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DANCING WHILE PREGNANT: BENEFITS AND HOW TO DO IT SAFELY

Thesis submitted in fulfillment of Theatre & Dance Honors-in-Discipline

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The Honors College

Theatre & Dance Honors-in-Discipline

East Tennessee State University

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DANCING WHILE PREGNANT: BENEFITS AND HOW TO DO IT SAFELY

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Please Note: *Dancing While Pregnant: Benefits and How to Do It Safely* is intended for informational purposes only and details my personal experience with dance before, during, and after my pregnancy. Dancing while pregnant is not for everyone and consulting a physician before beginning dance or any physical activity is necessary.

I. Introduction

Dancing While Pregnant: The Benefits and How to do it Safely explores my journey of dancing throughout my pregnancy. When I became pregnant my junior year of college, I was greatly concerned because I still had dance classes to take in order to complete my degree. As I began researching whether it would even be possible for me to continue dancing and discussing my dance experience and overall health with my physician, I discovered that dancing can have many benefits for both mother and baby. In this thesis, I will explain the different trimesters of a healthy pregnancy and how to continue to dance safely during each one. I will also discuss the benefits of dancing for both mother and baby during a healthy pregnancy. During my pregnancy, I learned many new and interesting things about a woman's body and how truly amazing women are. It also deepened my love for dance and my appreciation for how remarkable the art of dance truly is. Through research and real-life experiences, I discovered the beautiful world of dance and pregnancy and how when they come together, it can be something truly amazing.

Pregnancy can take a serious toll on the body. The first symptoms can include tender breasts, nausea, vomiting, increased urination, fatigue, moodiness, bloating, cramping, constipation, food aversions, and nasal congestion. During the first trimester, the baby is rapidly growing, forming the brain, spinal cord, and other organs. The baby's heart starts to beat and toes and fingers start to form. Some second trimester symptoms for the mother can include a growing belly and skin changes. For baby, this is the time they start to really move and hear. During the third trimester, backaches, heartburn, swollen ankles and feet, and large amounts of anxiety may characterize how the pregnant mother may feel. The last trimester can be the hardest on the mother because emotions may run high, and the body may feel the effects of the pregnancy most at this point. For baby, at this point they can likely open their eyes and are gaining weight

rapidly. Through this whole process it can be very draining both physically and emotionally. Emotionally, the mother can feel “all over the place” or forgetful and anxious due to hormonal changes. It can be very hard for the mother to think rationally at some points and may led to emotional outbursts, like crying at the drop of a hat. Physically, the mother’s body is so different; balance may be off due to rapid weight gain of 25 pounds or more, and it may hurt to move around. By the end of the pregnancy, I personally felt ready for it to be over.



Picture of me during my third trimester.

Dancing has been around as long as people have been around. It is a big part of life and in some cultures, it is a way of life. Many ceremonial, religious, and celebratory occasions call for dance. It is almost instinctual to dance. Babies and even some animals will dance to music, so I think it must be deeply rooted in our souls. Dance can be serious or it can be fun; it can be crazy or conservative; it can be graceful or rough. The fluid nature of dance is what truly makes it special. Anyone can do it at any time or anywhere. My dance journey, began at the age of three and has been a big part of my life since. I have taken classes in many different forms of dance and have studied even more forms. Dance is a great form of exercise but it can also be an escape

for many as well. When the beat and the rhythm take over the body, something about it can be therapeutic. Dance is also a good way to lose weight and to improve overall health.



Picture of me dancing in 2016.

