



## How to write or revise your dance studio policies and student handbook

**Suzanne:** You are in the right place for the DanceStudioOwner.com member webinar. Today we are talking about dance studio policies and student handbook.

Both of these are topics that are timely because, as I was saying earlier, oftentimes it's now during the summer that we have a chance to take a deep breath and say, "What do we need to revise or add that we were missing last year or that we need to have going forward?"

I hope wherever you're at, whether you're just getting started writing your policy or you've been at this for decades and just have to review or revise, these tips will work for your business model.

Again, make everything work for your business model. The suggestions we give are simply ideas, starting points. I'm excited. Again, if you're listening in on the web, there are slides available with this presentation to go along with the points we're making.

If you're only listening in from your phone, you'll be able to get a copy of the slides with the replay. Dance studio policies and the student handbook, this is sort of your guide to writing and revising the necessary operating terms of your business.

Oftentimes, we say policies sound so formal. Dance studio policies sound like the rules, and they are sort of the rules, but it's often through a big misunderstanding or upset parent or a complete breakdown in your business to uncover where you need a policy.

I speak firsthand in saying that until we have irate parents over something, we say, "We need a policy about that."

If you don't have these in place, [we have a checklist](#) we just added to the website. Some of you might feel it's overdone and it's too many things. Believe it or not, there might come a time when you're going to need that policy.

Consider this your warning light that at some point you might have a parent who completely freaks out because you didn't put a disclaimer on your costumer handout that the costume could possibly not look exactly like it does in the picture, that it might change. These are the types of things that can happen.

Studio policies are essentially the terms and agreements for which people are doing business with you. When someone becomes a student, it's easy for us to get caught in the warm welcome, without realizing that you're doing a business exchange: tuition for education.

There are certain terms and agreements or releases and waivers that need to be agreed upon at the point of registration. We will talk about some of those important ones.

Not only do they protect you from a liability standpoint, but also make sure that you have 100 percent articulated what the expectation is around making payment.

That's sort of the stuff that we will cover as we go through the slides. We like to consider that your student handbook is the user guide to participating at your studio.

You and I probably remember it wasn't very long ago that we were still printing up beautiful brochures. We would go to this extent to print multiple pages of brochures and send them in the mail. Those days are gone.

But I think in the midst of us getting so wrapped up in this technology that we lost sight of the fact that some form of a student handbook, whether it be 100 percent digital that you email or post on your website, or maybe you do print off a few as a new student welcome like "Welcome. We're so glad you're here. Here's your student handbook to make your participation even better."

I think that's one of the things that we're seeing things swing back around, wouldn't you say?

**Jill:** Absolutely. It definitely needs to be in place. Taking your old paper brochures and those paper policies and converting them digitally will help you to email them and get them on your website for people to quickly view and see if they need to.

**Suzanne:** The overarching theme is, how do you get people to read stuff anymore? Literally, it has gone from bad to worse on having parents digest the information we need them to get. If you're not lasering it in for them, handing them some sort of stickable note, it's impossible.

What I wanted everyone on this webinar to hear is that we're going to try to give you some ways to make this information land in the place that it needs to. Once again, I hear your pain on the fact that parents are busier than ever. They have messages coming at them from 8 million different directions and it's getting more and more challenging to deliver and get the message into their hand, not only get it to them, but make them clearly understand it.

I really want to have you guys walk away from this webinar with some new ideas for that. Of course, you can help me along the way. Everybody helps each other, so we're working on that as well at our own studio.

The last piece I want to get into before we go to the next slide is, if you do create a policy, be ready to enforce the consequences or hold people accountable to them. This is the hard part: imposing the late fee, kicking the kid out of class, not letting them perform in the recital.

We agonize over this. Let me tell you, your policies do not carry any weight if you're not ready to enforce them. There are always, I repeat always, exceptions to every rule, but generally speaking, you have to be ready to enforce these or the people on your team, your staff, needs to be ready to handle them.

That takes something, and I hope the conversation we have today will help you. If that's an area where you need help, I hope you get some information from this as well.

Again, if you're calling in live, jot down any questions and we'll open it up to questions at the end. If you're listening in from the web, you can certainly type in any questions from the Q&A box as Jill and I are watching those. There are slides to accompany it.

We just uploaded a checklist on the website, the dance studios policy checklist. If you can get ahold of that, it might be useful for you to go through as we do this. If not, you can certainly download it after the fact. It's a useful list.

We're going to cover those five major areas of focus in this webinar so that you have some new ideas. They're broken down and we'll go through each one. Basically, the goal, as I reiterated earlier, is for parents and/or students to read, understand, agree to and follow your policies.

We need people to read, understand, agree to and follow the policies. It takes something. Jill, you and I have offline conversations about this all day. We laugh about it like, "Mrs. Smith showed up at the recital and she didn't have a ticket." How obvious is that? We talk about tickets for months.

These people, we need them to read and understand. Part of the job of running a dance studio is communicating information over and over and over again. It can be at times exhausting.

In the same token, understand that it can also be very freeing and empowering for your staff and yourself to know that once you have these in place, you can constantly refer people to them. You can use them as a guide.

Again, while it can be tiresome, it can be empowering. Is there anything you want to say about that before I go on to the next slide?

**Jill:** Just to reiterate what you said, we get questions through our email and on the forum constantly about how to effectively communicate and let all the parents know. Everybody runs into that one parent or multiple parents who say, "I didn't see that," even though you've done everything but sky-write it above their house.

The more places you have your policies, post them in a tab on your website, email them out, especially to the newest registered students. Make sure you keep communicating and reminding them about the policies. That will make your job easier when you have to reinforce those rules.

