

# HOW DANCE TRAINING AFFECTS YOUNG PEOPLE'S BODY IMAGE



## Authors

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## WHAT WE DID

Over 3 months we led **18 creative consultation workshops** with **339 young people** in **dance training**. Each workshop used different creative methods and explored slightly different entry points into the topic of body image.

Three analysts independently reviewed the data from these workshops (a mixture of art works, written responses and facilitator observations) to identify themes.

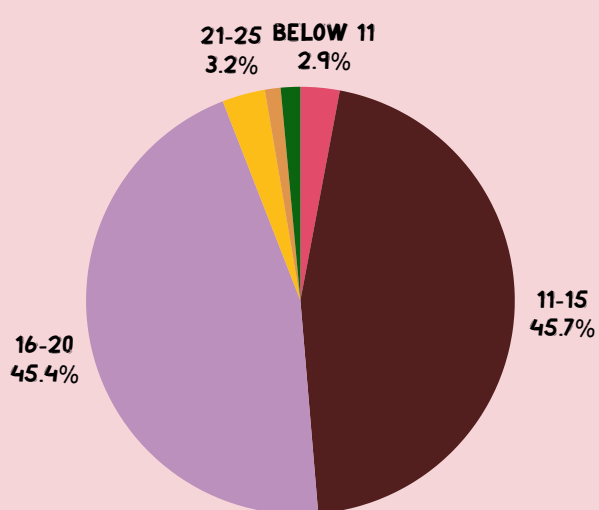


## WE WORKED WITH...

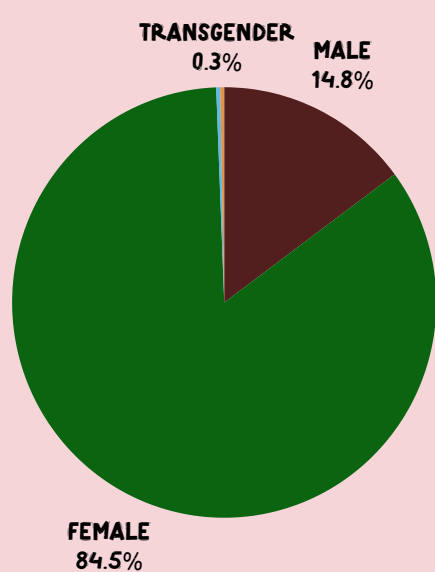
### 339 YOUNG DANCERS



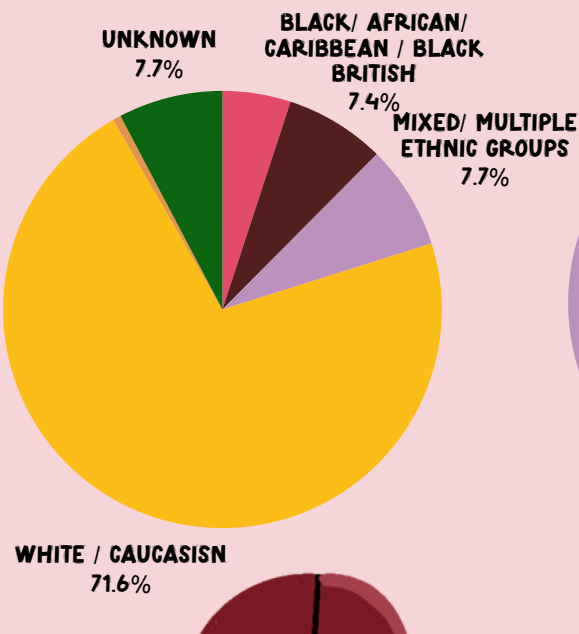
#### AGE



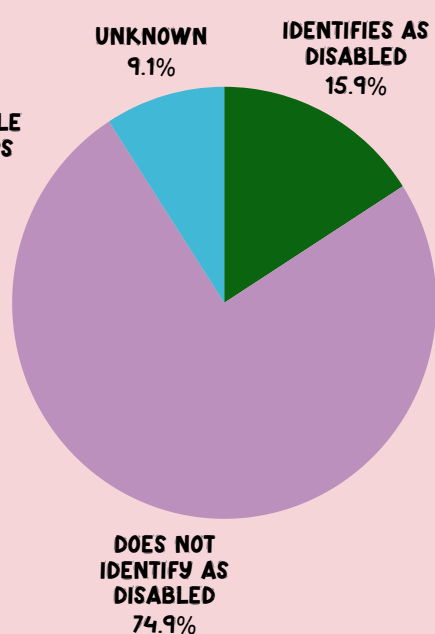
#### GENDER



#### ETHNICITY



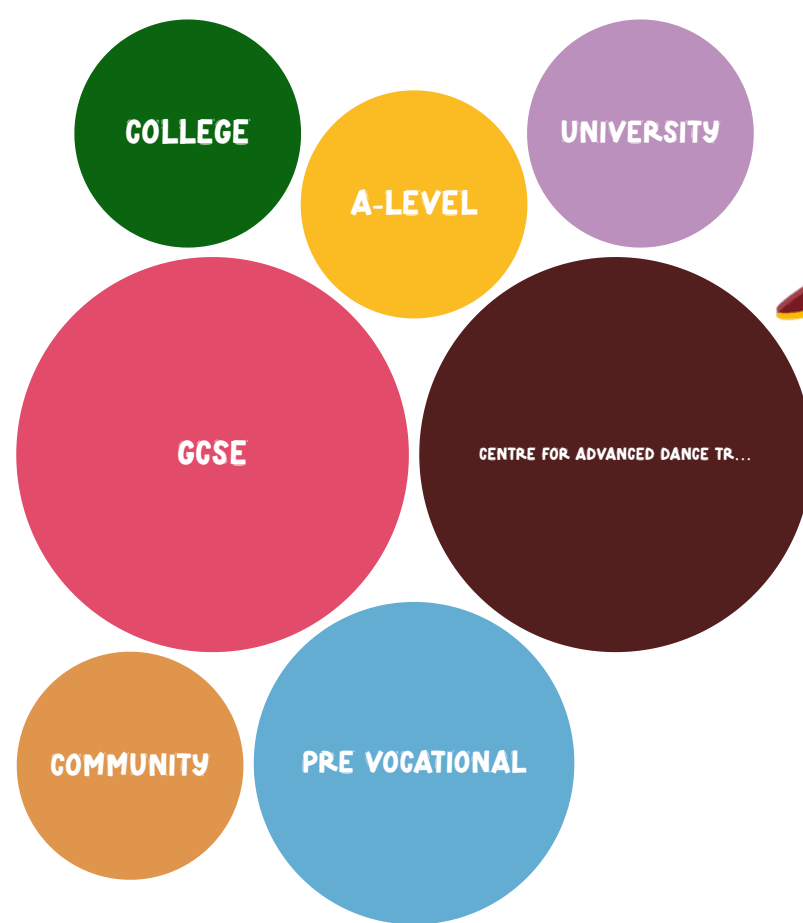
#### DISABILITY



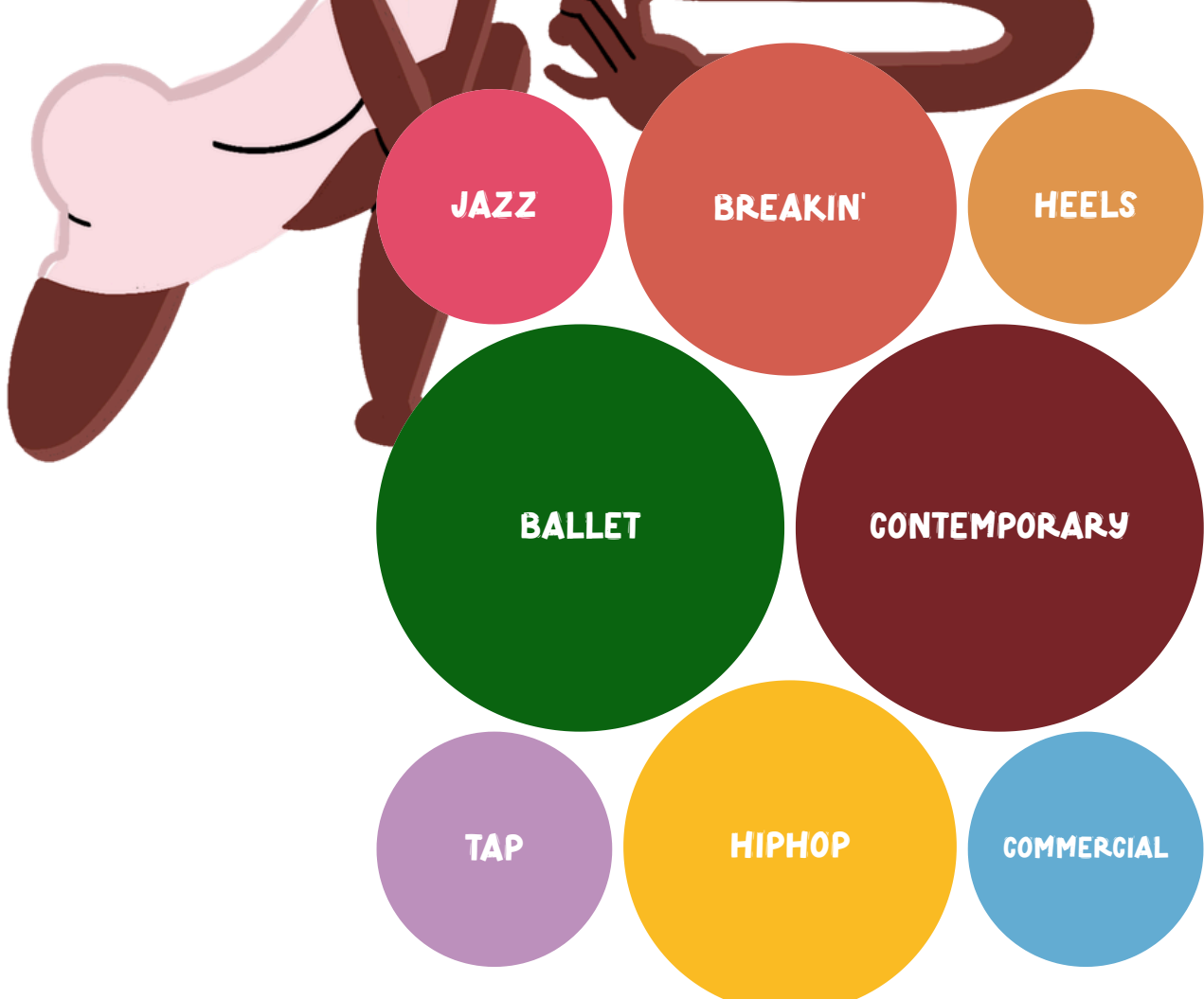