Dancing while pregnant is not researched very deeply. It is a form of exercise, but many doctors shy away from it because many do not truly understand the art form of dance. Research has shown that dancing during pregnancy, “reduces the risk of preeclampsia, treats and prevents gestational diabetes, alleviates musculoskeletal issues, positively impacts mood and mental health, and positively effects baby health and development” (Sanders 18). However, there is much to consider when deciding whether to continue dancing, such as, abdominal muscles, back pain, hips, pubic symphysis, temperature, blood flow, and nutrient supply. Most muscles will be affected during pregnancy which means there needs to be extra caution around those important muscles when dancing. An injury while dancing could seriously hurt mother or the baby so there are a lot of health implications to consider when dancing while pregnant. Other considerations include the mother’s temperature and blood flow. When dancing, the body will get warm, but dancers need to be cautious about not letting their bodies overheat while pregnant as it can be very dangerous to the baby. Another consideration is blood flow; while pregnant, the mother’s

heart is pumping double time to give blood and oxygen to the baby. When dancing, the mother's heart rate increases, so there needs to be strong body awareness to avoid getting out of breath, as it can be dangerous to the baby. One aspect I find very important to note is the impact dancing has on mental health. Dancing during pregnancy has been shown to have positive effects on mood, mental health, and self-image. I also think it is very imperative to bring up that suddenly stopping dance during your pregnancy can have a negative effect on mental health. When done safely, dance can be a great form of exercise for both mother and baby. Here is a solo I competed with before I was pregnant: [Solo Dance Pre-Pregnancy](#)

II. First Trimester (0-3 months)

Although many mothers may not quickly realize they are pregnant, I knew very early on that something was different about my body the month I became pregnant. I have always had a very regular period so it was a shock when mine never came. I decided to buy a pregnancy test, not actually thinking I was pregnant, but just to check it off the list. There can be many reasons for a missed period, such as stress, weight changes, medications, and illness. My mind immediately went to me being sick or stressed. Once I got home from the store, I put the test aside and began working on other things. It was not until that night that I decided I would take the test. I read and re-read the directions multiple times just to make sure I did everything right. I bought a fairly cheap pregnancy test because I did not think it would be positive, and I did not want to spend a lot of money on one. The test said it would take a few minutes to read, but as I was bringing the test up to sit it on the counter, I could already see the result. The positive result was just sitting there. I sat the test down swiftly because I did not want to believe what I had just seen. I sat on the toilet for a few minutes in what I believe to be shock. When I finally worked up enough

courage to look at the test, the positive result was there staring back at me. I felt every emotion possible in that moment, from excitement to fear. After I learned I was pregnant, that was when all of the symptoms really kicked in. I was peeing constantly and I was someone who very rarely had to go to the bathroom. I was so tired I would sleep all day AND all night. I was constantly hungry, but only for what I was craving and it had to be at that moment. I felt like I had to throw up almost all the time, not just the morning. Sometimes, I would actually get sick, and that was not enjoyable. Despite all of this, there is a lot of excitement surrounding all of the unknowns. “What will my baby look like?” and “are they healthy?”, began flooding my brain. Overall, the first trimester was very mentally and physically challenging for me.

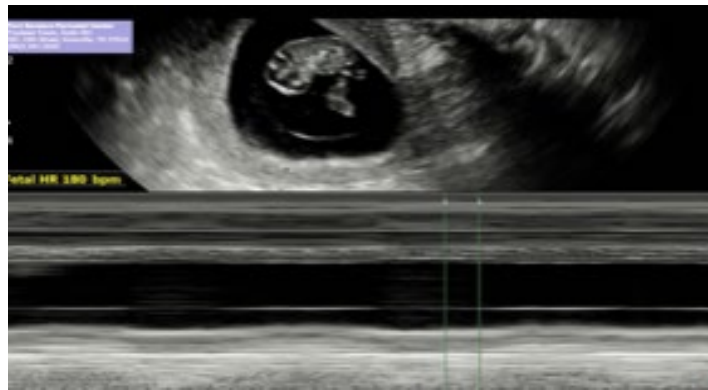
Many women experience much of the same things that I experienced while pregnant. The missed period is usually one of the first signs of pregnancy; however, some women have irregular periods, so this might not be unusual to them. Tender and/or swollen breasts are a common symptom the first trimester of pregnancy. This is due to the hormonal changes happening in the mother’s body. Nausea and sickness are fairly common symptoms of pregnancy and are usually due to the hormonal changes as well. There is an increase in the amount of blood in the mother’s body which can lead to frequent urination. Some more “fun” symptoms due to hormonal changes are tiredness and constipation. Both of these symptoms can be improved by exercise, like dancing! Even mothers who are excited about a new baby, feel some sort of stress as this is a big milestone in the mother’s life. Emotions are always high and are not helped by the irregular hormones. After finding out, the next steps are to find prenatal care and learn about how to keep both mother and baby healthy. This is where the mother can inquire about exercise and if dancing would be a good option for them. During the first trimester, the baby is developing its

