

## The Dance project

### *Adolescent girls' experiences dance as a positive physical activity for dealing with internalizing problems*

#### Why the combination adolescent girls and dance?

Scientific research is most successful and appreciated when the gap between research and practice is reduced, which in Sweden have been achieved through a project which included organized physical activity for young girls with internalized problems. This unique project has spread to other parts of Sweden, it have received further attention in other countries around the world and has also resulted in collaborations between countries. Anna Duberg (Reg Physiotherapist, Ph.D. University Healthcare Research Centre, Region Örebro County) has written the thesis "*Dance Intervention for Adolescent Girls with Internalizing Problems*"<sup>1</sup> with the overall aim to investigate the effects and experiences from an eight-month-long dance intervention targeting adolescent girls with internalizing problems. The study was named the "Dance project" and was carried out during a total of three years in the city Örebro, Sweden. The background to the study was to pay attention to the increased presence of adolescent girls with health problems that is related to somatic symptoms and mental illness i.e. internalizing problems. The difficulty for healthcare units is that they are unable to reach everyone in this target group, and the support they give in form of psychological contact and pharmacological treatment methods is not always sufficient. Girls is in comparatively with boys more vulnerable to internalizing problems and this can further result in a large societal cost for dealing with these problems. Physical activity is used to deal with different psychological and physiological problems. Dance has proven to be a popular activity for girls, its enjoyment and positive experience may influence to engage in such a physical activity on regular basis to promote healthy habits.

#### What was the method?

The study recruited 112 adolescent girls in collaboration with the school health care program aged 13-18 years old who had repeated visits to the school nurse for internalizing problems, for example stomach ache, headache, stress, sadness and anxiety. The girls were divided into one dance intervention group and one control group. The dance intervention was performed twice a week after school for eight months and under two school semesters, but no classes were held during holidays. Each dance class lasted 75 minutes of which 60 minutes would correspond to moderate to vigorous physical activity. A number of different dance



Photo: Bilder@BILDBYRÅN

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<sup>1</sup> Duberg, A. 2016. Dance Intervention for Adolescent Girls with Internalizing Problems, Effects and Experiences. *Örebro Studies in Medical Science*, 144.

styles themes were introduced and included African dance, show-jazz, street dance and contemporary dance. The classes were instructed by a qualified dance instructor and were organized at central gyms. The dance occasion would not encourage to focus on performance, instead it would be an opportunity to highlight the girls' resources and encourage the joy of movement. A central aspect was to create an undemanding atmosphere, as well as socialization, creativity and the girls' participation in the choice of music and make suggestions. The study was evaluated through a questionnaire where the girls' were asked to answer questions related to their health and lifestyle which were administered on a regular basis, and also through interviews.

#### What was the effects and experiences of the dance intervention?

The results showed that self-rated health increased more in the dance intervention group compared to the control group, which was an effect that remained four and eight months after the intervention had ended. In the dance intervention group 91.5% rated the dance intervention as positive experience and the attendance rate was high, 67% of the girls participated 50-100% of all dance classes. The interviews showed that the girls' central experience was understood as "*Finding embodied self-trust that opens new doors*". Furthermore, the results showed that the dance group decreased the use of medications, had reduced physical disorders and stress-related mental illness and that the dance project in total was cost-effective. One additional and important result showed that one year after the intervention had ended 92 % of the girls in the dance intervention group were engaged in some kind of organized and/or general form of physical activity, compared to 57 % in the control group.

#### What happened after the study?

After the dance project had ended there was a great demand and a few months later the dance project was implemented in several regions in Sweden, and some of these municipalities is followed up with a scientific evaluation (Malmö, Jönköping, Karlskoga, Örebro, Haparanda, Boden). In addition, three of them have implemented the dance intervention for adolescent health on a regular basis with annual funding from various organizations. Furthermore, 71 new dance instructors have been educated, all with a medical or educational professionals and experience of leading dance groups alternative youth groups. Besides to Sweden there was a considerable attention in the outside world at the publication of the article in the journal JAMA<sup>2</sup>, it was highlighted in the United States, Russia, Australia, India, Vietnam, Italy and France and some countries in Africa. The future of the dance project is to focus on other age groups; adult psychiatry and girls aged 9-12 years with recurrent abdominal pain, as well as to continue the positive trend to spread the dance project around the world!

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<sup>2</sup> Duberg, A. Hagberg, L. Sunvisson, H. Möller, M. 2013. Influencing self-rated health among adolescent girls with dance intervention. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 167 (1): 27-31.