

WHEN AM I READY FOR POINTE? - by Capezio



There are many factors that a student must consider to prepare for pointe work. Some are technical such as strength, flexibility of feet and ankles, center of balance, posture and alignment. Other factors include age, attitude, training, physique and proper pointe shoe fitting.

Pointe technique is a balance between the technical and artistic components of classical ballet. It involves body alignment, feet placement, weight distribution, and transitions from demi-pointe to full pointe. Proper technique is consistent application and mastery of leg rotation, alignment, aplomb (posture), placement, and *épaulement* (head and shoulders).

Strength

Strength is important because a student needs to be able to support herself while *en pointe*. The muscles that need to be strong including the core muscle groups, back, rotators, quads, hamstrings, calves, ankles, feet, arches and insteps.

Center of Balance

Center of balance is extremely important for pointe preparation. A student must have the ability to find their center of balance and maintain proper technique, while performing at the barre and during center combinations. The student should also have an ability to balance in demi-pointe in various ballet positions such as *relevé* in first position, and *passé* in fifth position.

Posture and Alignment

Posture and alignment is when the body is held properly while maintaining correct placement during standing and moving. For example, a student should make sure she is in proper stance with core muscles held, shoulders down, chest lifted, rib cage closed, and a straight pelvis.

Flexibility

Flexibility of feet and ankles are an important factor. Sickled (pronation) and winged (supination) feet are indications that a student requires more strengthening and/or flexibility of the muscles in the feet. A Theraband may be used to strengthen and stretch muscles and ligaments. Ankles should be flexible enough so that when the foot is pointed the toe, instep and knee is in alignment. A good exercise to stretch the ankles is to sit on the floor with feet and knees bent at a 90-degree angle. Have a teacher or parent hold your ankles down in a parallel position while you attempt to gently straighten your legs while moving the buttocks and shifting the body back a little at a time. Overstretched ankles and high insteps require special attention to build foot strength. A Theraband will aid students to build this strength by flexing and pointing the foot with the elasticized band.

“There is no reason to get a young dancer up on full pointe, if she cannot do anything when she gets up there.”

- George Balanchine

When to Start Pointe

It is very important that a young dancer not begin pointe work too soon. It usually begins when the student is 10 to 12 years old. The only exception may be if a dance teacher or a physician has determined that the bones in the feet have sufficiently developed. The student should have an ability to receive and apply corrections and work diligently to master proper technique. Furthermore, two to three years of serious ballet training is essential.

This is the minimum time and preparation needed to develop sufficient technique and strength to prepare for pointe work.

The student's individual physique must be carefully evaluated. She should have strong abdominal, pelvic, buttock, and back muscles which hold the torso in proper alignment.

Proper Pointe Shoe Fitting

Pointe shoe fittings are an absolute necessity to ensure the dancer receives a proper fit. When considering a pointe shoe fitting, always remember shape, support, style and shank. The shape of the shoe should fit and support a student's foot like a cast supports a broken bone. The shape of a shoe must match the shape of the foot being fit. The style of the shoe should complement the aesthetics of the student's line and the natural extension of her foot and leg. The shank should provide ample support to the instep and conform to the arch.

Demi-pointes are suggested for pointe work preparation. They help to strengthen feet, familiarize the student with proper shape and fit, and aid in the transition to traditional pointe shoes.

Criteria for Pointe Work / Checklist

1. Student should be age 10-12 to begin pointe work.
2. It is recommended that the student have at least two years of classical ballet training.
3. It is recommended that the student is taking a minimum of three classes a week consistently.

- Be able to correctly hold turnout while dancing.
- Have a straight, pulled-up back while dancing, especially the lower back.
- Maintain correct placement (alignment) and stability (aplomb) on flat and in demi-pointe.
- Keep the heels forward toward big toe (no sickling) while on demi-pointe.
- Keep the weight evenly distributed over the balls of the feet.
- Be able to do continuous *relevés* in center-work without losing one's balance.
- Be able to hold a *passé* balance on demi-pointe.
- Execute *piqué passé* with a straight leg.
- Possess flexible ankles so that the knee, instep, and toe are aligned when the foot is pointed.
- *Relevé* on one leg while maintaining balance and pulling up in the legs.
- Maintain proper technique while performing center combinations.
- A firm understanding of intermediate ballet.