

TimeOut | **Lifestyle & Culture****Child's play** by Danielle Demetriou

## One way to keep the kids on their toes

There are few certainties in parenthood, from the ever-changing sleeping habits of babies to the unpredictability of toddler tantrums.

One fact, however, can almost always be depended upon. However hard a parent tries to avoid gender stereotyping, almost every little girl will at some point become obsessed with two things: the color pink — and ballet.

The “b” word has been increasingly high profile in our household in recent months, with my 3-year-old developing a growing passion for watching the cartoon mouse Angelina Ballerina (who is also pink), looking at ballet books and charging around the house in a fluffy tutu.

Her grandmother more recently sealed the enthusiasm by purchasing her her very first pair of ballet shoes — and so it was only a matter of time before she demanded to go to ballet classes.

One venue in Tokyo that has recently started ballet classes for enthusiastic pink-loving little girls (and open-minded boys) is Poppins Active Learning International School, located in the upmarket Yebisu Garden Place development.

Among one of Japan's most successful child-care companies, Poppins has opened more than 150 nurseries across the country alongside thriving nanny and elderly care services since launching 28 years ago.

It was last year that Poppins opened its first international school (a sister establishment to its Active Learning School in Tokyo Midtown), with the goal of creating a globally-minded community of young pupils aged from 11 months to 5 years.

In addition to its daily school program, the two-story establishment is also home

to a colorful rota of after-school programs in the afternoons, including English, science and yoga, with its latest addition in September being ballet.

The class takes place in a large airy space, complete with a wall of mirrors and a Steinway grand piano, upon which one teacher expertly tinkles a rendition of “London Bridge is Falling Down” before the class begins.

There are around eight little girls in total — aged from around 2 to 5 — all of whom are dressed in variations of pink leotards, dance skirts and tutus. Many, my daughter included, are transfixed by the mirrors reflecting themselves dressed in pretty ballet outfits and spend quite some time simply staring at themselves in curiosity.

And then there is Miss Vivian Suzuki Baba, the exotically named ballet teacher (backed up by a team of discrete white-uniformed class teachers), who wastes no time efficiently rounding up the children in a row. And the class begins.

A recording of ballet music plays in the background as Miss Vivian whizzes through a range of warm-up moves — urging the children to lift their shoulders and arms up and down in time to the music.

They are then seated in a row on the floor — no mean feat for the easily distracted toddlers — before spending time pointing and flexing their toes.

Fortunately, Miss Vivian, a professional Japanese ballet dancer formerly based in Europe, is acutely aware of their short concentration spans and so she energetically moves through the exercises at a rapid-fire pace.

From jumping up and down waving their arms like butterflies and attempting to stand in first position with heels touch-



**In first position:** Miss Vivian Suzuki Baba takes the Poppins after-school ballet class through some basic moves. DANIELLE DEMETRIOU

ing and toes turned out (trickier than it sounds for toddlers) to skipping one by one across the room, an array of ballet moves are covered by the teacher.

To her credit, she is very relaxed about the little ones who don't always want to join in and are often quite literally away with the ballet fairies — my daughter included, who is initially far too shy to do anything other than cling to my hand. Two little girls who appear lost in their own world at the start, sit happily by the mirrors just talking and watching.

There are also several breaks in the hour-long class, enabling the little dancers to pause, have a drink of water, chat with friends and continue to admire their dresses in the mirrors.

The finale is a highlight, with all the little girls joining hands in a line with the teacher, facing the mirror, before undertaking a series of elaborate bows (with enthusiastic creative interpretations from the toddlers).

As the class comes to an end, it's clear that Poppins is about the quality of the experience as well as having fun at the school. Testimony to this? Even the wooden play house next to the ballet space was apparently constructed through a workshop collaboration between the children and Nikken Sekkei, the architects

behind Tokyo Skytree.

As Maiko Todoroki, the eloquent mother-of-two director of Poppins and daughter of the founder Noriko Nakamura, explains over tea after class: “Our concept of active learning means exposing children to many different authentic experiences, with the help of a range of professionals, from architects to musicians to professional dancers.

