From the studio to the stage: Managing Student Anxiety Around Performances

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A guide for dance teachers at Key Stages 4 and 5

The examination performance is unlike any other. Bound up with grades, identity and months of preparation, it can tip ordinary nerves into genuine anxiety for many students. But it is not only the formal assessment that presents a challenge — for a significant number of young people, simply being asked to perform in front of their peers in an everyday lesson is itself a source of real distress. This guide draws on current data and research to help dance teachers respond to both.

The wider picture: anxiety and SEND in schools today

The mental health landscape in secondary schools has changed significantly since 2017. Dance teachers are working in a very different context from even a few years ago:

1 in 5 children aged 11–19 now has a probable mental disorder (NHS Digital, 2023) — up from 1 in 9 in 2017. Among 17–19-year-olds, the rate is 23%.

The Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2023 report, published by NHS England, found that 20.3% of 8 to 16-year-olds had a probable mental disorder in 2023. Among 17 to 19-year-olds, the proportion was 23.3%.

Anxiety is the most common reason for referral to children's mental health services. In 2023–24, there were 204,526 new referrals of under-18s with anxiety as the primary cause — more than double the pre-pandemic figure (Children's Commissioner, 2024).

19.5% of all pupils in England had an identified SEN in January 2025 (DfE, 2025). In secondary schools, 16.5% of pupils have an EHC plan or SEN support.

Social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH) which includes anxiety, is the fastest-growing primary type of SEND. It now accounts for 23.6% of all EHC plans (DfE, 2025).

43% of pupils aged 5–16 is estimated to now need support with social and emotional development (Nurture UK / Boxall Profile data, 2024) — equivalent to over three million children in England.

What this means in practice: in a class of 30 dance students, statistical probability suggests five or six may have a formal or probable mental health need, with anxiety among the most common. A further eight or nine may have moderate social-emotional needs that affect their ability to feel safe being watched, judged or vulnerable in front of others.

Understanding What's Happening

When a student perceives a performance as a threat, the body's stress response activates; heart rate rises, breathing shallows, muscles tighten. In moderate doses this is performance-enhancing. Beyond a threshold, it becomes counterproductive — causing memory blanks, trembling and loss of co-ordination.

In practical examination contexts, several factors amplify this: the performance is being watched specifically to be judged; there is no second chance; and many students have significant emotional identity invested in dance. High achievers are often the most affected, as expectations are highest. But it is important to recognise that for students with anxiety disorders, autism or SEMH needs, the physiological response may be more intense, less within conscious control, and less responsive to straightforward reassurance.

Anxiety in the Everyday Lesson: Performing in Front of Peers

Exam performance anxiety gets most of the attention, but many dance teachers will recognise a more pervasive challenge: students who are uncomfortable performing, demonstrating, or even moving freely in front of their classmates in an ordinary lesson. This is not simply shyness. It is a real and clinically understood phenomenon.

Why peer observation is particularly threatening in adolescence

Research consistently shows that adolescence is a developmentally sensitive period for social anxiety. The peer group becomes increasingly central, and the fear of negative evaluation by classmates is genuinely heightened during the secondary school years. Studies have found that performing or reporting in front of others is among the most feared and avoided situations for young people with social anxiety (Beidel et al., 2007; Heiser et al., 2009). Crucially, this fear is not limited to those with a diagnosed condition — it exists on a spectrum across the general adolescent population.

In a dance studio, students are unusually exposed. Unlike a maths lesson, where a student can be largely invisible, dance requires physical presence, self-expression and often improvisation — all in a space where peers are watching. The body is the instrument, and being observed in it feels uniquely vulnerable, particularly during adolescence when body image concerns are already heightened.

What this looks like in practice

In-lesson anxiety around peer observation can manifest in many ways. Some students will refuse to go first, repeatedly defer or use humour to deflect. Others will perform in a diminished way, held back, self-conscious, technically capable in private but visibly restricted in public. Some will seek the back of the room, avoid eye contact, or find reasons not to participate. For students with autism or heightened sensory processing needs, being watched can create a specific, acute discomfort that goes beyond typical nerves.

Over time, these protective strategies compound the problem. The student who always avoids performing in class never builds the tolerance for being observed and arrives at their practical dance assessment without the psychological resilience they need.

Practical approaches for everyday lessons

- Start with structure, not spontaneity. Improvisation and open-ended sharing are often most anxiety-provoking. Reducing unpredictability - giving students a clear task, a defined time limit, or a specific focus to perform - this lowers the cognitive load and helps anxious students manage their response.

- Use progressive exposure. Begin with partner work, then small groups, then half the class, then the full group. Make the transition gradual and consistent. Treat each step as a normal part of the lesson rather than a significant event.

- Give students agency over when they go. Rather than nominating or going around the room in order - both high-anxiety approaches - allow students to volunteer or establish a predictable rotation they have agreed to in advance. Predictability reduces threat.

- Reduce evaluative framing. When students perform in class, be explicit about the purpose. 'I want you to notice what happens in your body when you perform' is less threatening than 'show us what you've made'. Remove the sense that casual sharing is a mini assessment.

