolong their 'wearability'.

Pointe shoes that have become soft in the box can be extended by one or two 'wearings' by coating the inside of the box with shellac, Fabulon or Future floor wax and allowing it to dry for about 72 hours. Get further instructions from your teacher.

### Care of the Feet:

Beginner pointe students may use **lamb's wool** (not cotton wool) or **Junior Ouch Pouches** (available at dance wear stores) in their shoes to make their first classes more comfortable. Junior Ouch Pouches are **very thin** gel sockettes which fit over the ends of the toes. They must not be confused with some of the very bulky blue plastic toe covers which are bad for the feet and are also so bulky that the student is forced to buy a shoe too big for the foot in order to fit these covers in. **These are not allowed.**

All students should have a little pointe bag (much as you have a makeup bag) with the following:

- Needles
- Thread (or dental floss)
- Nail Scissors
- Thimble (optional)
- Nail clippers
- Emory Board or Nail file
- Pumice stone
- Fabric Bandaids
- Antibiotic ointment (e.g. bactroban)
- Sponges or gel toe spacers (if needed)
- Adhesive tape (or hockey tape) for taping toe knuckles
- Lamb's Wool

In order to keep the feet from drying and cracking a wise young dancer will rub a small amount of olive oil on her feet at night and cover the feet with thin socks so they don't get the oil on the sheets. How often you do this is totally up to the dancer, but you do not want the feet to get to the point of cracking because it can become painful and then become infected or develop a fungal infection depending on circumstances.

### Toe Nails

Toe nails should be cut straight across and must not extend beyond the toe; the edges of the centre of the nail should also be filed down so that the edge of the nail is flush with the skin. Nails cut short at the corners can become ingrown. If you cut the corners too short, round each one with an Emory board and then let grow ever so slightly beyond the corner. Then maintain this length with an Emory board or nail file several times a week.

Ingrown toenails are a very painful thing in pointe shoes. The key is prevention; which is why you cut the nails straight across and file them down. If you should get the redness and soreness which begins the ingrown nail pain, put antibiotic ointment on it and keep it covered. It also helps to soak the feet in warm water and Epsom salts (available at the drug store) for about 20 minutes at night. Then very gently, pry up the edge of the nail. Dry and cover it with a Band-Aid. **You must be very gentle and do this nightly. It should not hurt if you do it gently.** If it becomes inflamed see a doctor.

### Taping of Toes

All toes of the beginner pointe student should be taped before the first class. Use either adhesive or hockey tape to tape around the knuckles – this is to protect them from friction and pressure from the shoe. As the student becomes more advanced she will know from experience which toes need to be taped and which toes are fine.

**If corns or blisters occur on all the knuckles for a long period of time it is a warning that the shoes do not fit properly.** Students who are prone to sweating a lot should dust their feet with talcum powder before putting the tights over the feet and the feet into the pointe shoes. Friction creates blisters and corns so you are trying at all costs to reduce the movement of the foot against the shoe.

Eventually, the skin on the toes will toughen up and you will be left with calluses where there were once blisters. Calluses are normal and are nature's way of dealing with perpetual friction. Sometimes corns (extremely thick yellow hard skin) develop. If they become too thick they cause pain from pressure and should be **carefully** pumiced or trimmed. An infected corn should be seen by a medical professional. Corns in between toes are usually a sign that the toes are pinching or overlapping - this usually means that the shoes are not fitting properly.

### **Blisters**

Most dancers have to cope with blisters at some time in their pointe career. Blisters are caused by friction. Making sure that pointe shoes fit properly, that there are no rough spots on the inside of the box of the pointe shoe, and that the tights are not wrinkled in the toe area when pulling on shoes are all preventative measures for blisters.

#### **However when you do get a blister take the following steps:**

- if part of the skin is still hanging on do not pull it off, leave it in place.
- wash gently with soap and water and dry carefully using a hair dryer to make sure that there is no moisture left on the wound.
- cut a small piece of gauze to fit the inside of the blister and drench it with antibiotic ointment, then put it on the blister, pull the skin (if there is any) over it and cover lightly with a bandaid.
- alternately after washing and drying some dancers douse the wound with hydrogen peroxide (this kills bacteria, and toughens skin but be prepared for major stinging because it hurts) and then apply a Band-Aid.
- 'Liquid bandages' do not work on most people for blisters.

**The main goal when treating a blister is to keep it dry and not let it get infected. Keep it clean; make sure there is an antibiotic ointment on it; and keep it covered so that dirt and bacteria will not get into it.**

**Take care with the type of Band-Aid that you wear in your pointe shoes** as some will wrinkle and then you have the friction problem again. They should lay as smooth as possible in the shoe - try fabric band aids (Band-Aid brand, not Elastoplast).

When going back on pointe with blisters some relief can be gained by buying, at the drugstore, the little gel pads that look like doughnuts with a hole in the middle (corn pads) and putting this around the blister to keep the pressure of the shoe off the wound. Then tape the whole thing so that the toe is protected in the shoe. Alternately the little gel toe socks bought at the drugstore or dancewear store can also give relief.