**Suzanne:** Here are some tips for delivering important info. The we're going to get into each area and I'm going to give some examples and comparisons of different wordings and sticking points around those touchy subjects.

Some tips that we're finding really helpful. Visual cues help. If you've noticed, think about the *USA Today* paper model, where you put a visual image and then you get to what you're talking about.

You can use websites like iStockPhoto.com or your own studio images or even create your own graphics. We have some stuff like that on the website to show you how to do it.

If you're talking about tickets, put a little image of a ticket next to it. Bullet points with little images are starting to be the way to get information across. It's almost like your point can't be any longer than a tweet. It has to be very short.

Images, short snippets with bullet points, and most importantly, we found that you have to bold underline with sparkling letters, practically, to lead with the important deadline at the top.

We're talking about deadlines around policy, and these could even be communications about events. Lead with the important stuff.

That leads me to anything that you have to have you students agree to, the releases, the waivers, the consents, that kind of information needs to be on your registration form.

If you're listening to this and you already use an online registration program, you should be able to customize those agreements that people are agreeing to. If you're using a paper form, be sure to add those as well.

We have list of those on the website, but we're also going to talk about a few of them. Most importantly, you have to be consistent and post this everywhere.

Again, until we can find one specific way, and I wish we could come up with that today, you're going to have to post this in a lot of different places, all roads leading back to where they can get the info.

Also, if you're using a studio management program, the one we use is Jackrabbit Class, there is a parent or student login portal where they can login. You can also post that stuff in a password protected area for people to get ahold of.

You do have options. It's just a matter of deciding what primary channel you're going to deliver this to and then being consistent on helping people find their way back to it.

Let's get to the first area of focus. If you're listening on the web, you can type any questions in there and if you're listening on the phone, jot down your notes and questions for later.

Tuition and fee general information. I did a lot of research with multiple studios all over the country, talking to them, looking at their handbooks, uncovering areas where they get stuck.

Generally speaking, the tuition and fee general information is slightly different than things such as refunds, discounts, credits. It's up to you how you want to organize it.

Generally speaking, the general information, which is your basic tuition fee and prices, how your tuition is structured or calculated, your operating dates, any holidays, registration fees, any additional fees that are sort of the starting point for people are what I would call the tuition fee.

This is stuff that should be on your website. I do know there are still some studios out there that hesitate to put their prices online. My encouragement is that you absolutely put your fee information out there.

In the day and age we live in, you have to make it easy for people to do business with you. Some say, "I don't want my competitor to know what I charge." Trust me, they already know, so you don't have to worry about that. I'm sure they figured it out somehow. People are pretty smart.

If you are hesitant to put your fee and tuition information up there, I once again really encourage you to put that out there. It's how the world works and it's how people are going to do business with you.

Jill, any thoughts on that before I go to a specific example?

**Jill:** If you could, just go through your bullet point list for anyone who's listening in and jotting some notes down.

**Suzanne:** We have this on a list on the dance studio policy checklist on the web. In case you miss anything, we have it all there for you as well.

Your general tuition and fee prices, that would be your starting rate, how you calculate your tuition. I'm going to give an example of this next, the distinction of how studios typically set it up.

Operating dates, when you're open. Vacation dates, how it pertains to your tuition or your calendar. Registration fees. Any performance fees or additional fees if applicable. Any dance team or company tuition fees, and a dropping class fee.

These are the things that we find when we do research and talk to our studio owners of what they would consider general information.

Let's get into a specific detail on that: how tuition is calculated. This is where I find most studio owners get a little hung up. Do I charge by the month? Do I charge by the week? How long should I charge for? Do I do 9 payments? Do I do 10? Do I do 12? It's all over the place.

It's really up to you. Some studios charge the same rate every month. For example, this is specifically from our studio, but we're not the only ones who do this. We say the school year will consist of 36 weekly class sessions and monthly tuition is based on the average of 3.6 classes per month.

Some months will have as few as two weeks, and others will have as many as five. For example, if your class is on a Friday, there could be a month like November where you come to Thanksgiving and in that month there might only be two weeks of class.

The tuition is still the same, whether that month has two or that month has five. We don't prorate based on how many classes.

Other studios do prorate, they do a per-class rate per month. I put an example on the slide showing the comparison. Some months have five dance classes, some have three. Tuition is calculated based on the number of times the class meets per month.

When a class meets five times in one month, you'll pay for five, and if it only meets three times that month, you'll only pay for three. That would require a lot more bookkeeping at our own studio in our office, but I understand why a lot of studios do that.

They say, "If we only meet three times, you're only paying for three." It's really up to you, but you want to ultimately make sure that you're charging your tuition to be appropriately set. Make sure you're charging what you're giving them.

Then it's up to you, really. We see this often, that some people will take the last month's tuition, say the May or June payment, as the deposit plus the registration fee and the first month all at once. It's up to you how you want to do it. Just know that you have options and it's important to spell that out for people.

Make sure you have that in writing, because people will ask. You can always change this. Some people do decide to change it. You can do that. It's your studio. If this is the year where you want to change how you bill, you can do that.

That's a high-level point. We could go into examples of each of those, but we don't have time for that today. If anybody has specific questions on anything within that, you can certainly get us on the forum.

We're working on another document that would have comparisons of each type of bullet point in there. Again, if you're listening from the web, type I your questions. If you're listening from the phone, we'll take those questions as we get going.

Let's move onto the next piece. This is sort of the drill down deeper part of the tuition and fee conversation. This is around due dates, late fees, discounts, refunds, credits and payment methods.

