



## EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE &amp; EDUCATION SERVICES

ORFALEA FAMILY CHILDREN'S CENTER

UNIVERSITY CHILDREN'S CENTER

FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES

May 15, 2014

To Whom It May Concern,

I would like to offer my strongest support and recommendation to expand the Ballet and Creative Movement program offered by Susan Manchak through 'Ballet with Susan'. As the Director of UCSB's Early Childhood Care and Education Services I have had the extreme pleasure of observing Susan as she presents a 'ballet class' to children ages 2 through 5 years in an informative, active and meaningful way. As an early childhood educator I value the learning that occurs in these classes, far beyond the fun with dance. The ballet and creative movement classes support children's growth and development across domains in a holistic, comprehensive and engaging manner. Susan has the ability to understand and sensitively adapt to the various approaches young children bring to new experiences. Her approach respects and engages both the slow-to-warm physically cautious child and the eager, active exuberant child as well.

There is a growing national awareness of the critical role that early exposure and experience has to shape and support a lifetime of wellness. Enjoying and participating in physical movement is a primary and obvious benefit of the ballet class as new skills build upon previous skills. Even simple movements of hopping on alternating feet and balancing can be challenging for a young child. The joy of learning to skip, a complicated achievement, is profound! However, the benefits of these classes extend far beyond the movements themselves. The experience is new to most children and brings with it novel learning: exposure, growing awareness and appreciation for a wide variety of music, learning to match your movements to another's, new vocabulary, nurturing creativity ... the list is long. But perhaps the most significant 'hidden' impact that the ballet class has is supporting the growth and development of 'executive function', recognized as critical to school success.

**When children have opportunities to develop executive function and self-regulation skills, individuals and society experience lifelong benefits.** These skills are crucial for learning and development. They also enable positive behavior and allow us to make healthy choices for ourselves and our families.<sup>1</sup>

Consider the ballet class in light of this description: "**Executive function and self-regulation skills depend on three types of brain function: working memory, mental flexibility, and self-control.** These functions are highly interrelated. Each type of skill draws on elements of the others, and the successful application of executive function skills requires them to operate in coordination with each other."<sup>2</sup>

Children tiptoe into the classroom (self-control) and sort themselves out on the floor. They wait for the teacher's instructions (self-control) and then dance to the music while remembering her words and cues (working memory). In the middle of the dance she may say "now turn around and leap the other direction (mental flexibility). The self-control to adapt one's movements from fast to slow, jump on a beat, 'freeze' on cue, following multi-step directions, think of a new way to move when the tempo changes... all of these build and strengthen the child's executive function abilities.

It is a lot of impact for such an enjoyable and novel experience! Learning is a pleasure when you are having fun and I can assure you the children have fun *and* learn through the dance classes. The benefits are strongest when the class can be offered on regular and consistent basis so I encourage you to give strong consideration to this request so that many other young children in our community can have the advantage of this opportunity.

Respectfully,

Leslie Voss, Director