head, nose, toes, elbows, genitals, and so much more. The baby is growing rapidly and is very dependent on the mother's health.

After talking with a doctor and getting both mother and baby's health assessed, then dancing may be a suitable form of exercise for the mother. Many doctors will only recommend doing forms of exercise that the mother has done while not pregnant. For example, if the mother did not lift weights before pregnancy it would not be a good idea to start when pregnant.

Consequently, if dancing was not something that a mother did before she was pregnant, it might be hard to get the doctor's approval. Conversely, dancing has many different forms with ranging difficulties. Even for moms who did not dabble in dancing before pregnancy, there might be a form out there for them. Something for mothers to think about in the first trimester is the increase in hormones. This can make the mother more susceptible to injury. A particular hormone to watch out for is relaxin. Relaxin levels are at their highest in early pregnancy and are meant to help the mother's body stretch with the baby and to help with labor and delivery. The increase in this hormone may cause many mothers to discover a new-found flexibility. While this may be exciting it should be cautioned that it can be unhealthy for the mother to push her body past pre-pregnancy limits. Once the baby has been delivered a mom who did not properly watch their stretching may find themselves reaping the consequences. Proper stretching and awareness of surroundings is key to safely dance in this first trimester. There are many pros to dancing during the mother's pregnancy, such as, increased blood flow, higher energy levels, helps prevent constipation, hemorrhoids, leg cramps, and swelling, better sleep, improved mood, and preparation for childbirth. That is a lot of pros linked to one simple, fun task. Additionally, there have been studies that show dancing while pregnant can directly impact how the baby is outside of the womb. According to Erica Hornthal, dance movement therapist from Chicago Dance

Therapy, states, “While more research needs to be conducted, there are clear indications that engaging in dance during pregnancy can help support a mother’s emotional and physical needs, not to mention support her baby’s development cognitively as well as physically and emotionally.” (<https://www.danceinforma.com/2019/10/04/dance-and-pregnancy-a-moms-connection-to-her-unborn-child/>). Here is a video of a dance choreographed while I was pregnant: [Solo Dance During Pregnancy](#)



Pictured above on top, ultra sound from first trimester. In the bottom left is from my gender reveal. In the bottom right is me from my first trimester.

