

Teaching Your Toddler and Preschool Students How to Wait their Turn in Dance Class

Today I want to give you a few quick tips on helping your students wait for their turn during travelling exercises.

First of all, taking turns is not an innate ability we were all born with. It's a skill. And it's learned.

For toddlers (18 to 36 months), I love the idea of doing an obstacle course in place of a more formal across-the-floor travelling activity. The reason I love this is because it minimizes waiting time, but doesn't completely do away with it. Toddlers have EXTREMELY short attention spans. So it's best to keep waiting times to a minimum, even with mom or dad around to help in class. With an obstacle course, children tend to have to wait from time to time for the student in front of them to finish something. But it's not nearly as much waiting time as if they took their turn then waited for every other student to take a turn. The key here is to expose your toddler students to the concept of taking turns. Also, be sure to mention to your parents that this is a new concept their child is learning.

For preschoolers (3 year olds), we work toward being able to take turns during travelling activities. Here's the progression I use in my classes:

- **Step 1.** When the school year starts, we travel across the floor as a big clump. It's not pretty, but the children have fun moving. They enjoy trying different steps—whether it's jumping like a frog, crawling like a crab, or flying (aka running) like a butterfly. I do this for the first month of classes because I feel like my students are learning so many other things to start off with.
- **Step 2.** Usually by the second month, I place mats along each side of the wall. I have students find a mat to start on at stage left. We all travel to a mat on stage right. Then we all travel back to the mats on stage left.
- **Step 3.** Next, I keep the mats in the same format, but we play a game that only the student whose name I call travels. You can even make this into a game of "Mother May I?", "Simon Says", or "Teacher Says". (Psst—They're all the same game, but you may have heard of it as one or another.) If a student appears to be losing focus, I'll often let her or him go next.
- **Step 4.** Finally, I line up the mats for the students in the same pathway they'll be travelling—straight across. (Basically how I would want them to line up if there were no mats.) I explain how they have to go to the next mat whenever someone takes their turn travelling across the floor. One thing that has worked well is lining the mats up by color so they make a rainbow pattern. I tell my students we move through the colors as our friends are dancing. After we get to red, it's our turn to dance.
- **Step 5.** The last step is to take away the mats! (My 3 year old classes often don't make it to this step until the very end of the year, if at all!)

For older preschoolers (4 year olds), I don't start with step 1. If it's a group of mostly new 4 year olds, I'll start with step 3 at the beginning of the year and end with step 5. If I have a group of 4 year olds who had class with me the previous year, I'll usually start with step 4 and work to step 5.

So how do I keep my preschoolers engaged while they are waiting their turn?

Props are great for this (although you may be limited on what props you can currently use, if any due to COVID-19 restrictions). A prop gives your students something to focus on while they are waiting. It can be a distraction. But for me, a child studying her ribbon streamers is better than one wandering around the room. (When one wanders, more will follow!)

Include quicker travelling steps between slow ones. Don't do slow movement after slow movement after slow movement. Do a slow movement (like a walk), followed by a quicker one (like a gallop). I try to alternate between slow and quick several times (to vary waiting times), then finish with several quick traveling steps. (For example, our travelling activity for a class might be to do walks, runs, crawls, hops, jumps, then gallops.)

Give your students a choice. For example, tell your students they'll be doing bunny hops across the floor. Ask them if they can wiggle their noses like bunnies often do. Then tell them you're very hungry and ask them if they are too. (Most likely they'll say yes.) Then tell them, when it's their turn, they'll let you know what food they'll be looking for as they hop across. You can tell them foods that bunnies eat and let them pick one. Or you can just let them think of one on their own (which they may do anyway! :-). In this example, giving your students a choice to think about as they wait their turns will help them accomplish waiting.

Give your students a task. The reason I like to line my mats up by rainbow colors is because it gives my waiting students a task. As each student travels, the others get to move up to the next color. It gives them something to look forward to and helps to keep them engaged. Granted, I can't use the rainbow color scheme in EVERY class, or my students will become tired of it. But I'll also do different shapes, different flower shapes (and tell my students they are fairies, bees or butterflies landing on each new flower as they get closer to their turn).

There you have it! I hope these progressions and tips are helpful to you in your classes. The biggest thing you can really do is have patience. Some of your classes will progress slowly to being able to line up and wait turns. Others will progress much more quickly. It will all depend on your students, their temperaments, the kind of day they are having, and their other experiences in school and with siblings.

If you try any of these, drop a comment below to let me know what your experience was! I'd love to hear it!