

My Window to the World

I walk into my ballet studio where six little girls sit on the floor in a ring, the seventh skipping around them, tapping shoulders. I expect “duck, duck, duck, goose,” but the chant is “toilet, toilet, toilet, flush” and



Ballet teacher Nina Rubinstein Alonso

the “flush” child gets up and runs around the others. When they see me, the song changes to “duck, duck,” again. A brunette with a pony tail, annoyed, says, “Hurry up and say goose.” I never heard the toilet ditty before, and I don’t laugh; I’m the adult in the room. Approve? Disapprove? Pretend I didn’t hear? Ignore it as harmless play, like the poop jokes that kids find so funny?

Dealing with my own daughter, it seems the most effective approach is to listen fully and not judge, not scold. Bite my tongue and detach, but with compassion. Be indirect, amusing and feather-gentle or a comment may fail and ricochet. So I sit in my teacher chair, look at each beautiful face – yes, they are beautiful – and check names off in my notebook. This is a ballet class and the girls are 5 and 6 years old.

There’s rarely naughtiness or malice in what they do, though limits seem as pliable as rubber and are often pushed. They’ll hang on the ballet bars, though they know it’s not OK, slide across the floor on their knees or put sticky handprints on the big mirrors until I remind them that the rules are there for everyone’s safety.

Sometimes I’ll sit them down to talk about why it’s not allowed to close your eyes while running around with a scarf or to look at the ceiling while spinning like a top. Cause and effect don’t seem real enough to cancel their fantasies, their wish to fly or turn into a princess. Once I had a little girl who refused to answer to her given name, because she was “really Cinderella”; luckily, that lasted only for one class.

They say things on impulse sometimes. I’ve been told about parents living in two places, dogs hit by cars, sisters breaking an arm after falling off monkey bars, grandmothers in the hospital, spilled purple nail polish, poison ivy, birthday parties with inflatable bouncy castles. I hear what hurts, see hang nails, Band-Aids peeled back to show scrapes and bruises.

During this class, one girl’s baby tooth falls out, her first, and I congratulate her and get tissues to stop the bleeding and wrap the tooth for the fairy. There are no tears, just excitement about growing up. And then, in the middle of class after stretches and crab walks, another girl hugs my leg and says, “Mama, Mama, please don’t send me to college.” Two others copy this until three are chanting, “Mama, please don’t send me to college.” They’re smiling and so am I, but I’m not Mama, and the children are 5 and 6. Do they feel the pressure of time passing, change pushing through like a big tooth, a time when they’ll be on their own? True, it’s a game, a joke, but they’re still hanging onto my legs.

All I can say is, “What’s this Mama stuff? You don’t have to worry because you don’t go to college when you’re 5 or 6, never, never. It’s not allowed, so let’s get up and stand in first position.” They let go and we do positions, point our toes, jump, spin, hop and skip across the floor. No girl mentions college or toilet, toilet, flush again, and neither do I. ♦

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