Water blisters that have not burst can be drained by making a small hole in the puffed-up skin with a sterilized needle. Then follow instructions as per regular blisters. **Blood blisters** should **never** be tampered with.

Most dance wear stores carry little gel "toe socks" which fit over toes that are painful. They are made by the same company as the Jr. Ouch Pouch, and look like a single little gel and fabric tube and it slips over one toe. Some dancers find that they work for them.

### **Bruised Nails**

Sometimes a dancer's toe nail can become bruised and purple under the nail. **To prevent this from happening keep toenails trimmed properly and centre edges filed down to the quick** so that the nail will not jam against the shoe or take impact under the nail.

### **Fungal Infections**

Fungal infections can enter cracked, dry feet which is why it is important to keep them moisturized and pliable. An olive oil rub, mentioned previously, a couple times a week is a preventative measure. Feet inhabited by fungus have heavy, yellowish, thick patches and the skin is usually cracked. Nails can be infected this way as well. There are cream anti-fungal medications at the drugstore, but if these do not work you must see a doctor for a prescription. Keep feet dry and do **not** use anybody else's nail clippers or Emory boards. Fungal infections are easily spread.

## **Pointe Shoe Fitting**

Compiled by Shannon Delaney, based on lectures by Janet Hagsavas

### **Know your feet:**

Do you have long or short toes? Do you have wide or narrow feet? Do you have a high or low instep?; These are things, along with your street shoe size, that will help the salesperson determine what shoe will be right for you.

### **Inside your shoes:**

Any extras you are going to be wearing will affect the fit of your shoe. Toe spacers, lamb's wool, or small toe pouches that will be worn need to be on your feet before you try a shoe.

If you have spaces between your toes, or if your big toe is prone to pushing over toward your second toe, you should wear a toe spacer (or makeup sponge).

You need to fit your shoes to your longest toe. The shorter toes should be built up with padding such as lamb's wool.

For added comfort, you may wear a junior ouch pouch or lamb's wool toe cover.

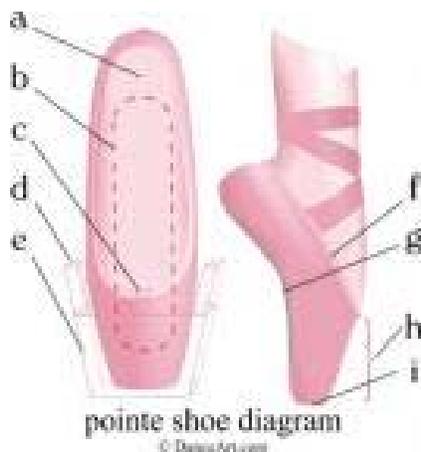
**Note:** If your feet are significantly different lengths or widths, you may need to buy two pair of shoes and wear one of each size.

### Trying on the Shoes:

Ask the salesperson if you may flatten the box a bit with your hands (they can be quite rounded at first, so if they fit when rounded, as you break them in they may flatten and become too wide for you). Also, with harder shanks, ask if you may round the shank at the heel so that it will follow the arch of your foot.

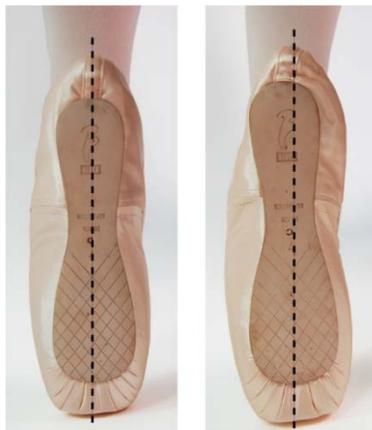
- Put on the shoes and stand in a small 2<sup>nd</sup> in plié:
  - The shoes should be evenly snug, but not too tight. The tops of your toes should just touch the platform and the sides of the shoes should not gape. The vamp length should reflect the length of your toes: If you have long toes, look for a long vamp (you should not see the tops of your toes peeking out from the top of the shoe); or if you have shorter toes, look for a shorter vamp.
  - How deep is the box? You should not be able to stick more than the tip of your index finger in the top of your shoe. If you can fit your whole finger into the top of the shoe, the box is too deep or too wide.
- Next, step up in a parallel first position (holding a barre, wall, or helper):
  - Your feet should not slide down into the box toward the floor, if they do, the shoe is too wide. There should not be an excess of fabric at the heel.
  - If your foot seems to be arching out of the shoe, you may need a longer vamp. If you are not all the way up on pointe, you may need a shorter vamp, or need the shank formed further.

### Pointe Shoe Parts Diagram



- a) inner sole / sock liner
- b) shank
- c) drawstring / drawstring knot
- d) wings
- e) box
- f) drawstring casing
- g) leather outer sole
- h) vamp
- i) platform

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The soles of the pointe shoes should fit straight (like in the first diagram) and not twist (as in the second). Twisting could be because the shoe is the incorrect size; because the dancer is not standing with the correct alignment; or because there were problems with the construction of the shoes.

<http://www.dancegeardirect.co.uk>