III. Second Trimester (4-6 months)

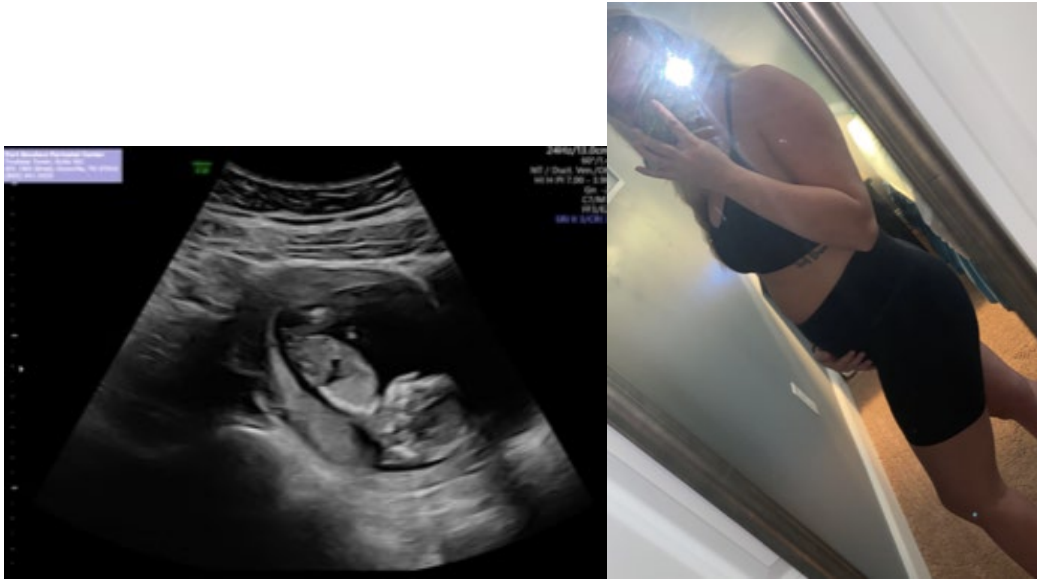
In the second trimester, I had to work a lot outside and on my feet at a water park, *Splash Country*. Now, I was working not only for me, but for my daughter too. It was difficult to say the least. My ankles were swollen almost constantly during this time. I would get winded very easily because she was pushing on my lungs and adding extra weight for me to carry. However, I stayed in shape and only gained twenty-three pounds my whole pregnancy. I would walk at least two miles every day that I worked. I struggled to eat enough every day because I only got one thirty-minute break. At this point, the baby is growing very rapidly and needs a lot of nutrients which is provided by the mother. It was very difficult to get around for me, my stomach was awkwardly big and I felt off. It is still important to continue exercising and staying healthy for the baby despite it being more difficult.

During pregnancy, most women experience growing belly and breasts, skin changes, nasal problems, dental issues, dizziness, leg cramps, vaginal discharge, and UTI's. The mother's uterus is expanding so the baby can grow, and the mother's breast are changing to prepare for breastfeeding. Some moms will experience Braxton Hicks contractions or false labor contractions to prepare the body for labor. Skin changes, nasal problems, and dental issues can be caused by the hormonal changes in the mother's body and can be helped naturally through forms of exercise. Dizziness is common because of the changes in circulation. Vaginal discharge and UTI's are some unfortunate symptoms but can be helped with medicines if needed. Leg cramps are fairly common and can be helped with stretching and exercise. Emotionally, most

women feel less tired and more energized, although it is not uncommon to feel the anxiety starting to hit about labor and delivery. Researching birthing classes and focusing on healthy lifestyle choices can be helpful during this trimester. Mothers should focus on getting to prenatal appointments where doctors will check on baby's growth and mother's health.

Dance can be a fun, safe way to stay healthy during this trimester. The types of dancing that would be safe during this time are going to be slow and controlled movements. Lynn Campbell is a dance teacher and active birth specialist, and she has created a movement and dance class for pregnant women to help with pregnancy and labor. "Pregnancy, labor and birth are physical body experiences, and yet so much of women's preparation for birth takes place in their heads! In contrast, when we use movement and dance as a mode of preparation for birth we open a gateway for connecting to our body wisdom, for remembering our natural instinctive creativity, and for giving ourselves breathing space in which we can connect to the life-force energy which is literally growing within." (Campbell 40). In Campbell's class, they begin with a warm-up which gives a chance for women to move each body part, pay attention to breathing, become present and rooted, wake-up physical systems, and connect with their unborn baby. Next her class will go through fluid, breathing postures. This gives women a chance to explore breathing, connect to the elements, practice not pushing but not holding back, and encouragement. Campbell then moves into movement meditations which include trying out various birth positions, practicing softness and resilience, releasing tension, massages, and drumming contractions. These are various dances which can be beneficial during labor and delivery. She then finishes with relaxation and feeling the echo. This includes softening and relaxing body parts, time to rest, gratitude, and connecting to themselves. The benefits of this class have been well documented and include healthy blood flow to mother and baby, a

balancing effect on the neuro-endocrine system, combating fatigue and reducing stress, promotion of shorter labor, reduced birth complications, and faster postnatal recovery.