## CREATIVE WORKSHOPS INCLUDED



## DANCE SETTINGS



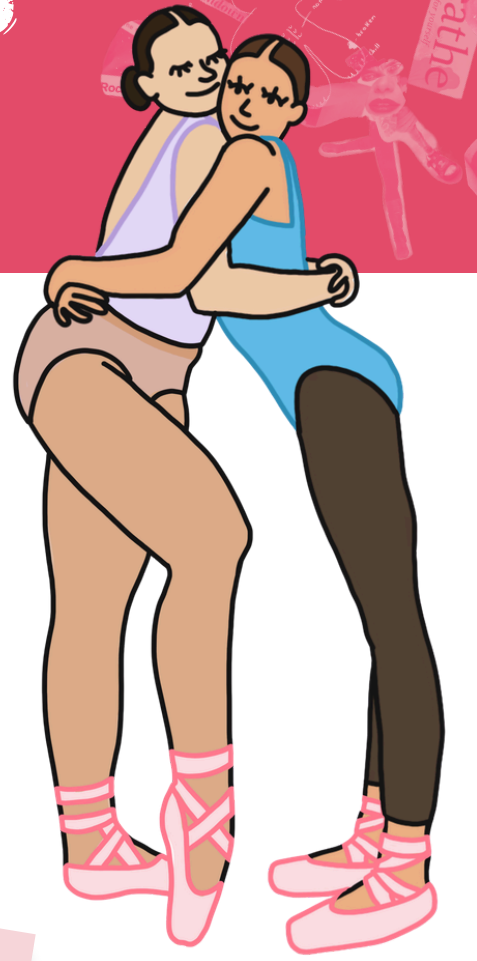
## DANCE STYLES



## OUR GOALS

- To open up honest, supported conversations about body image in dance
- To amplify the voices of young dancers in shaping the future of dance training
- To develop creative and practical resources that schools and organisations can use to support positive body image
- To contribute meaningful research that influences policy and practice in dance education

