

## Transcript of Interview with Studio Superstar Jen Dalton

Chantelle: Hello everyone, it's Chantelle here from [Studio Expansion](#), and welcome to another of our wonderful studio owner superstar spotlights. Today we have a winner for you. I'd love to introduce you to the remarkable Jennifer Dalton.

Jennifer Dalton is the principal of [Jigsaw Dance](#), which is a very large dance studio with over 1,300 students here in Sydney, but Jen has a few more strings to her bow than the average studio owner, which is why I wanted to bring her on to speak with you today.

Now fun fact about Jen was that she was actually a policewoman working for the New South Wales Police Force for, what? About 13 years, Jen?

Jennifer Dalton: Yeah.

Chantelle: Quite a long time, and specializing in child protection. Not only has Jen founded a phenomenally successful studio, she combines that with this incredible knowledge about creating safe studios.

That is what has led Jen to create the remarkable [Dance Teacher Central](#), which is a training hub of helping studio owners create masterful training programs for their teachers to ensure an incredible student experience across every touch point.

Jen, we are so thrilled and so grateful to have this time with you. Thank you so much for being with us.

Jennifer Dalton: Well, thank you so much for having me.

Chantelle: With your background both in the police and as running Jigsaw Dance for as long as you have, and now running Dance Teacher Central, what do you feel are the essential, kind of in a nutshell, what do studio owners need to know about helping to make their studios safe for students?

Jennifer Dalton: Look, I think the biggest problem is people get quite overwhelmed with that thought, and because it's so highly in the media especially at the moment, it's almost quite overwhelming. You could almost just bury your head because it's too hard, but it's really not that hard.

We have an obligation as studio owners to keep every single child safe that walks through our studio doors, but I guarantee probably 99% of people already are doing the majority of what they need to be doing.

We've gotta remove that panic, and then let's just do it together, and get it done, and we can set it up. It's not that hard. We currently are unregulated as such

within the industry, but the governments are getting on board. They're starting to really do stuff to help us out now.

All we're really needing to do is put together a portfolio of what we can do as a studio owner to keep our kids safe. Our codes of conduct, our training and recruiting, supervising, so we can show our parents exactly how we're doing this, and how this in turn keeps their kids safe.

It includes risk management, and identifying, complaints management, and again it's all that jargon of official government language, but it's not that hard. It can be done.

Chantelle: What are the types of things that you're doing in your studio with your teachers, and also training people to do in Dance Teacher Mastery, your program? What are some of the examples of things that we should kind of have on our radar as studio owners to really have? What do you think we need to be doing do you think on an annual basis or up front?

Jennifer Dalton: First and foremost is training. Without the knowledge we can't be expecting our teachers to be following the rules, because they don't know what to do without training. Probably again, it comes back to common sense. Just keeping communication open, listening to your kids. If you're feeling suspicious of something, if things don't feel right, we have to act on that.

Then the next step to that is, where do you go? It's up to the studio owner to know these things, and the information's out there. It really is just a responsibility to know these things, and then to impart that training onto our teachers.

Chantelle: I guess because it does vary so much from state to state, that's where I suppose that a lot of studio owners do feel that overwhelm of, you know, we all have the best intentions. Everyone wants to do the right thing, but sometimes it's not as clear cut. Have you found that in the past?

Jennifer Dalton: Yes. Look, that is, and again because I have looked across not only Australia and overseas, and looking at other countries as well to see what their policies are, and they are different so it is tricky. Ultimately, we're creating a child safe policy, which is a document that just tells us exactly what we're doing. We now have our codes of conduct, so it's our promise, our promise to our students, our promise to our families, our promise to our teachers. That's all we're putting together. The procedures that we follow, and once it's done, it's done. Then just little tweaking there.

Chantelle: You mentioned training before as a key component of this, and I guess for many of the studio owners that we work with and that you and I have known, they are so at capacity with just trying to run the studio that often training gets shuffled down the list, and if we do do training it's like, "Okay, let's talk about the recital coming up."

It's more artistic based than really about the experience maybe for teachers. How do you recommend or if you were to kind of give some ideas for the studio owners who are watching, what's involved in creating teacher training and what do you think are the things to really ensure that we're including back to the teachers?

Jennifer Dalton: It's a funny thing, training, because I think as time's going on it's getting more and more prevalent to become, training and such. I always will say to a studio owner, "Why did you start? What was your reason for wanting to become a teacher? What was your reason for wanting your career to teach?" Usually it's the same, "Sharing my passion for love, I wanna teach children, I wanna give them confidence," or even the adults, "I wanna impart my knowledge to just really help them grow and have amazing lives." At first it's easy, because that's all you're focusing on, and you can really hone in and work with them, but very quickly it grows.

Once you grow, you've got new people coming in, you're probably at different locations, so you almost lose that control, that quality control.