This varies greatly. In the research I've done as well, I've noticed that studios do this differently. Some people will send you an email to bill. Others will not. Auto billing for some studios is the only option. If you want to become a student here, you have to take either a credit card auto bill or a withdrawal out of your checking account.

Again, this is up to you. Some people I've talked to are really ready to move towards that. We highly encourage auto billing because it really does make everybody's life easier. I will give an example of how you can word that.

It's so nice to push a button and have your tuition billed on the first of the month or whatever day you decide. Going further, make sure you have in writing information about your due dates, how you bill, if you post fees, auto bill or invoice, if you have a late payment policy, a grace period, what the late fee would be.

An unpaid balance policy: how long will you let a child participate before they are not allowed in class? If you have a return check fee and if you offer any refunds and credits for tuition, costumes or dancewear, if there's any discounts.

Most studios offer some sort of a sliding scale discount on multiple classes, or advanced classes. This is where you want to give information on all your discounts. Payment methods accepted and offered.

There are probably more things, but in the work we did to compile this, those things would be the full coverage of things we saw. It's up to you if you want to give people a grace period or not.

Some studios say if you pay your tuition before the tenth of the month, you get a discount, and after the tenth it's the regular fee. For example, they actually make it feel like you're getting a prepay discount before a certain date. It's very subjective in how you want to do it.

However you do it, make sure you are in compliance with your merchant account. Jill, we had a lot of trouble with the merchant account. Sometimes you just want to pull your hair out. I think they try to just confuse you into submission sometimes.

Make sure whatever you're doing is following protocol for your merchant account. For example, a lot of merchant accounts, if you're running through an auto tuition billing, or even if you have one that you slide cards through, usually there's some sort of terms that you say you do in order to have that account, whether it be a return policy.

However you're doing it, make sure you're following the rules.

**Jill:** That's a very good point. Check with your merchant account and make sure if you're supposed to have anything posted in your terms that you definitely do.

**Suzanne:** It's completely reasonable to not have a refund policy for tuition, because it's not a product that you can return. I just say that as a disclaimer. Your state could have different rules for how your merchant account works, so just check on that.

Let's give an example of those exceptions. We find studio owners get hung up on what they should make non-refundable and what should be refundable. Should I do any of this?

For some people it's absolutely zero, no refund. An example for our studio, and I put this on the left and another studio on the right, we say credit will not be given for missed classes due to illness, snow days or personal commitments.

If you have a snow day or a personal commitment, no credit. But you are welcome to make up any class missed. We make a very general and easy to participate makeup policy.

Students can make up any class missed in an appropriate class of their choice at any time within the school year. In order to solve the problem of people saying, "We were sick," or "We had this family thing," or it's a holiday and you don't close the studio, no problem. You can make that up any class you want.

We actually encourage people to try a new genre, try it out. They can't try an advanced contemporary class if they're a beginner student, but within any appropriate class at any point.

That has worked for us in terms of making things nonrefundable. Refundable tuition, again, you might have it in writing.

We say that when a student sustains an injury that does not permit them to participate over an extended period of time, a credit or refund will be issue. In some cases a doctor's note is required.

If a young student is not ready to participate in a class after several visits, a refund of tuition will be given. Lastly, if a class is cancelled due to insufficient registration, a full refund will be given.

These have all come out of those scenarios I talked about at the beginning, the exceptions, all the "But, but, but, what about this?" I'm sure anybody listening has had scenarios where you have to make exceptions. There can be a lot of gray areas.

That's why we will either give you a credit if you want to come back, or we will refund them. Typically, we try to encourage the credits if possible because we do want them to come back, but sometimes you do just have to give a refund.

Any thoughts on that, Jill, or any questions coming in from the web that we can answer?

**Jill:** We have a great question that came in from the web. It has to do with tuition increasing. If you're going to be increasing your tuition, how do you communicate that to the customers? Or how do you respond to the question "Why are you increasing your fees?"

**Suzanne:** We're increasing our tuition this year too. We tend not to make some sort of blanket statement about it going into a new year, because it's not like we've done anything mid-year. This is a fresh start.

You could certainly say, "We increased tuition," or you could train yourself and your staff to be ready with a really positive response: "We do our very best to keep our tuition affordable, but as you know the cost of doing business increases, whether it be utilities or insurance. We do everything we can to keep our dancers safe and comfortable. This is a reflection of the natural cost of doing business increase."

That's typically how we word it. We also try to just pass it off, "Those darn utility companies. They never give us a break in the winter." If you can add some lightheartedness to it, that's good.

Believe it or not, unless you're doing some sort of drastic tuition increase, the chances are people will be like, "That's to be expected that tuition would go up."

If someone has a real concern, you might want to set up a meeting with them and talk to them. Perhaps you haven't raised tuition in several years and you're just being sensitive to the economic climate.



“Given the research we’ve done in our area and the way the economy has picked up, this is a reasonable, sustainable tuition increase.” That’s it. It’s reasonable that we raise our rates every so often.

If you get in the habit of raising your rates every few years, people will just come to expect that. I hope that helps.

I personally don’t like to go out and make some big statement about it, unless it was something that happened unexpectedly midyear. If it’s the start of a new season, I think it’s completely reasonable to just publish those rates and be on with your day.

What do you think, Jill?

**Jill:** I agree. Don’t feel bad for raising your rates. We talked about it before, my daycare raises rates every single year like clockwork. They do send out a notice every year in a statement and they say what the new rates are going to be. I just expect it and we know that it’s coming with the new year.

I think to have a tuition increase every year or every other year is not a bad thing at all.