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## WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

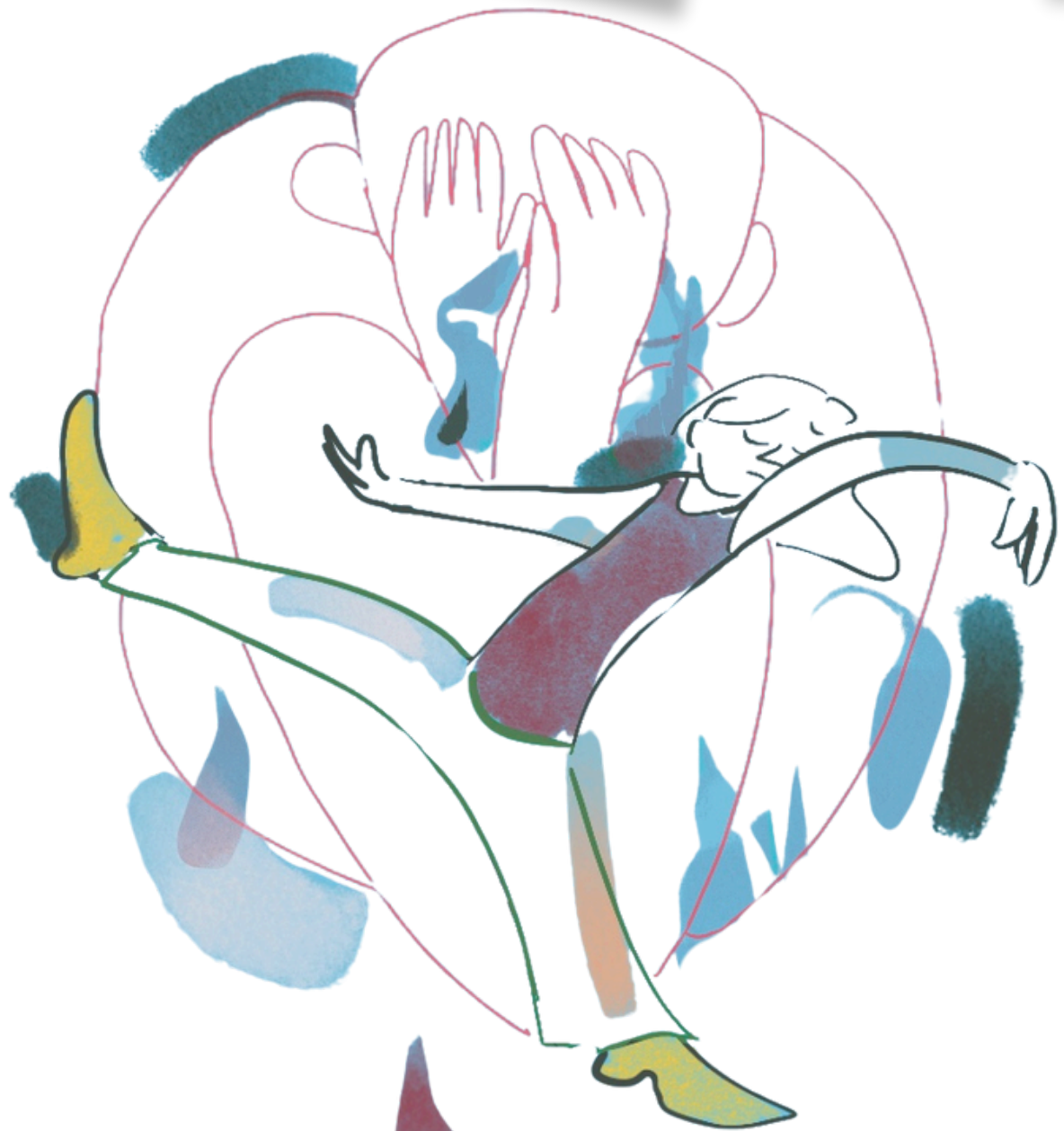
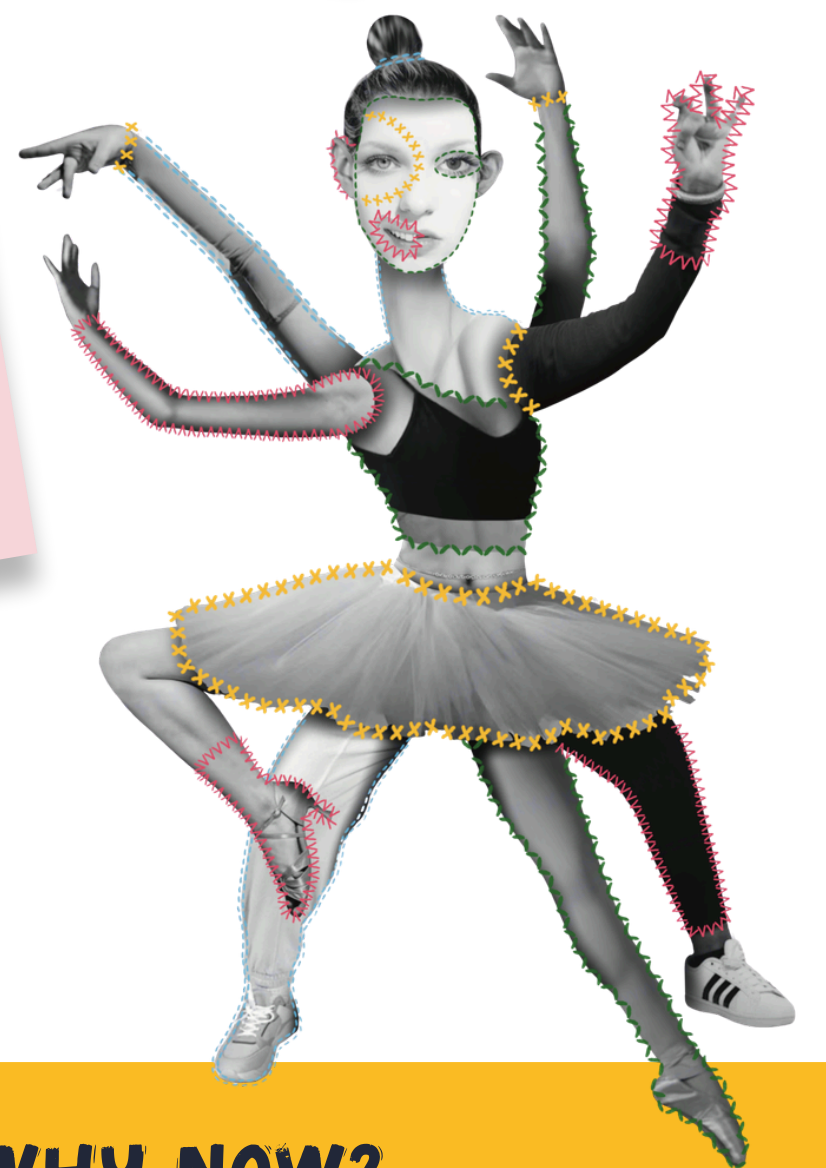
In 2014, research revealed that the average professional female ballet dancer weighed over 20% less than the average healthy weight for their height - a statistic that, for many within the dance community, is sadly unsurprising.

