

## Ballet's artistic point made en pointe

BY KEVIN GRIFFIN, VANCOUVER SUN NOVEMBER 19, 2010



Fiona Smith, assistant director, junior school, with a class of young ballet dancers at the Goh Ballet Academy.

**Photograph by:** David Cooper, Goh Ballet

VANCOUVER -- Dancing en pointe is not easy. Young ballet dancers have to train their bodies for years before they're ready to start dancing on their toes.

At the Goh Ballet Academy on Main Street, ballet students start at age six with about two hours a week of classes. The amount of training increases gradually until they reach age 11, when students are allowed to dance en pointe. By that time, they're putting in 4 ½ hours a week if they're taking ballet for enjoyment; if they're on the professional track, that's more likely to be 25 hours a week.

But a dancer's calendar age doesn't always determine when she will be allowed to dance in pointe shoes. If a dancer's body hasn't developed sufficiently or there is some unique characteristic of the feet, a dancer may be older than 11 before being allowed to dance en pointe.

Not all of the training is focused on training the foot to handle the strain of the body's weight, according to Fiona Smith, Goh Ballet's assistant director of the junior school.

Most classes will be directed at strengthening and preparing the entire body because dancing en pointe not only requires feet capable of handling the body's weight, but also properly trained legs and upper body.

Why do ballet schools spend so much time and attention on making sure dancers are prepared for en pointe dancing?

"For the safety of their feet," Smith said. "That way, they don't damage their feet. We don't want them going on too soon so that they're not strong enough to support their weight on the tips of their toes."

For young ballet dancers pursuing a career in dance, proper training helps prevent overuse injuries to the Achilles tendon or the development of painful bunions.

Smith takes a look at the feet of the young dancers in the school to make sure their feet fit snugly in their pointe shoes. Some dancers may need spacers filled with silicon gel between their toes to make sure the toes are properly aligned.

"I have a look at their feet and I say, 'I think it would be better to put a spacer between your first and second toe to keep your alignment straight so you don't develop any injuries,'" she said.

"A lot of care goes into making a shoe fit perfectly based on what's important for the student and her foot."

kevingriffin@vancouver.sun.com