Ultimately it falls back to training. The problem with that is it takes time, and there's also a lack of confidence for some people not quite knowing where to start, not quite sure what to include. It really is, the secret's planning.

It's just having it planned out before you start, and I always, always say, "Allow for three to five days at the beginning of the year starting, whatever that is for you, and just dedicate that time." Have your plan out, I always say, "Start with how you wanna set it up for the year, then fill in your content, then have your dates all set for the year in advance, so everyone's on board, everyone knows."

You can then tweak as it comes up, so say you've got your July training set, and you've got three topics already in there, but you might need to throw in something because something imminent's happened at the time, you can, but it's all there. That's a five minute job over a whole couple of days going, "What am I gonna train on?" It really does come back to planning. Once it's done, again, it's done.

Chantelle: The weight is off your shoulders.

Jennifer Dalton: Yes!

Chantelle: From where I'm sitting it's interesting, there's a huge variation between how much training studio owners do. I don't know if you've found that. Some studio owners I know will do one day once a year, and that's pretty much their training. Others meet on a weekly basis face to face.

What do you find with your experience and your knowledge, where do you see that happy medium? If you were to recommend for a pretty average studio, how much training should we be doing for best results?

Jennifer Dalton: Well, you know, it really does come back to a studio's values and what's important to them. For the majority of people I work with, they absolutely want to give the ultimate experience to their families and their students. I find for me, my people, I need to connect with them. We'll have four official meetings within the year, four official training days of about four hours, but I also touch base individually with each of them.

Whether it's face to face or a quick online, it doesn't even have to be long, but there's that touch point which is just so crucial. Just that, "I haven't forgotten you, I still am appreciating everything you're doing, is there anything I can do?" Then if there are issues, they can be brought up straightaway, solutions given, and then it can generally just be moved on. It doesn't dwell, it doesn't grow into something that it doesn't need to be, and more problems, more time to sort things out.

There's no need to get to that point, and if you've got those regular touchpoints, your regular meeting times, everyone's on track. If there's problems, they can be sorted out.

Chantelle: What impact do you think that has if you're on the receiving end of that? How have you seen your team shift as you've come to really embrace more training with them, and more connection, and more care I suppose? What's changed in the team dynamic?

Jennifer Dalton: There has definitely been a change and a shift. I can remember even just a few years back when things were really crazy, and we moved away from where my focus has always been about them and the studio, and other things were happening that I was having to deal with.

I almost had taken a step back because I was having to deal with other stuff, but I did see that all of a sudden they sort of start to meander away, and they started to get, because they're not in my mind regularly. Remember why you're here, remember what our promise is, why we're doing this.

Being able to identify that, and again, coming back to self awareness and my self-awareness of, "Hang on, I need to fix something here." I was able then to realign, and we got everything back on track. Within weeks I could see it was, they're so important to me, obviously.

Apart from running my business when I'm not there, I really genuinely care for them. They're like my own, they're like my own children, sisters, and they need to know that. They need to be reminded. For them to give 100%, they need to know that I believe in them 100% and I'm here for them 100%.

Chantelle: Just listening to you talk, Jen, you can just completely feel the importance that you place on the team. It's fascinating to me working with so many different sizes of studios and different types of studios. There's this

incredible correlation that I've noticed between the success and the size of the studio, and the value a studio owner places on training.

It's almost as if, I don't know whether this, I've got no proof of this, but I just want to kind of pose this hypothesis that the more you invest in training the team, actually the more the business will grow, the more the studio will attract and retain students, and therefore the greater growth you'll achieve.

That's just from where I'm sitting, and truly across the board the most successful studios I know put so much heart, and love, and invest, it truly is an investment in their team and in their training. Have you found the same thing, and why do you think that is?

Jennifer Dalton: 100%. 100%, it falls back to that, because ultimately if anyone else but yourself is involved, the only way you can keep it at a level that is acceptable to you is to let people know how to do it. We can't have expectations of someone coming in to do what we think or do what we want if they don't know.

Chantelle: Yes.

Jennifer Dalton: That's a frustration that I get, and I feel sorry for some teachers that have to come into studios, and almost get reprimanded or bad-mouthed, but it's not their fault. If the studio hasn't set their expectations, hasn't given them clear guidelines and training, then how can they perform?

This is across the board. To me it's the fundamental, it's before anything, and it's not just your teachers. You need to train your students, you need to train your staff, they need to know to be able to perform. I'm very passionate, can you tell?

Chantelle: Just a tad. Just a tad, Jen, truly. If you think about it, you know one of my big passions is retention.

Jennifer Dalton: Yes.

Chantelle: What I see is that we spend so much time talking about costumes, and about music selection, and about concerts, and things like that, and recitals, that actually what is the core of our business?

Training is about retaining, and creating the experience, and building a connection, which is all things that, it's a different type of training.

I think studio owners have a concept of what training is, but it's actually not the foundations of what's gonna make your business grow. Do you wanna kind of talk about that, Jen? Because that's something I wish, I really want every studio owner to grasp.

