

# APPEARANCES IN DANCE — THE IMPORTANCE OF INCLUSIVE HAIRSTYLES

BY ERIKA HOGAN



As dance educators, we strive to build confidence in our dancers. We want them to love themselves and their bodies—and this has to include their hair, the importance of which cannot be underestimated. It is insensitive and out-of-touch to insist that all dancers adhere to a white European aesthetic standard of dance. The good news is, you have the power to make meaningful change, and if we all make changes together we can make the dance space more inviting, accepting, and inclusive for all.

To paint a picture: Imagine being a new dance mom. You get your 3-year-old dressed in her dance uniform, you make sure her tap and ballet shoes are in her bag, you braid her hair to perfection, and you both excitedly walk into the studio. As your daughter bounds in, there's an employee, a woman—white—passing by. She frowns. She tells you that your daughter's hair is unprofessional and shows you a picture of a beautiful little blonde girl and says "this is what we expect your daughter to look like." As a mother, not only are you crushed by the weight of those words, your child has been told she does not look the part; she internalizes the comment to mean she is not beautiful just as she is. The woman at the studio has broken two spirits, potentially twisting dance into an unwelcome place for that child, potentially for her entire lifetime.

But let's say this child and her mother make it past that first terrible experience of being told their Blackness isn't acceptable in the dance world. They go home, pull out the damaging flat iron and spend hours straightening her hair to make the perfect bun that is required. The young dancer progresses in technique and joins a performing company or competitive team. Now, not only does she need her hair in a bun for ballet and lyrical; she needs a straight, high ponytail for hip hop, and then a side-part and low ponytail for jazz, plus two buns for that cool contemporary piece.



**SIDE STORY:** I remember being a young dancer at a nationals competition with my team. We all know nationals usually take place at some really cool beach or a hotel with a pool and hot tub. Now, remember, once we get our hair straightened, we can't get it wet. This resulted in more than one nationals experience where I had to sit on the sidelines while my team swam in the ocean, took pictures in the pool, etc. I wanted so desperately to join in the fun, but I never could because my hair had to "stay straight" for competition. Why, though? The expense, the anxiety, the damage to my hair—for what reason, really? For the notion that maybe if my ponytail wasn't as straight and flowing that my team might not earn a coveted platinum award?

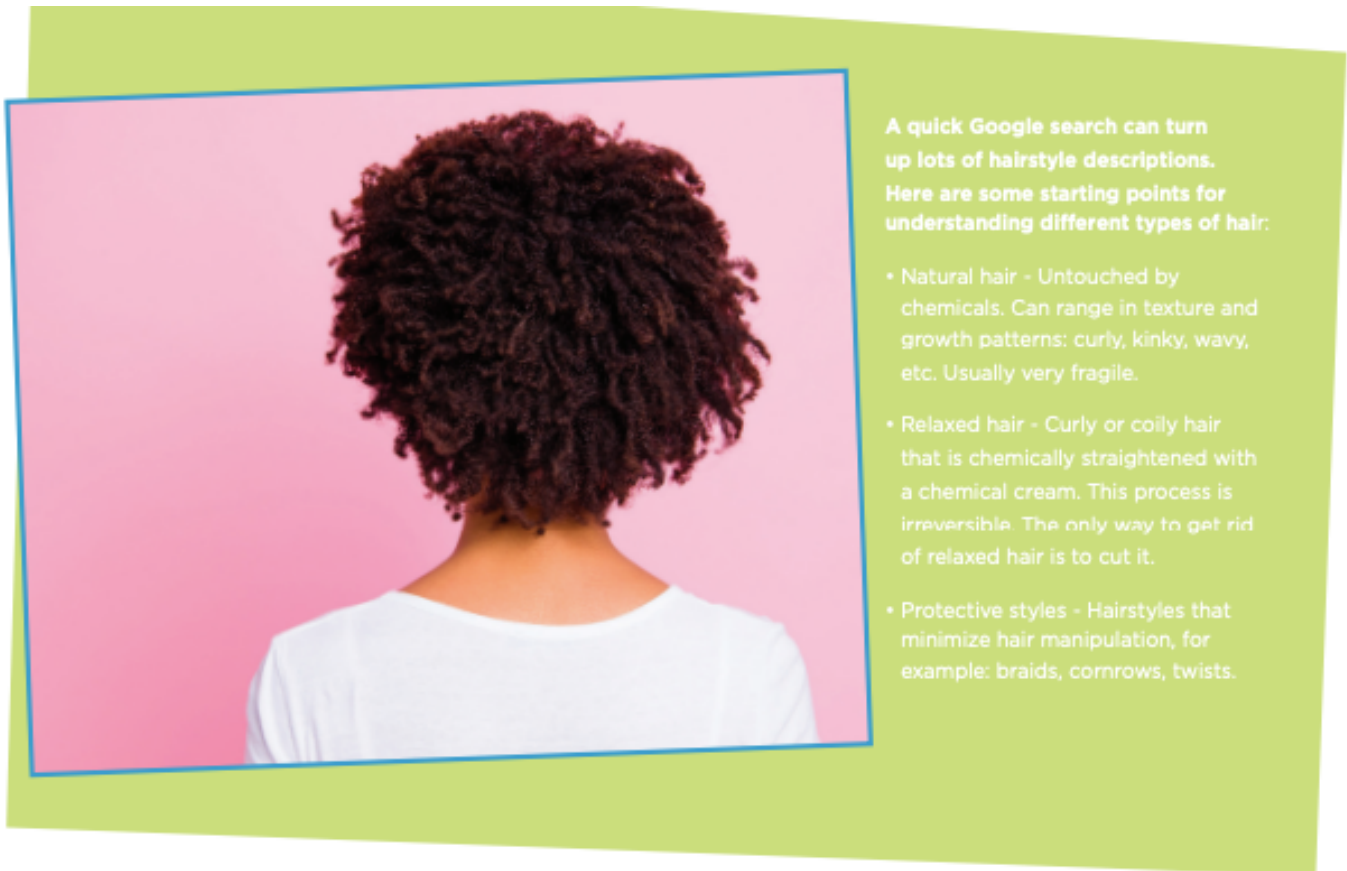
I'm here to tell you these hairstyle expectations are stressful, hair-damaging, and sometimes nearly impossible for your Black dancers to pull off. They will try, because your dancers of color want to please you. Chances are, like that mom and 3-year-old, their early experience with dance taught them that they needed to acclimate to this incredibly white space and learn how to navigate around it because that's how much they wanted to dance.

