

# 'Tis better to have gusto than grace

By Esther Baird

Tue Feb 26, 2008, 04:54 PM EST

BEVERLY, MASS. - Grace is not the most striking quality of the women in my family. As such, we've produced no ballerinas. As a little girl, I was given to climbing trees and catching snakes.

My two good friends, on the other hand, both took ballet and, truth be told, I was drawn to the pictures of them in sparkly leotards and glittery tutus with their soft ballet slippers.

Still, I knew I'd rather build a fort with the brambles in our back yard.

My oldest daughter seems mostly to be following in my dancelss footsteps. But, when she suddenly started playing 'ballet class,' we rolled with it. Sure her version often culminated in an airborne launch between the couch and the ottoman, but we figured, an interest was an interest. So I asked her if she'd like to try ballet instead of her regular YMCA gymnastics class.

"Yes! Watch me do ballet!" came her enthusiastic reply as she flung her arms behind her and began prancing around the kitchen in what looked like a ballet duck skip — or something.

So we signed up.

When I read the pre-class instructions, I realized she was to come in full ballet regalia: Leotard, tights and slippers. Sigh. I didn't suppose we could fake it with a bathing suit and stockings — and that was how I found myself in a specialty ballet store far, far beyond my comfort zone. The sales lady graciously presented herself to us and spoke in calm, even tones about the merits of ballet tights with stretch versus ballet tights without. I nodded and 'Mmmed' a bit and then, when she wasn't looking, I grabbed a pair of pale pink tights and a black leotard that looked like my daughter's approximate size.

Then it was time to choose slippers. The lady smiled serenely as my daughter fidgeted in the sizing chair and, in rapid sequence, touched everything in sight.

She took one of my daughter's feet firmly. "Now, each teacher has a different philosophy about what size they like their student's slippers to be. Some prefer them to be slightly larger than the foot, and others prefer them to fit exactly. With whom will she be studying?"

"Ah yes." I replied, trying to mimic the refined direction this conversation was heading. "She'll be studying with the teacher of, uh, the 3-year-olds at, um, the YMCA." The lady nodded. "Wonderful. They have an excellent program." Mmm hmm, I thought, they also have an excellent snack area where I plan to buy a big old muffin to eat while I sit and do nothing during this little ballet experiment.

Properly clad and fitted, we made our way to the class. And it was great. The teacher was kind and clearly understood the energy levels of 3-year-old girls who are given a whole room, with a wall mirror, to bounce around in. She handed out ribbons, hoops and scarves and my daughter seemed to love it. She waved her ribbons with, if not precisely grace, then at least a great deal of gusto.

And then disaster struck.

She bounced right when another girl was bouncing left and they had the smallest, most minor of mid-air collisions. My daughter's properly fitted slippers didn't quite catch the floor and she had the teensiest of falls. Perhaps seeing it play out on the wall-sized mirror was simply too scary or overwhelming because she burst into tears and that, to my astonishment, was that.

"Don't you want to try ballet again?" I asked her as we stood outside the room.

"No, I want to go back to gymnastics." She cried. Try as I might, both that week and the next, she would not set foot into the dance studio. She was done with ballet.

I didn't like ending on that note, considering she hadn't even moved to music yet, but she was only 3 and I knew this was not a battle worth picking. So we returned to the land of gymnastics and did not discuss ballet for quite some time.

But a few weeks ago, the slippers started getting worn around the house and she began soaring between major pieces of furniture again.

So it came as no surprise when she announced, "I think I'm feeling brave about ballet now."

"Are you sure, sweetie?" I asked.

"Yes, I'm almost 4, so I'll like it now."

You can't really argue with the internal wisdom of a preschooler. They know what they know. So we've signed her up – again.

Of course since her last ballet attempt she's grown, but we're going to just assume that this ballet teacher likes the slippers sized slightly *tighter* than the foot — all the better to soar in.

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