Jennifer Dalton: You're talking about within a classroom? Is that what you mean by that?

Chantelle: Well, even external to the classroom, like what happens outside of the studio even impacts on retention in the studio. It's shifting away from just like, "These are the steps I want you to teach," or, "This is how I want you to improve your technique as a teacher," to training teachers on how to connect, and build relationship, and retain students. You with me?

Jennifer Dalton: Yeah, yeah. First and foremost, and the first thing I would teach whenever I'm teaching, whether it's training teachers or studio owners, it's self awareness. You need to be aware of your strengths and your weaknesses, and then where you can improve. By identifying that in each individual, then they can work on what they need.

I talk about the experience within my studio, so stepping back to my studio. The experience actually starts when they ... Well, there's the whole online experience, knowing what to expect, but from them walking from the car park into our doors it should almost be like magical. I don't even mean in the fairy way, but there should be eye contact straightaway and a smile.

Even if you're talking to someone else, you should make eye contact. You can still smile with your eyes. You can communicate with your eyes. It's these tiny little things that make such a difference. The shy dad that walks in every week, I will always say hi to him, just to make him feel it's okay to be there. It's that experience.

Then there's the experience within a classroom. There is so much more beyond teaching the steps, and this is where my passion lies, because you can be the best dancer in the world but if you can't connect or engage, you're not effectively gonna be passing and sharing on your passion and your talent that you really want to do. This is where there's a bit of a downfall in our industry, because there isn't the training on that.

Chantelle: Yeah.

Jennifer Dalton: There's not communication and management, behavior management. What do you do if you're in a classroom and you've got a child who's highly anxious, and you've got one who's crying, and you've got one who's stealing the show?

There's no training, so unless there's a senior teach training a junior teacher and imparting that knowledge, which is tricky in the classroom situation. This again comes back to the experience that the kid's going to have.

I want every single one of my children walking out the door going, "Wow, that was so great, I had so much fun," and feeling really special, but I also want my teachers to feel, "I did a great job, I was able to teach them the content, I was able to say everyone's name and they all smiled, they're all feeling good today."

It's such a package. Such a package, and that's where it all cycles. Your retention then cycles from that. Your parents are happy from that, the kids are happy from that, your staff are happy, studio owner's happy, because it's all happening. It just comes back down to training.

Chantelle: So beautifully said, Jen. So inspiring. It just makes sense. I think that's the best thing about your message, it makes sense. It's completely logical.

If we were to put a shiny bow on it, with all of your experience both in the police and running a studio, and now training dance studio owners in how to empower their team, what would you say is your number one tip? What is the essential, magic secret to creating a really inspiring environment and experience in a studio?

Jennifer Dalton: Look, simply it's to strive for mastery. When you look at mastery it's going from where you are to the next level of extraordinary excellence.

If every studio owner can get to extraordinary excellence, then the world will change, because it's then their responsibility to impart that extraordinary excellence into their team, to then impart onto their kids. It's really quite simple, really.

Chantelle: I just got goosebumps, Jen. I just got all tingly like. Now the world will change, our industry, the arts industry as a whole would change.

Jennifer Dalton: It's my mission. That's what I want. I want every single dance educator to achieve this level of mastery. That's my goal.

Chantelle: What a woman! What an inspiring woman, and thank you so much for all that you are doing to help, to bring mastery, and to bring an exceptional experience and exceptional education to students through dance.

It's truly such a privilege to learn from you, Jen. We truly as an industry, we're just beginning to really embrace this whole new way of learning about training our teachers. I think it's a very exciting time in our industry, and with people and leaders like you involved, we're in very good hands.

Jennifer Dalton: Thank you. Thank you very much.

Chantelle: You are so welcome. Well, Jen is one of our Studio Evolution members, and this is the kind of caliber of people we have in the program.

People who are out there trailblazing the industry and creating momentous changes in their studios, and striving for exceptional excellence. That's kind of the real essence of what our studio owners in Studio Evolution are achieving.



If you would like more information on joining this incredible tribe of studio owners, please go to [StudioExpansion.com/Evolution](https://StudioExpansion.com/Evolution). You can find out more about this program and how you too can strive for that excellence in your business.

Jen, once again, thank you so much for having this time with us. Truly, I got goosebumps, so inspired. We've learnt so much from you, and looking forward to seeing this next level of your incredible impact for work happening in our industry. Thank you so much. Also, where can people go to find out a little bit more about your programs and your content?

Jennifer Dalton: So the name of the business is Dance Teacher Central at [www.DanceTeacherCentral.com](https://www.DanceTeacherCentral.com). You can hook up there. We're also on Facebook, of course, and Instagram. I'd love to connect with anyone who might be interested.

Chantelle: Wonderful! Well, thank you again, Jen, so much, and for everyone we'll see you next time with more of our beautiful studio owner superstar spotlights. Thanks everyone, bye!