**Suzanne:** Whoever asked that question, if they haven’t had a chance to listen to or read the transcript of the raising tuition webinar we did a few months ago, I think that would be really valuable for you because we gave some really good strategies on there, based on information that our accountant has shared and things that are completely reasonable.

Be confident about it. You want to charge the rates that you’re worth. You need to have a sustainable business. We’re supporting you.

I know it’s not easy. We worry that we’re going to lose students. Believe it or not, students are going to come and students are going to go, no matter what you do. Keeping your rates the same does not serve you. You have to increase as the cost of doing business increases.

Don’t fear. Try to have some confidence around that. Let’s move on to the next area that I think is important. This is the part where people get scared. This is the release form, consent and privacy policy.

This is where you really want to make sure you have consulted with your insurance policy or agent, that you know what your liability, release and claims are, the medical treatment of a minor. These are the areas.

General liability release of claims, very standard operating procedure for a dance studio. It’s the thing that says you’re putting yourself at risk of injury, that whole long line of things you’re saying you are releasing of any claim. You want to make sure you have that on your registration form and your policies.

Secondly, the consent for medical treatment of a minor, check on that. We at our studio have to make sure that we have permission to extend treatment in the case of an emergency. Definitely make sure you have that in there.

This next piece is optional, photography and video release. If you're taking pictures of kids and you're using them, you have to get some sort of release on file. That's what we've been advised.

I'm going to give some examples on the next page of some varieties of releases that we've seen and the way the world is changing around that. It used to be you would just take pictures and use them in a brochure or in a media release.

Now with Instagram and Facebook, who knows where those pictures go. You need to cover that. Lastly, there's a privacy policy. This is the part that is least common for studios that I see. They put some sort of privacy policy on their website about the information they obtain through their online registration forms or if you call the studio, what they are doing with that information and why they are collecting data about your child's date of birth, all the stuff you need to run a business.

Some people have gone to the point of putting a privacy policy on their website. That's optional. Again, check with your attorney and insurance to determine what you need to have to run.

Jill, any thoughts on that before I get to the example of the photography and video release?

**Jill:** I think going right into that photography and video release is important because that's a hot topic and one that everybody questions and wonders about.

**Suzanne:** Again, I'm coming at this assuming you have all the right insurance and you know who to talk to about that. If you don't, come to us and we will point you in the right direction. If now is the time to review your policy, for example, at our studio we run our studio as a C corp in New Hampshire.

The rules in New Hampshire might be different than the rules in Massachusetts and California. We have to do all the stuff for worker's comp for all of our employees. There's so much of this, so I kind of come at this from a very high level.

Make sure you have people in your life that are experts, like attorneys and an insurance agent, to help you with it.

The photo/video release, I have seen more and more studios come to us so upset about this. This is going into even people taking screenshots of photo circuit TVs in the waiting room and spreading them around the waiting room, or the recording of classes and snapping pictures and sharing them all over the world.

We want a visual business. We have to be able to take photos. We need to be able to use images in our marketing. That's the bottom line. How are you going to come at this?

Unfortunately, this is the part where parents just checkmark yes and don't realize they have agreed to something until they are irate and emailing you like, "How dare you post that picture of my kid in class on Facebook!"

It happens. I'm not going to lie, these are the things that we deal with on a daily basis. People are like, "Now that I see you are using the video, I don't want my kid in that."

How are you going to get around this? We might have to start reissuing that. We might have to start making this an additional step. It's really up to how you want to handle this. We put this on a registration form of a consent that people agree to.

Ours is a little more controlled by us. Other people use a very broad use. Here's a couple of examples on the slide. Again, you can get any of this from us through the website.

"I give permission for [dance studio name] to take photos of me or my child while participating in studio activities for promotional purposes. Names of students will not be used or disclosed. I understand that for the safety of dancers and their families, all photos and/or videos of studio classes, rehearsals and performances, including dances in studio costumes, will not be used, published or posted publicly in printed or electronic format without the express written permission of the studio and the director."

Here's the distinction on that one. It's the one we've been using. We're asking permission of the parents to take pictures, but we're not going to use any names. Before anyone else gets ahold of those pictures, like the media, no one else is allowed to use those pictures except for us. We are the ones that have permission.

That's where we can hold someone accountable and say, "You are not allowed to videotape this dance class and put it online." If we see a parent videotaping a rehearsal, no. We've seen this happen. They post videos of choreography that we've paid lots of money for right on YouTube and they don't even realize they're doing it.

That's one way. There are so many options on this, and again, you have to go with what's going to work for your studio. This one was shared by a studio owner who indicates the issue that we now have to add to ours, about the no payment is given.

"Parents or legal guardians give permission to the studio to use photos and videos of their minor child without payment, in connection with the studio publication, advertising and news coverage."

Here's the hiccup of a parent complaint that we've had to deal with: "If you're using my kid's photo in your promotional material, am I getting any sort of kickback for that? How about a discount? Should I get a special deal?"

No, that's the whole without payment thing, where we are going to have to go back and put that in there. That may or may not be something you have thought of before, but I'm here to tell you there are people out there who are going to want payment for that.

Jill, any additional thoughts on the photo/video release?

**Jill:** I know we'll get questions from studio owners about how no matter what policy you have in place, someone is going to break the policy or go against it, and is it really enforceable? What are your feelings about that?

**Suzanne:** We've had a few studio owners who we've talked to who have been really upset about what the parents have said to them. You always want to let people know that they can opt out.

