

Irish Dance Practice

Irish Dance is highly cumulative and technical. Mastery of material at one level creates the building blocks for material at the next level. Regular and consistent at-home practice is needed to remember steps from one class to the next and to improve technique.

Because Irish Dance is an art form, a competitive sport and a cultural heritage, it can be very challenging right from the beginner level. The basics of Irish Dance require students to dance on time to the music, perform while high on their toes with arms by their sides, their feet and legs turned out, and have the strength, stamina and flexibility to perform the movements of the dances without injury. Irish Dance is the equivalent of running extended wind sprints, so students who are in perfect shape for another sport may be lacking in areas for Irish Dance, particularly in stamina and their ability to process lactic acid in their muscles.

The science of sports fitness is a trending topic in the Irish Dance world. At the Flying Irish Studio, we take dancers' fitness very seriously. We have developed warm up and cool down routines to assist dancers in developing their fitness levels specifically for Irish Dance. Unfortunately we cannot do everything in class. Dancers must work at home; those dancers/parents who do online research into this fascinating subject will be gratified with better dance results and less injuries.

What should at-home practice entail?

- Review of material taught in class. Go through dance steps without music, marking the direction of the steps. Ask yourself if you are doing the steps with good turnout, arms by your sides, and high on your toes.
- Dance material to music, working to staying on time throughout the dance.
- Note areas for improvement and drill the techniques to fix those areas.
- Do some of the conditioning exercises from class (or other ones from your own research) to stay in peak form.

The amount of time spent to master material will depend on a dancer's age, maturity level, learning style, physical ability and level of fitness for Irish Dance.

Higher-level competitive dancers should attend group classes 2-3x a week, with those attending only 2x week taking a weekly private lesson.

Advice For Dancers

- Sometimes when you practice, no matter how many times you repeat a Difficult jump or move, you just can't seem to get it right. If this is the case (after you really have tried) then move on to something else.
- Irish Dance takes time. Sometimes, progress is slow. There might be weeks where you feel like you are getting nowhere. Just be patient and keep with it.

- Don't "over practice". Remember that your body needs time to rest in-between Strenuous practice sessions. Your body needs breaks from Irish Dance. Take a rest day one day a week to avoid burnout. Doing a different type of physical activities during your rest day is a good idea.
- If you are having an "off" day and you are only becoming frustrated, take a moment to regroup and rest. Think about something else for a little a while then go back to practicing. If all else fails, just do the warm up exercises, some sits ups, push ups and stretches and try again another day.
- Avoid injury by building up your fitness level for dance so that you can perform your best. Use the exercises & routines from class, and/or from online searches, to ensure your body can handle the requirements of Irish Dance.
- Make use of the online practice logs on the Flying Irish Studio's website (Dance Programs page). These logs help you to stay on task. Write down your steps when you get home from class and bring your notebook to class with you each week to write down your teacher's comments as you head home.
- Enjoy your practice time. Don't forget that you dance because it is fun and you love it!

Advice For Parents

Some children have a natural drive to practice their dancing on their own and strive to be better dancers. These dancers need only support and encouragement to continue with their good practice habits.

Some dancers want to be competitive and to improve their dancing but have trouble understanding how to fit practice time into their day. These children often need help from their parents to set out a weekly practice plan and stick to it. Quite often, after a month or two of help and support, these children can learn to practice diligently on their own to achieve their goals.

It is important to discover what your child's practice style is and compare that with what their goals are for their dancing. Overall, as a parent, your most important role is to accept the character type of your child and do your best to be supportive of them and the decisions they make regarding competition.

At-home practice does not guarantee that a child will place at every competition. Your child may dance really well, but another dancer may dance better. Remember that when a dancer doesn't place, it doesn't necessarily mean that they are not a good dancer. It is important that your child understands this and understands that they are still loved and valued even when they don't win.

How to Get the Most Out of the Irish Dance Experience

- Give your dancer a dedicated practice space where they can use their soft and hard shoes. This can be anything from a sheet of plywood kept behind the sofa to creating a dance stage in a lesser-used room.
- Buy as many tunes by as many different musicians as possible. Timing is key in Irish Dance and being familiar with a variety of styles and tempos is invaluable.
- Weekly privates for novice level & up gives dancers one-on-one time with the instructor to work on improving technique, learn new moves and prepare for competitions & shows.
- Attend as many competitions as possible. This will give everyone a chance to see other dancers from different schools. Watching dancers at higher levels is always inspiring.
- Send your dancer to Camp Rince Nua.
- Subscribe to *Irish Dance Magazine* and get training tips from some of the world's best Irish Dancers.
- Watch as much Irish Dance (live or on video) as you can.
- Help your dancer to set individual goals. Hold them accountable for reaching those goals but also help them work through their problems if they are not meeting the goals. Writing down specific goals (ex. "hit my left foot trebles") can be very helpful. Dancers may need to be reminded to work on this goal; ask your dancer "What did you drill today?" and other specific questions that are non-critical and show you are interested in their practicing.
- Watch your dancer practice once a week. Be encouraging or say nothing. (Some dancers will hear criticism even when it isn't there.)
- Don't fight with your dancer! If s/he isn't working to his or her potential, s/he will hit a plateau sooner or later. Not having the material to perform dances with their classmates in shows or watching dancers move past them in competition can be the inspiration a child needs to work better.
- if your dancer is working hard but is experiencing a tough time in school or is going through a growth spurt, s/he may not see improvement. The work put in will show eventually, but while waiting for that to happen, a hug and an "I love you" may be just what a child needs.