



Child Magazine
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Jacques d'Amboise

♦ **HONORED FOR:** Fostering a sense of achievement and self-esteem in schoolchildren through the power of dance. In 1976, while a principal dancer with the New York City Ballet, d'Amboise founded the National Dance Institute (NDI), an organization that has touched the lives of nearly 2 million kids through free in-school dance classes and performances. NDI, which works with New York City-area partner schools and trains teaching artists from around the country, is internationally recognized as a model for integrating arts education into everyday learning.

♦ **HOW AND WHY HE GOT STARTED:** D'Amboise, who grew up in a rough section of New York City, started attending his sister's dance classes at age 7 because his mother wanted to keep him off the streets. Recognizing his talent, the young boy's teacher referred him, at age 8, to George Balanchine's School of American Ballet; by the time he was 15, d'Amboise was a professional dancer. After returning to his old neighborhood following a European tour, d'Amboise realized how dramatically dance had shaped him. "There were no big ambitions or dreams in my community," he says. "It seemed like such a small world, a world without sunlight." Then he had an idea: Maybe dance could help others too. Says d'Amboise, "I went to city schools and asked, 'Would anybody like free dance lessons?' The condition was that the dance classes had to be part of the regular curriculum. In every place of learning, arts should be as important as math and social studies—not relegated to something you do in the corner after school." D'Amboise paid the costs himself until he learned he could form a nonprofit organization.

♦ **HIS GREATEST REWARD:** Witnessing the transformation of a child. D'Amboise recalls one fourth-grader who seemed a lost cause; the boy was disengaged and refused to interact with his classmates. D'Amboise coaxed him into joining a few dance exercises, then returned a year later to find the boy still in the program. "There he was, dancing like a dream," he says. "He was talking; his grades had rebounded. We had given him an opportunity to excel at something, and because of his success in a little dance class he was no longer afraid to take a chance on life."

♦ **IN THE WORKS:** Last year, NDI adopted the Senegalese village of Potou and is raising money through fundraising drives at its partner schools to fight poverty, malnutrition, and disease in the region. "It goes back to our belief that kids should not have to struggle," says d'Amboise. "It's about the promise of hope for children everywhere." ➤