Pictured on the left is an ultra sound from my second trimester and on the right, is a picture of me during my second trimester.

IV. Third Trimester (7-9 months)

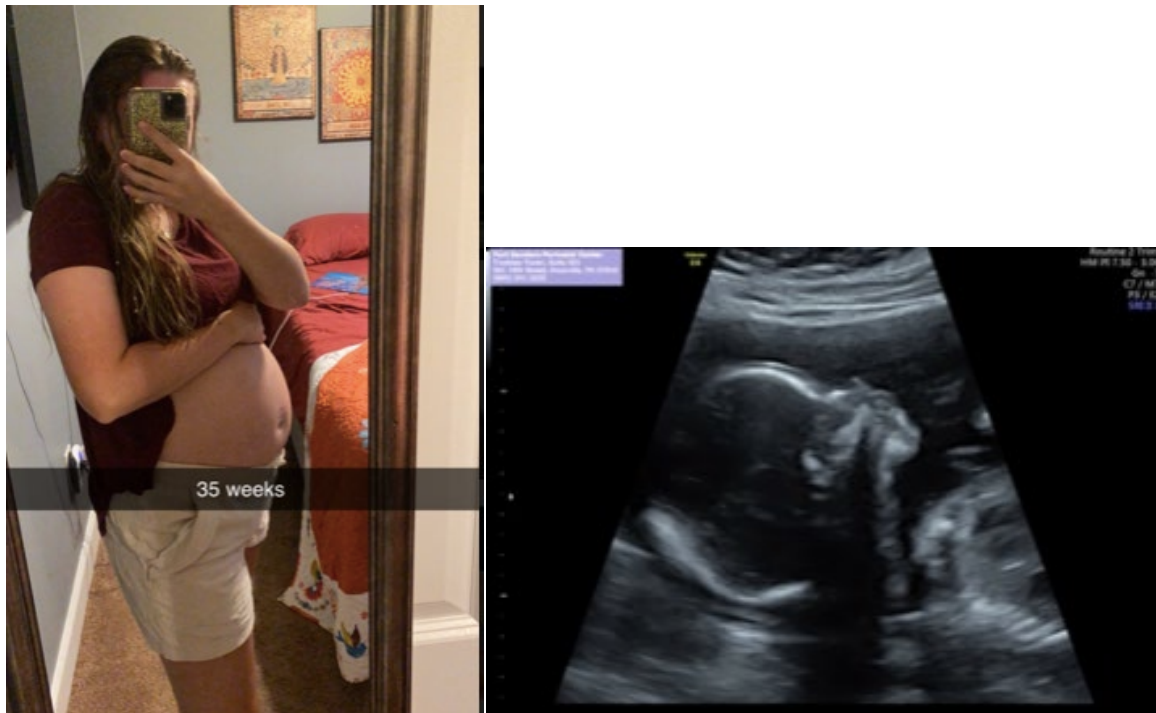
The third trimester was the second trimester times ten. I was even bigger and even more tired. It was almost impossible to get around at this point. My ankles were always swollen, and I had tons of heartburn. At work, I would constantly be finding a place to sit just to relieve the pressure off of my hips and ankles. I needed to pee every fifteen minutes because of the extra pressure on my bladder. Just two days before I went into labor I was working the water coaster at *Splash Country*. The morning I went into labor I could tell something was different. It felt like cramps on steroids, but I just thought I was having Braxton Hick's contractions since I was still only thirty-six weeks. I already had a doctor's appointment that day so I was going to try to wait until then. Around eleven I got up to use the bathroom and there was blood so I decided to go to the emergency room. Once I got there it took a while to get checked. When a nurse finally came

