



# Nutrición Hospitalaria

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## Carta al Editor

### DANCE PARTICIPATION AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN YOUTH GIRLS

Dear Editor,

Dance is a predominant type of physical activity among girls (1). Dance characteristics imply skills associated to health-related physical fitness (2-4), as well as others such as learning and memory, mental representation, imagination and creativity, which are related to cognitive development (2,5,6). Although dance has been shown to influence physical health among youth girls (2,3), whether dance may influence academic performance and cognition in youth remains to be elucidated. The objective of this work was to examine the association between participation in dance and academic performance in youth girls. Participants were part of the UP&DOWN study (7). Children and adolescents were recruited from schools in Cádiz and Madrid (Sapin), respectively. A total of 2,225 youth (1,188 children) participated in the UP&DOWN study. Parents and school supervisors were informed by letter about the study, and written informed consent was provided. The present study included 714 youth girls aged  $11.83 \pm 2.50$  years. Body mass index (BMI) was determined by standardized methods and calculated as weight/height squared ( $\text{kg}/\text{m}^2$ ). Physical activity and participation in dance were assessed with the Physical Activity Questionnaire for Adolescents/Children (PAQ-A/C) (7). Academic performance was assessed through grades reported by every school;

four main indicators were used: a) Mathematics; b) Language; c) average of Mathematics and Language; and d) Grade point average (8). Table I presents the association between dance participation and academic performance segmented by age group, since we found an interaction between age group and dance participation in relation to academic performance. Child girls who participated in dance had significantly higher scores in all academic indicators than those who did not participate in dance after adjustment for age, maternal education and BMI. In model 2, after further adjustment for other physical activities these associations remained significant (all  $p < 0.05$ ). However, among adolescent girls, dance participation was not associated with academic performance ( $p > 0.05$ ). When analyzing separately younger ( $12.28 \pm 0.60$ ) and older adolescents ( $15.30 \pm 0.65$ ) the results were similar ( $p > 0.05$ ). In the scientific literature, there are few studies related to dance benefits and academic performance in youth since most studies are focused on total physical activity (9). An intervention study of aerobic dance in 208 children, including boys and girls, had similar results. After 30 minutes of aerobic dance three times per week during one year, the intervention group ( $n = 85$ ) improved cardiorespiratory fitness and math scores (2). Our results show a positive association between participation in dance and higher levels of academic performance only in child girls. Recent research suggests that during sensitive periods plasticity is heightened and the brain primes to process particular stimuli in each stage (10). It is possible that during childhood brain is more sensitive to dance-related

**Table I.** Differences in academic performance according to dance participation in youth girls

|                           | Children (n = 277)                |                                   |                  |                      | Adolescents (n = 437)             |                                   |                   |                  |                      |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------|------------------|----------------------|
|                           |                                   | Yes Mean $\pm$ SD                 | No Mean $\pm$ SD | P <sub>Model 1</sub> | P <sub>Model 2</sub>              |                                   | Yes Mean $\pm$ SD | No Mean $\pm$ SD | P <sub>Model 1</sub> |
| n                         | 154                               | 123                               |                  |                      |                                   | 211                               | 226               |                  |                      |
| Math (1-5)                | <i>3.58 <math>\pm</math> 1.21</i> | <i>3.14 <math>\pm</math> 1.32</i> | <i>0.006</i>     | <i>0.006</i>         | <i>2.87 <math>\pm</math> 1.36</i> | <i>2.92 <math>\pm</math> 1.35</i> | <i>0.459</i>      | <i>0.326</i>     |                      |
| Language (1-5)            | <i>3.84 <math>\pm</math> 1.14</i> | <i>3.38 <math>\pm</math> 1.23</i> | <i>0.003</i>     | <i>0.002</i>         | <i>3.18 <math>\pm</math> 1.27</i> | <i>3.16 <math>\pm</math> 1.31</i> | <i>0.917</i>      | <i>0.977</i>     |                      |
| Math & Language (1-5)     | <i>3.71 <math>\pm</math> 1.12</i> | <i>3.26 <math>\pm</math> 1.22</i> | <i>0.003</i>     | <i>0.002</i>         | <i>3.03 <math>\pm</math> 1.21</i> | <i>3.04 <math>\pm</math> 1.18</i> | <i>0.718</i>      | <i>0.568</i>     |                      |
| Grade point average (1-5) | <i>3.90 <math>\pm</math> 0.85</i> | <i>3.53 <math>\pm</math> 0.92</i> | <i>0.001</i>     | <i>0.001</i>         | <i>3.39 <math>\pm</math> 0.96</i> | <i>3.42 <math>\pm</math> 0.91</i> | <i>0.748</i>      | <i>0.628</i>     |                      |

Statistically significant values are in italics. Model 1: Analyses were adjusted by age (years), maternal education (university level/below university level) and BMI ( $\text{kg}/\text{m}^2$ ). Model 2: Adjustments for model 1 plus other physical activities (PAQ-A/C score without dance participation).

stimuli than in adolescence. However, the design that was used limited the possibility to draw any conclusions on the causal direction of the associations. Further research is need but this evidence suggests that dance programs might be important for successful academic performance in girls, mainly during childhood.

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