

# When Does Visibility Become Vulnerability

By Nicole Cutler

---

A quiet reflection on online exposure, safeguarding, and the children we celebrate through dance.

## Introduction

There's a quiet conversation starting to take shape in children's competitive dance. Increasingly, we're not just acknowledging skill and presence — we're celebrating performances shaped by adult aesthetics, amplified by digital culture and competition norms. It's a quiet shift many have sensed, even if they haven't yet put words to it.

But that conversation doesn't stop with choreography or costuming.

**There's another, deeper layer that deserves our attention.** One that rarely makes its way into open discussion — not because it isn't important, but because it can be uncomfortable to talk about.

It's the question of **visibility** — and when that visibility quietly becomes **vulnerability**.

We live in a time when talented young dancers can be seen far and wide with just one post, reel, or livestream. And in many ways, that's something to celebrate.

Visibility can bring connection, recognition, opportunity.

But it can also bring something else — something we may not fully realise until we stop and ask: **Who is this visibility for? And what is the cost?**

## The Age of Exposure

Not so long ago, a child's dancing was something witnessed in person — at a studio show, a local competition, or maybe on a camcorder recording passed around by proud relatives.

Today? It's global.

It's high definition. It's edited, captioned, and posted online within minutes. Instagram, TikTok, YouTube — they've all changed how dance is celebrated and shared.

Short clips of extraordinary young talent fly around the internet. The feedback is instant. The audience is enormous. And more and more, the reward isn't a medal — **it's the reaction of strangers with smartphones.**

This isn't inherently wrong. But it is fundamentally different.

Today's young dancers aren't just performing for judges. They're performing for a digital crowd — one they can't see, don't know, and have no control over. Their videos are uploaded, replayed, re-edited — sometimes by people they've never even met.

*And once it's online, it is often out of their control.*

**So we need to pause and ask:**

Who decides what gets posted?

Who shapes the image we're putting out there?

Who's protecting the child's digital presence — and are we even thinking of that as something that needs protecting?

Because in most cases, the child isn't the one pressing 'post' or 'share.' *It's an adult behind the camera — and that comes with responsibility.*

## Lessons from Outside – The 'Kidfluencer' Parallel

This isn't just a dance issue.

We've seen growing concern around "kidfluencers" — children whose lives, personalities, and talents are turned into content. Netflix Documentaries like *Bad Influence: The Dark Side of Kidfluencing* have peeled back the curtain on the quiet cost of this spotlight.

Most of the adults involved had good intentions — they were proud, supportive, excited to share their child's talent. But slowly, something changed. Boundaries blurred. Identity became branding. Privacy was eroded before the child even understood what privacy meant.

Of course, dance is different. It may not be product placement, but the pattern is uncomfortably familiar: **Early exposure. Repeated validation. Adult-managed image.**

As researcher Lisa Sandlos explores in her 2023 study [In the Land of Dance](#), *the bodies of girl dancers are increasingly constructed as sexual objects* — shaped by external expectations long before those dancers understand the meaning behind what's being presented.

What starts as celebration can slowly become something else — performance for the camera, not the dance floor.

Even when the intention is good, the impact can get complicated. What we film, post, and edit doesn't just showcase a child's talent — it can begin to shape it.

It can set an expectation for how they should move, look, behave... *not for themselves, but for the watching world.*

And as that audience grows, **the more care we need to take.**

## The Dance Industry's Blind Spot

Our dance world is full of structure — rules, formats, dress codes, syllabus levels.

But when it comes to *digital safeguarding* — particularly for children — we're still catching up. There are almost no shared standards for how children are filmed, posted or promoted.

Some studios have internal policies; others leave it to individual teachers or parents. Competitions livestream without always considering close-up shots of minors. And social media is now full of edited, filtered and stylised footage of children — often presented in a way that's more adult than **age-appropriate**.

There is also the aspect of **how** children are portrayed.

Posts that highlight talent, growth and joy are one thing. However, we are currently witnessing a surge in heavily stylized content — such as adult-like choreography, slow-motion backbends, flirtatious expressions, bold makeup, and suggestive poses — being posted and shared by adults.

Many of them may not have taken a moment to reflect: **Is this how a child should be portrayed?** Or even consider the implications of the message it conveys.

When we share these images without context, framing, or critical thought, we risk encouraging a culture where a child's "performance" is prioritised over their well-being.

And sometimes, the most popular posts? **Aren't the most age-appropriate ones.** Let's take a moment to think about that.

Scholar Mary Bawden refers to this transition as a '*cultural slide from innocence to hypersexualization*' (Bawden, 2025). It describes a gradual shift where behaviours that once raised concern — and still should — are now applauded and rewarded, *as visibility begins to take precedence over vulnerability*.

## When Culture Quietly Shifts

One of the most difficult things about naming these issues is that they don't arrive as sudden change, but as a slow shift we don't always notice.