**The lesson for studio owners is this:** Asking an African American dancer to consistently straighten her natural hair is not only damaging to her hair, but also expensive and time consuming. When a dancer of color gets her hair straightened this means she cannot get it wet, nor can she sweat too much prior to a performance or competition. She has to wrap it up extra tight to take a shower, and as for rainy days ... forget about it.

Here's another lesson I hope we can all take away from this: As long as a dancer's hair is secure and away from her face, there should be no problems. Many forms of braids, extensions, weaves, and other styles can be pulled into a bun or ponytail. These styles can incorporate a side or middle part as well. And please don't force your students of color to purchase fake hair buns. (They rarely match in texture.) You might argue that dancers are learning to be professionals and they should follow whatever hair guidelines make everyone look uniform, but the reality is that we are responsible for these expectations, and our dancers are not being paid to be in a professional company. Their parents are paying us to be a part of their child's village.



What else can you do to become more inclusive? How can you show your Black dancers that they— and their hairstyles—are welcome? Look at the verbiage in your team contracts and studio policies. Think about the words you use to describe your required class and performance hairstyles. It's time to do better if you have described required hair as "neat" "clean" or "professional" but then told your African American dancers they cannot have braids, locks, or natural hair. When you tell a Black child that the hair that naturally grows from her scalp or the hairstyles traditionally worn by people of color are not acceptable because they do not fit a European standard, the psychological damage can be immense. They may feel that no matter how high they leap, no matter how many fouettés they do, they will never be good enough. Don't clip their wings before they have a chance to see how high they can fly. Your words and standards have a huge impact.



**A quick Google search can turn up lots of hairstyle descriptions. Here are some starting points for understanding different types of hair:**

- Natural hair - Untouched by chemicals. Can range in texture and growth patterns: curly, kinky, wavy, etc. Usually very fragile.
- Relaxed hair - Curly or coily hair that is chemically straightened with a chemical cream. This process is irreversible. The only way to get rid of relaxed hair is to cut it.
- Protective styles - Hairstyles that minimize hair manipulation, for example: braids, cornrows, twists.

As you are making adjustments to your contracts and policies, think about how you will talk with your employees too. Just as you sit down with your staff at meetings and



discuss costumes, attendance policies, rules, schedules and more, add in discussions about hair. Make it part of the normal meeting agenda and soon it will become second nature. If we can pick costumes based on body types of dancers in the piece, why can't we choose hairstyles based on dancers in the piece? Also, familiarize yourself with hairstyles and terminology (see above). Know what "natural" and "relaxed" hair means. Look up cornrows, braids, extensions, twists, protective styles, etc. Find a hair stylist who specializes in hair for women of color. Ask them questions or invite them in to give a class on how to properly secure different hairstyles and textures. At the very least, talk to the parents of color at your studio. I'm sure they will be more than willing to answer questions and provide feedback.

Remember; You got into the studio business because you love dance and you love kids—all kids of all colors and shapes and sizes and abilities. If you haven't already, it's time to shift your thinking when it comes to hairstyles. We are all in this together. We can make this dance space more inviting, accepting, and inclusive for all—one change at a time.



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