There is an option to opt out of anything, I suppose. That's where you can say, "Mrs. Smith, just put it in writing that you are opting out." Definitely ask for this stuff in writing from people. I cannot say that enough. Put it in writing to me that you're opting out, no problem. We have it on file.

Because we know how hypersensitive people are about this stuff, even though we ask for the release to take the photos, we still personally will tell a class, "We snapped some photos for use on Facebook. Are you okay with us posting that today?"

Maybe it's our location, maybe it's how we handle it. Parents appreciate that, "FYI, we're going to use this." Sometimes parents will say, "I took these pictures of my kid. Do you want to use them?"

We just have a culture where people are snapping pictures and it's not weird anymore. It's not strange to take pictures anymore. I think we're moving to a place where people are more comfortable with that, but always give people an option to opt out.

We always say we're not posting names. We're not tagging these kids on Facebook. We're not putting their names on them. Our teenagers take all sorts of pictures of their friends. They're all over Instagram. There's no way we could control that. That's impossible.

The question is, how much of the police do you want to be? We can only control what our office does with the pictures we take. After that, it's not up to us.

I'm sure many of you guys listening in have dealt with something this year or recently where people post inappropriate things, kids do things they shouldn't do, say things they shouldn't say, use hashtags they shouldn't use.

We could probably do a whole webinar on managing the social use of images. It's a squirrel that we can't catch. From the front end, from the business side, having something about how you personally as a business will be using any pictures, is at least liability coverage. You're covering yourself, so to speak. You're covering what your own studio is putting out there.

Other people, you can't control them. You can make requests, but you can't control them.

**Jill:** And making sure that your teachers are fully aware of the policies and having them adopt what you want for your studio.

**Suzanne:** The social media policy may or may not be something you are implementing with your teachers. We are doing some conversations on the back of the handbook.

These are definitely opportunities to have conversations with people and decide what you're comfortable with and what you're not. It's impossible to control everything, but the part that you are doing, you can make it known how you will operate.

Any questions about that, please bring them our way. Like I said, on some things you have to take it on a case-by-case basis. Until there's a problem, sometimes we don't realize that we have to put some sort of policy in place.

Be aware of your liability.

**Jill:** Do you want to take a break and answer a question from the web?

**Suzanne:** Sure, let's do that and then move one.

**Jill:** Kelly is asking, how do you handle the same families each year being late with payments? We often have to chase them every year for tuition and they all seem to have a sad story why they can't pay.

**Suzanne:** I know, right? There are so many good stories out there. We get them too. I'm not going to lie and say we let people run up big balances that we shouldn't have let happen.

We had someone pass us counterfeit bills this year, and they knew it. We had never encountered counterfeit bills until this year. I guess my thought is, how much of this are you going to deal with? When is it not worth it anymore?

You kind of get to, as my mom would call it, a turning point. You hit your maximum on these people and then you say no more.

You have to have a conversation with these people and say, "Moving forward, I've been advised by my business person that we are not going to be able to let balances age this long anymore."

This is where you need a policy of after 60 days of a past due, your child will not be able to participate in class. That is a point that we don't want to get to. What can we do to make sure that you make payment on time?

Those are the questions. You can make taking a credit card mandatory. You can have the withdrawal taken out of their checking account. Again, check with those processors. I don't know how yours works, but it's a tricky thing, especially if you have a history with these people and you've known them since their child was three.

**Jill:** It's very hard. You have to get to a point where it sucks so much studio energy out of you as a studio energy to chase these people down and to have that balance growing every month.

Sit down with them at the onset of the upcoming year and, as Suzanne said, make it very clear that it can't get past a certain point, and this is what's going to happen if it does.

**Suzanne:** Be ready for the fact that because you have allowed it, you could get a lot of pushback because they know you're allowing it. As dance studio owners and teachers, we are very sensitive people, and we would never want a child to miss out on dance because of a parent's lack of getting their life together.

It's bad. It's awful. We have parents who get diagnosed with cancer or lose their jobs. People have tragic things happen in their families. Divorces happen. Awful things happen to our kids' families and we are really there for them.

We give them breaks where we're like, "No problem. Next month, no problem."

Sometimes it's okay to either scholarship a kid and say, "This year, that other class you want them to take, just between you and I, that's a scholarship." Sometimes we make that exception and say, "We don't want an unfortunate life situation cause your kids to not be able to go to dance."

Just make sure you're not being taken advantage of. Sometimes that can happen because people know you're not holding up your policy. It's tricky. I'd love to say it's black or white, but it's not.

Once you start holding your ground on things, then people will take you seriously. Put those late fees on there or say, "Your child can't participate after 60 days."

That would be my recommendation. Let's move on to the next piece that often causes all sorts of headaches, which is attendance and participation. Raise your hand if you feel like all you do is manage absences and attendances and kids here for this rehearsal and kids who can't make this rehearsal because they're in the town play and there's this thing at the pool.

I feel like once again it's a little more challenging to manage attendance. Our teachers could spend hours and hours tracking people down. Did they call? Did they email? It's long.

If you haven't had a chance to review your attendance expectations and minimum participation policy, now is a great time to do that. Also, in this list would be how to address tardiness, make up classes, inclement weather/snow cancellations, sick, injured, if you're not ready to participate, what happens when there isn't sufficient registration for a class, or you have a faculty change or teacher substitute.

What happens when the schedule changes? How are you conveying information about studio announcements and closings? What does a student do if they have to add or drop a class, opt out or withdraw from your studio?

This whole area is what you probably feel you're managing on a daily basis, just all of it. Remember when we said you need to have a system and a policy around this? There has to be some sort of procedure that you do a little more automatically so you don't feel like you're reinventing the wheel every day.