back to see how dilated I was, she said that I was at about four cm and that they would admit me. Since I was still at thirty-six weeks the doctor's wanted to slow down or stop my labor. They gave me a steroid shot to help baby's lungs develop as much as possible. Then I sat and waited the rest of the day and night. I kept dozing in and out of sleep but the contractions were very painful. Around six in the morning, I called the nurse into the room because the contractions were getting unbearable. She decided to check my dilation and I was at a seven and a half cm. At this point, my daughter was coming whether we wanted her to or not. Within thirty minutes I had seven nurses in my room and I was getting an epidural. Since she was premature, the hospital had Children's neonatal doctors in the room just in case. My daughter made her arrival at nine fifty-nine in the morning. She came out perfectly healthy and did not even need oxygen. She was very tiny though and I believe it was due to me not eating enough during the last few months. She was four pounds six ounces and seventeen inches long. My delivery went very smoothly and was nothing like all the horror stories I had heard. Subsequently because I danced I was very flexible and able to hold my legs in ways that made delivery much easier. I only had to push for sixteen minutes and I could tell I had great control over my body and muscles. I did not tear and was actually up walking not even thirty minutes after I had given birth. Most of this can be attributed to her low birth weight, but I do believe dancing played a major role in the smoothness of my delivery.

Most women in the third trimester experience backaches, shortness of breath, heartburn, varicose veins, hemorrhoids, and frequent urination. Hormones relax the connective tissue that holds the bones in place and this can cause lots of aches and pains. Dancing is a good way to help relieve some of that pain as long as the mother has spoken with her doctor first. Shortness of breath is a symptom most pregnant women face. Heartburn is caused by hormones that relax the

valve between the stomach and the esophagus making it easier for stomach acid to reach the esophagus. The extra pressure on the bladder from the baby makes the mother use the bathroom very often. Emotionally this can be the scariest time for the mother as the time nears for baby to be here. Parenthood is on the horizon and all the “what ifs” are about to be answered. Prenatal care is very important these last few months as the baby is almost done developing. It is important to make sure everything is developing properly, and the baby has everything they need to live outside the mother’s belly. Around those last few weeks, the doctor will administer a few tests to make sure the mom is healthy and ready for delivery as well.

Dancing during labor has been thought to help quicken labor and reduce pain. Some dancers have written personal experiences in which they danced during the first stage of labor. Dance in this context means a combination of pelvic movement, rhythmic body movement, upright positions, and position changes. Some cultures believe dances, such as belly dancing, can facilitate labor and delivery. Dance has been shown to help upright positioning during labor which includes different positions to help maternal and fetal circulation. Dance has also been shown to shorten labor and reduce pain. According to the article *Dancing during Labor*, “Some movements common in dance, such as expanding hip circles that loosen and relax muscles o the pelvic floor, may be beneficial to women during labor. Available evidence suggests that dancing during the first stage of labor may decrease duration and intensity of pain and increase patient satisfaction.”



Pictured on the left is me from my third trimester and on the right, is an ultra sound from my third trimester.

V. Post-Partum

It was not long after birth that I was up and moving around. I recovered very quickly which made becoming a new mother easier. There are so many things going on and things that you have to do after delivery that if you are in pain it makes it that much worse. People are constantly coming in and out testing the mother and the baby. The nurses and doctors overload the new parents with information and tasks to do. It can be quite stressful when it is supposed to be happy. Since I did not have to worry about stitches and staying in bed it made everything easier and less stressful. Dancing played a big part in my recovery and the smooth transition into motherhood after. Within a few days after birth, my body was almost back to the size it was before. This can also be attributed to exercising during pregnancy and keeping my muscles engaged.

