



Rocco Santorufu teaching Kennedy Jackson (far left) and Liam Boyle (left). DiPiazza (below) with teacher Amy Siconolfi and shadow Shannon Campbell.



Working with Special Kids

Classes for autistic children can make a difference—for everyone. **By Brady Hohn**

Jodi DiPiazza wanted to take dance class. But the 3-year-old had trouble following directions. She often got upset. She couldn't focus. Dance studios said they couldn't teach her. Her parents were disappointed, but not surprised—Jodi is autistic.

Finally the DiPizzas approached Annette Romano-Merlini, owner of Dance Dimensions in New Milford, New Jersey. At their request, Merlini decided to start a special class for autistic students. She wanted to share her belief in dance's positive influence, and New Jersey has long attracted families with a variety of special needs because the state legislature offers special funding and support. A website, autismnj.org, covers state efforts for those with autism, and includes a listing of workshops for professionals helping autistic children. Romano-Merlini felt that once word was out, she could easily fill a class.

She was right. For the past four years, Dance Dimensions has been offering the class to students from 5 to 12 years of age. Several teachers at the studio attended workshops. They found that repetition could be key to the children's success. They also learned to avoid changes in the time, place, and structure of the class and to introduce new material slowly. Romano-Merlini discovered that she had to change how she explained a step or combination, avoiding imagery and make-believe. "Fly around the room like a butterfly" does not get the same understanding as

"Run on your tippy toes and wave your arms up and down," she says.

Though Romano-Merlini was a pioneer of sorts, special-needs dance classes have become a growing trend with New Jersey dance studios. Rocco Santorufu, director of Broadway Bound Dance Center in Dumont, New Jersey, has 53 special-needs students enrolled, and Susan Coutts, director of Dance Innovations in Chatham, New Jersey, has long allowed special-needs children to attend certain classes. Some schools ask parents to provide "shadows," family members, babysitters, or special counselors who can help with any disciplinary issues. The shadows handle verbal outbursts or tantrums specific to their child. The teacher is then free to teach dance.

The ways an autistic child benefits from dance are the same as for any other child: fine-motor skills, coordination, body and spatial awareness, strength, flexibility, ability to follow direction, and discipline. The true benefactor is the dance studio. Just like "normal" children, kids with autism have the potential to become great doctors, lawyers, even the next Baryshnikov, but they must be taught in ways that they can learn. This year, Dance Dimensions' autistic students spread out into mainstream classes. Because of the foundation that the isolated class built, the students are proving to be successful. Jodi is one of the most, if not the most, promising.