I saw a great example. A studio owner had a link at the top of her website. We could do a whole webinar on how to create a Google doc. She had like a class absence reporting form. Instead of having to send a manual email, they just clicked this button at the top to bring up a web form for the parent or student to say they're not going to be in class today.

They say what class they're in, and she asks them what class they intend to make up. It's almost making them accountable with something in writing, which I thought was a really great idea.

**Jill:** That's fantastic. A lot of studio owners don't have anybody in their office until later in the afternoon. I know when I head into work and my kid is already out of school sick and I know I need to call her in, I think, "I'll call later, I'll leave a message," but to be able to just go online and click on that form and call her in sick to the studio, then to take one more step and hold her accountable for that makeup class is fantastic.

**Suzanne:** We can handle the absences when we know that people are communicating about it. When you get what we call the Red Flag, the double absence with no communication, that usually means they're heading south, that they're going to drop out, something is terribly wrong.

You probably have a warning system in your gut, but we have a double absence call list, where we pull the list of double absences without communication and we start going down the list either emailing or calling, "Just want to make sure you're okay. We missed your child in class. We look forward to seeing you next week."

The point is there is a document about that on the DanceStudioOwner.com website about attendance and I can pull that up and put it with this replay. It's got the script we use when we call people or email them about being doubly absent.

These are the areas that we often manage. Let me move on to the next slide to get into the next questions. You need to reserve the right to do certain things.

Here are two places where studio owners often get hung up and they forget to put this in writing and you have people freaking out. On our schedule, upon registration, our website says, "We reserve the right to place students according to their age, ability and dance experience. Some classes require prerequisites or permission of instructor."

Even if you have online registration and you have it set up so that a parent cannot register their child into a certain level, that's fine. Essentially what a policy like this will do, even if they think they've put their kid in the right class based on all those other criteria, you still have the right to place the child.

I highly recommend you put something like that in writing. Lastly, in sufficient registration or instructor change. "We reserve the right to cancel any class with insufficient registration. All faculty members are subject to change. In the event of a change, we will present you with an equally qualified instructor."

We had to learn the hard way last year. We had a few faculty changes at the very last minute. People thought they were registered into a class with a certain instructor, they were all set.

If you're facing a to-be-determined teacher, you could put a class on your schedule and say, "Teacher to be determined." If you put a teacher's name on it and it changes, some fine print like this is helpful. People understand they are registering into the class and the teacher could change and that for insufficient registration you can cancel it.

Again, any thoughts on that, Jill, before we move on? I have a couple more slides before we move on to the questions and I want to stay on track.

**Jill:** Could you just back up for a quick second? Christine has a question. With children being so busy today, can you go over your makeup class policy one more time and let everyone know how easy it is, or how easy you try to make it for them to make up classes?

**Suzanne:** Great question. We tell people they are welcome to make up any class missed, and that they can make up any class missed with an appropriate class of their choice.

Let's say it's a kid registered into ballet and there is no ballet class available in a level that is suitable. We say, "Why not try a jazz class?" Likely, they're not going to take a tap class, but maybe contemporary or lyrical.

If it's something in a similar style that is appropriate for their age and ability, we find that actually kids get interested in other styles when they do that. They might not have ever thought to take that class.

If it's a small enough studio, most of the other teachers know the kids, whether they had them as a younger student or something else. We have a very easy makeup policy so they never have the excuse of "I need a refund because I can't find a class."

We can find a class for you, no problem. That's how we do it.

**Jill:** Great. Just so everybody knows, if you tune in a little later, we are going to have copies of the slides on the website when we post the recording. We'll post the slides as well.

One other quick question as we take a break from your slides, how do you handle different policies for your competition teams? Do you have separate handbooks or separate information for them?

**Suzanne:** That's a whole other animal, so to speak. There is a whole section on the website for a competition where there's a dance team agreement and all that. Dance team agreements are really strict compared to the others.

Most of these policies tend to be like general student behavior. When I say dance team policies are way more strict, I mean we're more specific about conducts and being in class and all this.

Go to the website and go to the left-hand column and hit the Competition button and it will take you to some examples of all sorts of things for dance team.

While a lot of this does count towards the dance team, they also have another layer of behavior agreements and things like that. Absolutely.

**Jill:** Do you want to more into dress code and class attire and those types of things now?

**Suzanne:** This last piece I would say gets a lot more specific to your studio's culture and how you have determined that you will set up your studio. This would be the area of dress code, attire, the whole thing.



Some studios have a very specific dress code or class attire, and others are very loose. However it is, put it into your expectations by class genre or level, and where they can purchase dancewear is applicable.

Again, people are busy. Where do they get this? From you, from the website, a local dance shop, give them options.

Class etiquette and performance etiquette, a lot of studios will distinguish this right out of the gate. This is the thing from no chewing gum, no cell phones, no snacks, however you want to do it, whatever your expectations are around all of that.

Then there are student expectations on conduct and parent expectations on conduct. In the research we did, some studios are so specific about every level of behavior, everything spelled out. Others just say, “We would hope that you respect and hold yourself the way you always would.”

Some are very general, some are very specific. It’s up to you.

Things from lost and found and visitor information and all the stuff about how you enter and exit your building, if there is video surveillance, closed circuit monitoring, this last bit very much leads into the student handbook conversation.

It is almost the lead-in to that, which we’re going to get into. Having a policy around that is important. If you’re going to have a dress code, that is essentially a policy, and someone has to uphold that policy: your teachers, your staff, however they do it.