Post birth it is very important for the mother to take care of herself. It can be very hectic with the new baby and everything going on, but if the mother is not healthy, then it will affect the baby. It is normal to be tired and have some pain, but it is important to talk with a healthcare provider about any uncertainties. Urgent signs can include severe headaches, dizziness, changes in vision, fever, trouble breathing, overwhelming tiredness, chest pain, severe belly pain, severe nausea and vomiting, severe swelling, thoughts of self-harm or harming baby. It is normal to have vaginal soreness after birth and can be soothed with cooling devices, a pillow, pain medication, and a warm bath. After birth, vaginal discharge is normal and will be heavy for the first few days and then begin to slow down. Contractions are common and help the uterus shrink back to normal size. Incontinence and hemorrhoids affect many women because of the pressure from birth. Hair loss and skin changes happen due to hormonal changes after birth. Mood changes are completely normal and may be overwhelming. The mother's hormones are off balance and it makes emotions easy to trigger. It is hard adjusting to life with a newborn and feeling sad is normal. It is important for the mother to talk to her healthcare provider and take measures to keep both her and baby safe. Post-partum checkups are very important and useful for moms.

One post-partum symptom that can be very serious is post-partum depression. Post-partum is more severe than the baby blues which is very common. Symptoms can include depressed mood, severe mood swings, excessive crying, difficulty bonding with baby, withdrawing from family and friends, loss of appetite or eating more, inability to sleep or sleeping too much, intense irritability and anger, fear of not being a good mom, hopelessness, feeling worthless, severe anxiety or panic attacks, thoughts of self-harm or harming baby, and recent thoughts of death or suicide. Exercise is proven to help with depression and anxiety. Exercise also is a good way to

get back into shape post-partum. One fun form of exercise is dance. Dance specifically is good at uplifting the dancer's mood. It allows the dancer to release in a different, creative way that is comfortable for them. Olivia Mandracchia, a dance/movement therapist, states, "Pregnancy and motherhood are associated with many expectations, guidelines, and stressors. Unfortunately, many of these women will experience post-partum depression shortly after. This literature review explores and addresses how Dance/Movement therapy can be beneficial to those suffering from depression."



Pictured from left to right: Picture of my daughter the day she was born, picture of my daughter and me a month after she was born, picture of my daughter days after she was born.

VI. Conclusion

Dancing While Pregnant: The Benefits and How to do it Safely explores the benefits of dancing through pregnancy and how to safely continue. While my pregnancy was hard both physically and emotionally, I would never take back a second of it. My daughter is my world and my everything. My body went through a lot and will never be the same all to bring her into this

world. My body is bigger and to me less attractive and it has been hard to find myself again. Looking into my daughter's eyes makes all of it worth it. She depends on me for everything and puts all of her trust into me. Being a mom is the most amazing thing in the world, and it is so instinctual. Once that baby is in the world, I think that every mother, whether they have done it before or not, figures out what to do. Emotionally, this pregnancy took me to a place I have never been. I never thought I would feel inadequate as a mother and that I couldn't do it, but I did. Hormones and post-partum depression is extremely serious and needs to be discussed more. Many moms do not realize how normal and common it is to feel sad after such a happy and important time in your life. It is hard adjusting to life with a whole new person in it, but I could never imagine my life without her.

Kids begin dancing as young as newborns and they grow and continue to dance their whole lives. Dance in a social, technical, and religious context is done by people of all ages. As soon as healthy babies are born, they kick and flail their arms and legs to a fun beat. People dance as a form of social interaction, and each decade has a new social dance that sweeps and then dies down to allow a new form of dance to take over. In religious ceremonies, dance can signify many things and is extremely important to many cultures. Dances are passed down from generation to generation and can withstand the test of time.

Dance is a fun, safe form of exercise. Pregnancy is very strenuous on the body and requires a healthy mother. Exercise is important during pregnancy for both the health of mother and baby. Dancing can be a fun way to stay healthy, make labor and delivery easier, and overall uplift the mother's mood. Belly dancing originated to help pregnant women during labor and has actually been shown to work. Flexibility and strength, which is acquired through dance, are key during delivery and can make a huge difference. Mentally, dance can change someone's life. Being able

to zone out from the world and negative thinking and focus in on your body and breathing is magical. Plus, exercise releases endorphins which boosts mood and feeling. Overall, moms should dance their heart out until it comes out during delivery! Here is a video of a dance choreographed for my daughter: [Solo Dance Post-Pregnancy](#)



Pictured above is my daughter at 6 months old.

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