

My First Pair of Pointe Shoes A Fitting Guide for New Pointe Students (and their parents!)

By Dr. Heather Snyder

Congratulations on advancing to this level in your ballet training. It has taken a lot of hard work and determination as well as a tremendous amount of both mental and physical strength. From a medical perspective, let me offer a few ‘foot-healthy’ suggestions to ensure that you are able to continue your dance training while minimizing your risk for injury.

**First and foremost...if you have not been physically evaluated by a pointe dance instructor...
do NOT read any further!**

Dancing *en pointe* should not be taken lightly – nor should it be assumed simply to be the next level of ballet study by instructors, dancers, or their parents. Not every ballerina (no matter how many years of dance instruction or the dancer’s age) can physically meet the demanding requirements to dance on pointe. Adequate bone, tendon, and ligament structure in the lower extremity (hips, knees, ankles, and feet) as well as maturity level and knowledge and execution of proper ballet technique must ALL be prerequisites to safely dancing on pointe.

Once you have permission from your dance instructor to begin pointe training, be sure to ask the instructor for specific shoe, padding, ribbon, and/or elastic recommendations. Certain instructors or dance schools may have specific preferences for a few types of pointe shoes as well as for the type of padding (if any) that should be worn.

Dr. Snyder’s side note for parents...do NOT rely on shoe recommendations from other dancers. Each and every dancer’s foot is structurally different from another’s...therefore, a brand or style of pointe shoe and/ or type of padding that works for one dancer may NOT be appropriate for another!

Next, schedule your first pointe fitting with an experienced pointe shoe fitter. **NEVER, NEVER, NEVER order your first pair of pointe shoes online or through a catalog!** Be sure to inform the dance shop that you will be fitting your first pointe shoes so they may allow for adequate time. Keep in mind that, still today, many pointe shoes are handcrafted – no two pairs are identical. As such, there are literally hundreds of shapes and sizes of pointe shoes – each tailored to fit a certain type of dancer as well as foot shape. Pointe shoe fitting is more of an art than a science and it frequently involves a lot of trial-and-error. Therefore, proper pointe shoe fitting, particularly for the first pair, can take HOURS! Plan ahead. Try to avoid scheduling your first fitting during a Saturday when the store may be particularly busy or too hectic. As with fitting street shoes, it is best to schedule a fitting at the END of the day, when your feet are a bit more swollen.

A few days prior to your scheduled pointe shoe fitting, trim your toenails. Be sure to trim your toenails straight across so that the edge of the toenail is even with the edge of the toe. Do not trim the toenails so short that they’re sore! The best way to properly trim your toenails is to clip the excess length that hangs over the toe and then use a file (emery board) to gently smooth the edge and slightly round at the corners.

Another helpful tip prior to your fitting...have a friend or family member trace your feet onto a white piece of paper. Look at your tracing. Is your 2nd toe longer than your big toe? Or, are your toes kind of ‘squared-shaped’? This is helpful information for the professional pointe shoe fitter in shoe selection.

On the day of the fitting be sure to wear the tights that you regularly wear for practice. Also be sure to bring any padding or other recommendations suggested by your dance instructor.

Properly fitted pointe shoes should have a ‘dancers fit’ – that is, the shoes should feel very snug when flat – NOT TIGHT AND PAINFUL! This snug fit may be a new, initially uncomfortable, sensation to the dancer, particularly for a dancer who may be used to wearing soft ballet slippers that stretch and have adequate “room for growth”.

*Dr. Snyder’s side note for parents...pointe dancing needs to be treated as a serious sport – not simply a recreational hobby. **IT IS EXPENSIVE!** You can NOT shop for ‘bargain shoes’. You can NOT purchase larger shoes to allow a student to ‘grow’ into. Pointe shoes **MUST** fit perfectly EVERY TIME! The bones of the foot do not fully ossify or ‘harden’ until around age 20. Many ballerinas begin pointe training around age 12. If the pointe shoes do not fit adequately – minor problems such as bruised or ingrown toenails, blisters, calluses, and corns can*

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*occur. Over time more serious and permanent injuries such as bunions, hammertoes, tendonitis, metatarsalgia (pain under the ball of the foot), arch pain, heel pain (plantar fasciitis), ankle injuries, fractures, and even arthritis can occur! These injuries can end a dancer's career and result in chronic painful foot problems and deformities as an adult. Professional ballerinas go through at least one-two pairs of pointe shoes PER PERFORMANCE! Advanced ballet students can go through a pair of pointe shoes every 1-4 weeks! Depending upon the weight of the dancer, arch type of the dancer, and how many hours of dancing en pointe, a new student can expect a new pair of pointe shoes to last about 3-6 months! At \$40-\$80 per pair, you can see why this sport gets expensive. **If cost is a concern – then dancing on pointe should NOT be considered!***

During your fitting:

- Stand with both feet flat on the floor. While standing flat, the 1st (big) and 5th (little) toes should be just touching the sides of the shoe. There should be almost NO 'wobble' room. Are the toes crunched, overlapped, or painfully squeezed together. Does the shoe wrinkle or buckle at the toe area? It may be **too narrow**. Is the tip of the longest toe (refer to your foot tracing!) pressing into the front edge of the shoe? Does the shoe 'dig into' the back of the heel area? It may be **too short**. Is there any gapping of material at the sides or heel of the shoe? Can you fit a finger between the drawstring knot and the top of the foot? It may be **too big**.
- In second position perform a plie. The tips of the toes should touch the end of the shoe. Are the toes curled up or painfully pressed into the tip of shoe? It may be **too short**.
- Using the barre as support, gently place one foot on pointe then slowly place the other foot on pointe. Do NOT releve. **Remember – the shoes are not secured with ribbons or elastic nor are the dancer's muscles adequately warmed up at this time. Trying to go on pointe without the support of a barre may result in injury!** Does the foot slide forward? Does the shoe pop off at the heel? It may be **too big**. Only a very minimal of satin should be pinched at the back of the heel while on pointe.

Remember to communicate what you're feeling with the shoe fitter. He or she can not see what your toes or foot arch is doing inside the shoe. Tell them what you feel!

***Dr. Snyder's side note for parents...**Be prepared to purchase 2 pairs of shoes. Not all dancers have two identically sized or shaped feet. It may be necessary to buy 2 different sized shoes. However, since there is no right or left pointe shoe, the dancer will then have 2 pairs of shoes that fit perfectly! I advise 'growing' pointe ballerinas (age 11-18) to have their foot size checked at least once every 6 months!*

Padding should NEVER be used to accommodate for 'extra-room' in a pointe shoe. Ideally, if a pointe shoe fits 'like a glove', the shoe itself should adequately protect and support the foot and the dancer wouldn't even need any padding! Padding, if used, should be for comfort only – NOT for fit!

Be sure to have your pointe dance instructor check the fit of your shoes. If the shoes are acceptable, your instructor should teach you how to sew your ribbons and/ or elastics specific for your foot type and dance style.

For more detailed information on pointe shoes, training, and technique, I highly recommend "The Pointe Book" (© 2004, Princeton Book Company) by Janice Barringer and Sarah Schlesinger.

Enjoy your transition into this beautiful, challenging stage of ballet dancing. I wish you all the best in your endeavor and hope this bit of information starts you off on the 'right foot'!

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