- Create a culture of generous watching. Talk to students explicitly about what it means to be a good audience in the studio. A class that responds with curiosity and respect makes performing significantly safer for anxious students. This can be taught and reinforced over time.

- Offer alternatives where needed. For students with significant anxiety, SEMH needs or conditions like autism, a brief private sharing to you - rather than the class - may be an appropriate, dignified accommodation while they build confidence. This is not special treatment; it is inclusive practice.

Drawing on Dweck's (2006) concept of growth mindset, the student who never performs in class will not suddenly find it easy in an exam; it is in daily lessons that resilience is either developed or eroded.

Recognising the Signs

Not all anxiety is visible, and not all students will tell you how they feel. In the build-up to a performance, watch for increased physical complaints (headaches, nausea), over-rehearsal driven by fear, emotional volatility, avoidance of talking about the assessment, and catastrophic thinking. On the day: trembling, hyperventilation, requests for repeated reassurance, or a dissociated, absent quality.

Be alert to students who hide it. Bravado and apparent indifference are often defences against vulnerability. High achievers are particularly prone to concealing anxiety. Create space for honest conversation without forcing disclosure.

For students with SEND particularly those with autism, ADHD or SEMH needs, the presentation of anxiety may look different: meltdowns, emotional dysregulation, extreme avoidance, physical complaints, or sudden disengagement that appears behavioural but is rooted in overwhelm. Coordinate with your SENCO to understand any relevant EHCP provisions and ensure you are part of the wider support picture.

Building a Classroom Culture That Reduces Anxiety

Normalise performance throughout the course

Build in regular, low-stakes sharing from the earliest weeks. Frame these moments explicitly: 'The goal isn't to be perfect; it's to notice what it feels like to perform.' The more familiar the experience of being watched, the less threatening it becomes.

Separate the performer from the performance

Students with significant anxiety tend to fuse self-worth with a single outcome. Use language that treats the work as an object being crafted, not a reflection of intrinsic value. At Key Stage 5 this can become a rich conceptual framework: the choreographic process is iterative; the performer grows through imperfection.

Make space to talk

A brief, structured check-in during the weeks before assessment, even a one-to-ten scale and a single word normalises the conversation and helps you identify students who need more support. Where anxiety is severe or persistent, involve your school's pastoral team, SENCO or a mental health lead. With over 270,000 children currently on CAMHS waiting lists (Children's Commissioner, 2024), many students in your class will be waiting for external support that may not arrive quickly — which makes the classroom environment all the more important.

Practical Strategies for the Exam Run-Up

Performance conditions rehearsals

In the final weeks, ask students to treat run-throughs exactly as they would the real event — entering and exiting the space, consistent warm-up, costume if possible. Always process these rehearsals together: what changed in your body? What helped?

Rehearse things going wrong

Anxiety feeds on catastrophic thinking. Help students prepare for a stumble, not just a perfect run. A student who has mentally rehearsed recovering from a memory blank will handle it far more gracefully if it happens.

Strategies to teach your students:

- Diaphragmatic breathing — in for 4, hold for 4, out for 6. Practise during cool-downs so it becomes automatic.
- Physical grounding — press feet into the floor, notice five things you can see. Draws attention away from anxious internal monologue.
- Reframe the arousal — say 'I am excited' rather than 'I am nervous.' Research shows this cognitive shift significantly improves performance outcomes.
- Pre-performance ritual — a consistent warm-up and mental preparation routine signals: 'I know how to do this.'
- Positive visualisation — not a perfect performance, but a connected, present one. Vivid mental rehearsal builds neural pathways associated with confident performance.

On the Day

The day itself is not the moment to introduce new strategies. Your role is to be a steady, calm presence that helps students access what they have already built.

Manage your own anxiety first. The emotional atmosphere you carry into the studio will be absorbed by your students.

Run a structured, familiar warm-up. Doing something the body already knows says: 'I can do this.'

Choose your words carefully. Avoid 'This is your big moment' or 'Don't let yourself down.' Try: 'Trust your body. You've done this.'

After the performance, mark the transition — a collective breath, a shake-out — before students return to being students. Hold the full debrief until the next lesson.

Final Thought

The data on young people's mental health is sobering, but it is also a prompt to act. Dance studios, at their best, are some of the most psychologically generative spaces in a school — places where students learn to inhabit their bodies, take risks and recover from failure with dignity. But that potential is not automatic. It depends on the culture we build, lesson by lesson, long before anyone walks onto an exam stage.

The students who leave our classrooms knowing how to breathe through fear, recover from a stumble, and find something authentic under pressure will carry those abilities for life. That is the real gift of the examined performance: not the grade, but the person who earns it.

Key Data Sources and Further Reading

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- Alison Wood Brooks (2014). Get Excited: Reappraising Pre-Performance Anxiety as Excitement. Journal of Experimental Psychology.
- One Dance UK health and wellbeing resources - onedanceuk.org/health
- Young Minds mental health statistics and teacher resources - youngminds.org.uk
- NICE guidelines on anxiety in children and young people - nice.org.uk