Consider that again a place to revisit if you’re ready to get a little more strict about that, or if you’re ready to loosen it up a little bit. Whatever you do, put that in writing for people.

This is the last bit related to that, that I call reframing the tricky point. Jill, you and I always laugh about it. Even though we are giving them a rule, it’s really because it was their idea.

For your convenience, we make auto billing available. So many parents have said, “I don’t want to write a check every month. Can you just bill me and make it easy?”

When we say that to our parents, “Auto billing was your idea, thank you so much,” it’s okay to say that. They were asking for it.

We say things like, “For the safety of our dancers, we schedule class viewing and make closed circuit TVs available.” This is the answer to parents’ faces glued to the window, interrupting your class, wanting to know.

Always use, “For the safety of our dancers.” Parents understand that.

Some things you can say are, “To make the most out of your dance education, a respectful attitude and regular attendance is expected.” That tells people right out of the gate that we want them to get the most out of this, so here’s how it works: you come to class with a respectful attitude. Easy as that.

This last point, I could do a whole webinar on registration fees, but your annual registration fee covers nontuition essentials such as insurance, music licenses, studio communication and administration, and helps lower your monthly tuition.

We actually position the annual registration fee like a good deal for our parents. “Isn’t that such a great deal that we keep the tuition price low because we have this registration fee?”

We don’t mean it in a bad way. We actually are trying to show the value of the education. Thoughts on that or any questions? I only have one more slide.

**Jill:** Since there’s only one more slide, do you want to just keep going?

**Suzanne:** Sure. Lastly, put it all together in the student handbook. A handbook can help your students and parents better understand your policies, while also orienting them to your studio.

We’re considering a new thing where we have a new student orientation night, or at least something that makes new students feel like they’re part of something new and it’s okay to ask questions about the recital in August for next year.

It’s where you can write a welcome message, share your studio mission and vision and share your expectations around the general conduct. If you do any evaluations or teaching philosophy, position that as part of your teaching philosophy and help people understand why you have all these rules as part of your methodology.

Again, you can restate those policies that were agreed upon, and then all the things about attendance expectations. The handbook is really the user manual of all the things we just talked about. It’s the way to pull it all together and give people the whole feeling of your studio.

I know I have talked too much, but there’s so much to cover on that and I really want it to be useful for everyone listening in. We can certainly start to take some questions.

**Jill:** With reframing those tricky points, we had a comment come in about how much they love that, being able to make it sound like it was there idea.

**Suzanne:** It’s amazing how much that makes a difference, just the little things. There’s one piece that I forgot to put in the slide and I thought of it this morning. When you type any of this stuff up or you put it on your website, avoid using all capital letters.

It’s very tempting to type things that you really want them to know in all caps. For all you listening, a lot of people get turned off by that. It’s the equivalent of shouting, and we don’t want to shout. We just want to be really firm.

You can be firm without doing all caps. Take some time to read through your policies or rework them a little. Say, “How does this land over in the world of a new student if they didn’t know how we are? How would we help them feel like this is a strict policy in that we mean business, but it’s still a really happy place?”

That's my thought on that. If you're listening, you can press \*7 and it should be able to let you talk and share. Press \*7 on your phone. While we're doing that, if anyone else on the web has any thoughts or tips that you found really helpful.

I see all types of people calling in, so they must have things to add.

**Jill:** While we're waiting for anyone to raise their hand for a question on the web or the phone, I know this is something really basic, but typing up your policies, do you use Word? Do you use Google docs? Do you make a PDF?

I know my recommendation is that anything you post to your website, make sure it's a PDF document. When it's opened up in your customer or viewer's computer, it will look exactly like you want it to.

You can type everything up in Word or a Google doc, but make sure you save it to a PDF before it goes to your website. I've seen a few where I'm not able to download things or it's in a format that I can't quite see.

Just little administrative things like that really make a difference.

**Suzanne:** We tend to put the stuff that absolutely has to be on the website as text on the page. Michelle emailed me and she's like, "Great timing on this webinar, Suzanne. We're doing the same thing. We are revising our policies right now."

Sometimes it's just about going through that checklist and making sure you have something on each one, or combine them all into one statement. It doesn't have to be like a legal document as if you're signing your life away. It just has to be indicated.

If you're calling in, I know you want to talk and share. It's \*7 on your phone. We have a couple more minutes. Obviously, if there are any follow-up questions, we are always available on the forum to go over all of this.

Like I said, we're actively working on this too. Post on the forum and say, "This is what I need help revising. What should I say about that?"

Again, it's very personal, but it's at least a starting point when you have a list to work from. These are all compiled lists from a lot of studios from all over the country with the various policies they have in place.

**Jill:** Everything will be posted on the website too.

**Suzanne:** We have a caller. Is that Samantha?

**Caller:** It is Samantha. I did have a question on the attendance you were talking about with attendance absences. I did love that. We feel the same way about it. The one thing we find a little tricky is teachers constantly managing attendance.

Do you have a laptop in the studio that they directly input the attendance into Jack Rabbit or Studio Director? Or do you have them do it on a paper list and turn it in at the front desk if there's more than two absences? How do you handle that process?

**Suzanne:** I think everybody probably does this differently. We print our attendance sheets off onto clipboards and we do two months at a time on that one sheet. Let's say there's 8 classes in two months. Sometimes there could be 10, sometimes there could be not as many.

We have a color coding system. A red dot is for someone who was there. CA stands for communicated absence. We can look down and say, "That's a CA, that's a communicated absence. That means that person let us know they were going to be out of town. We don't have to freak out and call them. We know they are out."