They develop gradually — *woven into evolving trends, shifting competitive standards, and changing ideas of what a "successful" performance looks like*.

And unless we pause to reflect, we barely notice the shift.

As Bawden points out, *cultural drift is subtle. It creeps in quietly*.

And over time, we stop questioning what we once instinctively knew to be out of place — and it begins to feel like the norm.

**What used to feel "too much" now gets applauded.**

## What used to be questioned now gets rewarded.

This is the nature of cultural drift: standards move quietly, norms adjust gradually and by the time we notice, the shift is often deeply embedded.

It doesn't always indicate bad intentions. Sometimes it's imitation. Sometimes influence. Sometimes it's not noticing — until we step back and ask: **Is this still aligned with what we believe childhood in dance should look like?**

However, if we recognise that these aspects are learned, we should also keep in mind that *they can be reconsidered*.

*We have the power to consciously shape culture — rather than merely responding to it.*

## Shared Responsibility, Not Blame

### *Good Intentions, Unintended Risks*

Children in dance are often filmed, photographed, and posted online to build profiles, gain recognition, or promote schools, teachers, coaches, and dance camps.

They're frequently presented beyond their years — their performances edited and shared online with wide, often unvetted, audiences.

The intention may be innocent — pride, promotion, encouragement — but *the result can be unsafe*.

The reality is: **Children do not control their digital footprint. Adults do.**

And every post, reel, or story shared without careful thought creates an opportunity for the wrong kind of attention.

We must ask ourselves: **Who is this visibility for? And what protections are in place?**

Now is the time for our sector to align with broader safeguarding conversations.

Raising awareness is not about blame. It's about taking shared responsibility, understanding the risks, and acting early enough to make a difference.

This isn't because people don't care. It's often because they haven't paused to ask different questions.

We often speak about technique and artistry, but **rarely about consent**. We celebrate online views and shares, but **don't always consider who's watching**.

And in a culture where being "seen" is linked to being "rewarded," it can feel difficult — even disloyal — to raise concern.

But safeguarding isn't about fear, punishment, or paranoia.

It's about care.  
It's about protection.  
It's about recognising that not every kind of attention is positive —  
and **not every viewer is safe.**

## Moving Forward — Gently, Clearly, Together

These issues extend beyond the digital realm; they speak to the very heart of how we protect, nurture, and guide young dancers in today's world.

Most parents, coaches, organisers, and associations are doing what they believe is best — often out of deep love, dedication, and commitment. But in a world where children are more visible than ever, we need to update our instincts — *together*.

Not to silence celebration — But to make it **Safer. Kinder. Clearer.**

We can begin with quiet, grounding questions:

- Who is the audience for this content?
- Has the child meaningfully consented — or are they simply used to being filmed?
- Is the imagery age-appropriate in how it looks, feels, and is framed?
- Would we still be comfortable with this image if it were shared out of context?

Some studios may have already or wish to develop internal posting policies. Competitions might consider revisiting basic safeguarding protocols — especially regarding online media and the presence of media teams.

And as a wider community, we can start holding space for these conversations — **without shame or judgement.**

*Because children should be able to love dancing, be seen, and feel proud — without becoming vulnerable in the process.*

## An Invitation to Reflect

These conversations aren't always easy. They ask us to sit with nuance, to shift habits, and to see through a new lens.

But safeguarding doesn't start with rules.

*It starts with noticing.*

*With care.*

*With questions we may not be used to asking — and the courage to ask them anyway.*

It begins with the quiet resolve to protect, even when no one's watching.

Because in the end, the question isn't whether children are visible.

**It's how they're seen.**

**And by whom.**

## A Note from the Author

This piece reflects my personal observations over many years as a coach, adjudicator, and mentor in the world of Ballroom and Latin American dance.

It's not written to spark controversy, but to invite reflection — and hopefully to contribute to a wider, more thoughtful conversation about how we care for our young dancers in today's digital age.

### **Footnote:**

[Sandlos, L. \(2023\)](#). *In the Land of Dance: Unpacking Sexualization and the Well Being of Girls in Competitive Dance*.

[Journal of Dance Education. Bawden, M. \(2025\)](#). *The Shift in Children's Dance: From a Culture of Innocence to a Battlefield of Hypersexualization*. *Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence*, 10(3).

## **Nicole Cutler**

*Nicole Cutler is a former World, European, Open British, International, and UK Amateur Latin American Champion and Professional Latin American Finalist. Originally from South Africa, her celebrated career spans the world's most prestigious competitions and global stages, including starring in the acclaimed stage show Burn the Floor and appearing as a professional dancer in three series of Strictly Come Dancing. Today, Nicole is a highly respected adjudicator, lecturer, and coach, known for her quiet authority, deep artistry, and dedication to mentoring the next generation of dancers.*

*Away from the spotlight, she is also a devoted wife and mother — roles that ground her and bring perspective to her life in dance. Her work is guided by values of tradition, kindness, and excellence, both on and off the floor.*