When we speak to dancers about body image and vocational training, we're often met with a knowing nod - a quiet recognition of personal experience, or of stories shared by peers. These conversations underscore what many have long felt: that body image pressures are deeply embedded in the culture of dance.

75% dancers feel pressure to lose weight  
*\*Reel, J. 2005*

Dancers show high levels of body dissatisfaction  
*\*Anshel, 2004*

Dancers are 3x more likely to develop an eating disorder than the general population  
*\*Arcelus J, Witcomb GL, Mitchell A 2014*



## WHY NOW?

Recent 2022 BBC Panorama investigation into the claims of previous students of two prestigious ballet schools, titled *'The Dark Side Of Ballet Schools'*, further echoes these findings of negative body image which can lead to eating disorders & hospitalisation.

The consequences of negative body image are serious - both physically and mentally - and they're lasting. It's time to reimagine what safe, supportive dance training can look like

## THE IMPACT OF NEGATIVE BODY IMAGE

Higher body dissatisfaction is associated with a poorer quality of life, psychological distress and the risk of unhealthy eating behaviours and eating disorders.  
*\*Mental Health Foundation, 2019*

80% of people agreed or strongly agreed that their body image had a negative impact on their mental health  
*\*The impact of body image on mental and physical health. House of Commons 2022-23*

61% said negative body image negatively impacted their physical health  
*\*The impact of body image on mental and physical health. House of Commons 2022-23*

Just over one in eight UK adults have experienced suicidal thoughts or feelings because of concerns about their body image  
*\*Mental Health Foundation, 2019*

# HOW DANCE TRAINING AFFECTS YOUNG PEOPLE'S BODY IMAGE

"I want to dance to dance.  
Not to look a certain way"

"The body is basically  
like architecture"

"Never being fit enough"

"I am not let to be myself by choreographers and  
directors, I have to become what they want"

\*Quotes from young dancers

## THE PARADOX OF DANCE

"The reality is our body is our instrument, it's our tool."  
— Steven McCrae, ROH Principle Dancer

*Dance offers joy, expression, and connection, but in intensive training contexts it can also increase body surveillance, perfectionism, and self-criticism. Training culture, not dance itself, plays a key role in shaping these experiences.*

8 OUT OF 10



HAVE THOUGHT "I DON'T LOOK LIKE A DANCER"

5 OUT OF 10



FEEL INSECURE DURING DANCE CLASS

## KEY FINDINGS

- 01 Physical Sensations: From Pain to Playfulness**  
Pain, tension, and fatigue are often normalised in dance training, leaving many dancers struggling to identify bodily sensations beyond tiredness or discomfort.
- 02 Hyper-Awareness of Body and Appearance**  
Young dancers develop intense awareness of specific body parts and appearance, frequently judging themselves against narrow aesthetic ideals.
- 03 Social Comparison and the Gaze of Others**  
Dancers often feel watched and compared, internalising external judgement from teachers, peers, and audiences.
- 04 Internal Critical Voice: Perfectionism and Self-Doubt**  
Perfectionism and fear of mistakes drive harsh self-talk, with many dancers tying their self-worth to flawless performance.
- 05 Hunger, Weight Loss, and Body Control**  
Language around dieting, hunger, and weight control reveals pressure to manage the body to meet expectations of thinness.
- 06 Aesthetic Ideals: The Tension Between Form and Function**  
While dancers value strength and ability, appearance-based ideals often overshadow appreciation of what the body can do.
- 07 Dance as Emotional Experience and Regulation**  
Dance functions both as a source of joy and emotional release, and as a site of stress, anxiety, and emotional overload.
- 08 Differences Between Training Contexts**  
More intensive training environments amplify body surveillance and pressure, while less formal settings support joy, expression, and body trust.

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## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

These findings indicate a need for:

- **Trauma-informed and body-positive teaching** approaches that actively counter appearance-based messaging
- **Safe spaces within training** to fail, rest, and listen to the body without fear of judgment or career consequences
- **Normalizing diverse bodies in dance** across all body types, proportions, and presentations
- **Shifting focus from aesthetic to functional** body appreciation and expressive potential
- **Supporting young people** to build healthier relationships with both movement and self-image
- **Protecting the playful, creative,** identity-exploration functions of dance
- **Recognizing and amplifying the resistance strategies** young dancers are already developing
- **Addressing grooming and presentation standards** that extend surveillance beyond body shape alone (hair style, fashion, make-up etc)
- **Explicit attention to preventative measures** for disordered eating risk within intensive training environments

## WHAT NEXT?

The findings highlight the importance of rethinking dance training environments so they can support, rather than undermine, young people's wellbeing while preserving the profound benefits dance can offer for joy, expression, emotional regulation, and identity development.

## PLACES TO GO FOR SUPPORT

If any of the issues discussed affect you or someone you know please do reach out for support:

BEAT Eating Disorders (0808 801 0677 or [www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk](http://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk))  
Samaritans (116 123 or [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org))  
Shout (text SHOUT to 85258 or [www.giveusashout.org](http://www.giveusashout.org))  
Mind (0300 123 3393 or [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk))



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To find out more go to [www.hungry2move.com](http://www.hungry2move.com)