It's the people who get the blank no response that we have to follow up on. We tend to go back and do it in the system, but the teachers are handed a clipboard. That has been the system that has worked for us.

I'm sure others are way more high-tech about it, but that's best for us at this point.

**Caller:** So the communicated absences, for example, that clever idea about having the absence form on the website or have them call, then the person at the front desk reviews that communication and goes into the studio or wherever you keep the clipboard and updates that attendance sheet to show it's a communicated absence before the teacher sees it?

**Suzanne:** Good question. If someone has called in before the class is happening, we would be able to put it on the clipboard so the teacher when she comes in knows that person is absent. If it happens after the fact, we'll go back in and put it in.

We go through and we do an inventory on a main master sheet of those problem children we call them, the ones who need to be called, the ones with a couple absences. We just start listing them.

First thing the next morning, we look through the sheet and see who is absent twice. In October people start falling off pretty fast. We start going through and just make it a habit to check the sheet. It won't be in the morning exactly when they go through and add to that list. I hope that helps.

**Caller:** It does help. This has always been something we've had a disconnect on. Do we write it on a slip of paper at the front desk and provide it to the teacher? The teacher keeps their own binder with their lesson plans and attendance sheets.

At what point do we go and pass that information to the teacher, that they see it and they're notified if the parent tells us ahead of time. Does that have to go into every teacher's lesson plan binder to sift through for their attendance sheet, and then check off who has more than two absences?

That's always been a bit of a struggle. That's why I was just curious if you did that.

**Suzanne:** Honestly, this is going to sound really old-school, but it works because we have so many papers coming in. We use those things called the carbonless memo papers, where it's keeping a record. When you're writing, it's like a check and it keeps track. Does that make sense?

We use that so we know to give the teacher the handwritten note from the phone, but what we do is we have that master book to go back to. We kind of do a loop and check it off once it's done. If a kid is out, check it off, done.

If there's somebody who needs follow-up or there's a problem, we track that. It gets so busy. There's Post-It notes and there's emails and there's messages coming in. It's like, where does it all live?

Sometimes, just creating a system for that will help. Honestly, sometimes the low-tech version works for things like that.

**Caller:** Okay. Thank you.

**Suzanne:** If anyone has a better idea, send it my way. So far that has worked for us for years and we still get plenty of emails. Great question. Thanks for asking that. Anyone else? We're a little over time so I want to give a chance for one last question if anyone has one.

**Jill:** Jenny is coming in from the web. This is a great question: when is the best time to hand out studio handbooks to registered students? We have online registration and an in-house registration. They alert people to the important policies at that time, but as far as giving them the actual handbook, do you wait till the first week? What would you recommend, Suzanne?

**Suzanne:** That's a great question. We do like five weeks of open house in August with people coming in and doing dancewear and all that. It used to be that you could just wait until class started.

I think it's important to ask yourself when you want people to have this information. Would it be more organized if you could dedicate to that first week of class to email the whole class? Then it's not scattered like, "Did So-and-So get it? I'm not sure."

Losing track of who has what is tricky. Other people would say get it in front of their face the moment they register so they know and they have time to read it. It's really up to you how you want to handle that.

I would say that ultimately, part of your registration process could be a confirmation or thank you email "By the way, we'll be talking about this more when classes get started, but if you would like to review the student hand book to get yourself familiar, here is the link."

Something like that might be useful. At traditional school, a lot of kids aren't given a handbook till school starts. It depends on how much of that information would be helpful for your kids to know when they walk in the door. That's the question. What do you think, Jill?

**Jill:** I agree. I think providing that information upon confirmation is great. Also, just reiterating it and referring back to it, making sure that everybody did get a copy of it when classes start is helpful.

I don't think there's too much. You can never give the information too much. Whatever feels most comfortable for you.

The last thing coming in from the web, for scholarship students, do you handle that like your competitive teams? Do you have some different policies for them? Would you keep that all under the same policies and procedures?

**Suzanne:** Every studio does scholarships differently, and this is my disclaimer. On the business side of things, make sure you are tracking any scholarship programs appropriately from a financial standpoint, because that's a tax question that you want to have answered.

We did a webinar about that a few months ago. It's on the website. It's called Debunking Tax and Business Mythology for Your Dance Studio. We had that with Jessica from Financial Groove, and it really helped to clear that up.

That being said, we would treat a scholarship class like we would treat any other kid on a dance pass who is already getting a discount. We're a for-profit business, we're not a nonprofit. People have to be paying something at the bare minimum.

From there, essentially our dance program is like a scholarship for additional classes. I would say definitely treat things like would expect all behavior to be.

We've also done some work-study programs with some of our assistant teachers at the higher level of high school. They've gone through our assistant teacher training program, they're available to assist. We will sometimes do a trade like a work-study. You're working, we're paying you.

The equivalent of the work hours you're putting in, we're putting towards your dance tuition. That's done really well for us. Those are the types of things that are very studio specific.

Again, as we wrap it up here, there are certain policies that have to be agreed upon at the moment of registration, prior to people making a decision about your dance studio. Then there are those policies and student handbook related items that do need to be communicated soon after they become a student or throughout the year.

I definitely applaud everyone for being on this call, for listening in on the web. I really want you to know how excited I am for you, that you're willing to take on looking at the policies and revising your handbook.

It's okay to make changes to things as the years go on and tweak things as necessary. If anyone has any follow-up questions, you know you can find us anytime on the forum or through the website.

I really want you to have this year starting off on the right foot. Jill, any last thoughts before we go?

**Jill:** No. Suzanne, thanks so much for providing great information and we will post everything for you and recap and we're always available.