“These children are experiencing and absorbing everything through all of their five senses and so it is very important that these experiences are of the highest possible quality.”

*Poppins Active Learning International School is located at Yebisu Garden Terrace Nibankan, 4-20-2 Ebisu, Shibuya-ku; 03 5791 2105; www.poppins-palis.jp/en. The After School Programs include art, maths and science, yoga, English, music and ballet. Tuition costs range from ¥36,000 a month for two after-school classes a week, to ¥80,000 a month for five classes a week, plus an enrollment fee of ¥20,000. Free trial classes are available. or more information, visit <http://bit.ly/poppinafterschool>*



**Stretching out:** Girls perform some warm-up exercises before their ballet class of jumping, waving and skipping. DANIELLE DEMETRIOU

**On: Fashion** by Misha Janette**October debut for Gaultier's Sept Premieres**

French couturier Jean Paul Gaultier has teamed up with Seven & I Holdings to produce Sept Premieres, an affordable line of clothing that launched Oct. 1. This is the first designer collaboration for the company, which owns Seibu & Sogo Department Stores and Ito Yokado, 67 outlets of which will sell the line.

The collaboration comes as a surprise, since the designer famous for Madonna's “cone bras” and a mainstay on the Paris catwalk quit the ready-to-made market to focus on

couture just last year. “The fashion cycle is too fast, and there are too many collections — we don't have time to think,” he explained.

But for Sept Premieres, he has had a change of heart.

“I have been working with Japan since '78 and I know their strengths and what I will get when I design,” he said at the launch. “So I had no worries over this.”

The 50-piece line includes everything from socks to dresses and coats, priced from ¥1,400 to ¥49,000, — and, as expected, there are plenty of Gaultier signature stripes and patterns.

[www.sogo-seibu.co.jp/septpremieres/jeanpaulgaultier](http://www.sogo-seibu.co.jp/septpremieres/jeanpaulgaultier)

**YaChaika makes sure you're well heeled for comfort**

The James Dyson Award is an annual event that celebrates innovative designs that solve product problems. It's a broad

competition brief and this year Yasuyuki Yamada is in the running, his comfort-engineered YaChaika high heels making it into the top 20 list.

There isn't a “how-to be a woman” manual that says we have to stomp around in high heels all day, and yet despite their general ability to cause discomfort, most women own at least one pair.

Yamada, from Keio University's Graduate School of Science and Technology, has engineered a pair of heels with leaf spring plates and high-vibration damping rubber sheets that soften the impact on the feet and make walking in them less tiring. The “invisible” heel is



10-cm high, but on the impact of a step it contracts to 3 cm with a spring-like effect. For the wearer, it feels similar to wearing a sports shoe. The curved design is inspired by the wings of a seagull, which is what “chaika” translates to from Russian.

The Dyson winners will be announced Nov. 10.

[www.jamesdysonaward.org](http://www.jamesdysonaward.org)

**An opening ceremony for Yoshio Kubo**

Yoshio Kubo has partnered with popular global multi-brand shop Opening Ceremony for an exclusive line called Five Rings Travel. Inspired by Opening Ceremony's own Olympic concept — focusing on one Olympic city per season — Kubo's line debuts with pieces that give a nod to Calgary, Alberta.

Sporty tracksuits and wide-leg pants feature dark earthy tones like forest green, with pretty gradations that evoke the scenery seen from a



airplane window on the approach to the city. The line is unisex, but is being described as “genderless,” with easy-to-wear stretch waists and deliberately oversized silhouettes.

Kubo is one of the most-watched menswear designers in Tokyo and also has a more under-the-radar women's line, Muller of Yoshiokubo. This line might help him bring home some more gold.

*Available now at Opening Ceremony 6-7-1 Jingumae, Shibuya-ku: 03-5466-6350. [www.openingceremonyjapan.com](http://www.openingceremonyjapan.com)*