



Media Day & Competition Prep Playbook



**The difference between a great
photo day and a hard one is almost
never talent.**



WHY WE MADE THIS GUIDE

Every competition season has the same handful of mornings that go sideways: a bun that won't hold, a costume zipper stuck two minutes before call time, a portfolio session where your dancer looks tired in every frame because nobody ate breakfast. None of that is about talent. It's about prep, and prep is the one part of this whole process that's completely within your control.

Photographers, competition directors, and studio owners will tell you the same thing if you ask them directly: the families who have the smoothest picture days aren't the ones with the most expensive gear or the most elaborate routine. They're the ones who showed up with a plan. This guide is that plan. It's built from what photographers actually ask for, what competition packing lists actually include, and what tends to go wrong when nobody thought about it in advance.



1. The Competition Bag That Actually Saves the Day

A competition bag isn't the same as a dance bag. It needs to survive a full day of quick changes, touch-ups, and whatever the venue throws at you, backstage hallways are not climate controlled and greenrooms are rarely near a mirror. Pack for repair, not just for wear: safety pins, fashion tape, a small sewing kit, extra bobby pins and hair ties, and stain remover wipes belong in every bag regardless of routine count.

Food and water matter more than most packing lists admit. A dancer running on an energy drink and a granola bar by 2pm does not perform, smile, or photograph the way they did at 9am. Pack snacks that don't stain a costume and water that doesn't need refrigeration.

Actionable step:

Build a competition bag once and keep it stocked between events rather than repacking from scratch every time. A simple checklist taped inside the lid (pins, tape, sewing kit, hair supplies, snacks, water, stain wipes, phone charger) turns this into a five-minute task instead of a stressful morning scramble.



2. Hair and Makeup That Holds Under Lights

Stage and competition lighting is unforgiving in ways that regular indoor light isn't. Makeup that looks fine in a bathroom mirror can wash out completely under bright stage lights, and hair that looks secure standing still can come apart during a full-out run. Test the actual look, under conditions close to what you'll face, before competition day, not the morning of.

Hairstyles built for performance need to survive more than one number. A style that holds through a single dance but not a full day of changes, sweat, and re-styling is going to fail by number three. Ask your studio what hold products and techniques they recommend for their specific routines. They've seen what works and what falls apart by the finale.

Actionable step:

Do a full trial run, hair, makeup, and costume together, at least once before competition season starts, under lighting similar to what you'll perform under. It's the only way to catch a problem before it happens in front of a judge.



3. What to Pack for Comfort, Not Just Costume

Competition days run long, often eight, ten, twelve hours between call time and awards. Comfort during the waiting hours matters as much as anything happening on stage, and it's the part most packing lists skip entirely. A change of comfortable clothes for the hours between numbers, a phone charger, entertainment that doesn't involve a screen for the whole day, and a way to rest are not extras. They're what keeps a dancer's energy and mood intact for the numbers that matter.

Layers matter more than parents expect. Greenrooms and backstage areas run cold, auditoriums run warm, and a dancer moving between the two all day needs something easy to throw on and off that won't disturb hair or makeup.

Actionable step:

Pack one bag for performance (costumes, shoes, quick-change items) and a separate bag for the hours in between (comfortable clothes, a blanket or pillow, snacks, something to do). Keeping them separate means nobody's digging through tights and safety pins to find a granola bar.



4. Costume and Quick-Change Logistics

Quick changes are where competition days actually fall apart, not on stage, backstage, in a hallway, with two minutes and a costume that has a stuck zipper. Lay out every costume in performance order before the day starts, with accessories, shoes, and any specific hair or makeup notes attached to each one. A costume that's correct but out of order is just as much of a problem as one that's missing.

Label everything. Costume pieces, shoe bags, and accessory pouches that look identical to a parent backstage under pressure need names or numbers on them, especially at group numbers where multiple dancers' pieces end up in the same pile.

Actionable step:

The night before, lay out costumes in performance order in a garment rack or labeled bags, and do a full run-through of every quick change at home, timed, so you know exactly how long each one actually takes.



5. What a Photographer Actually Needs From You on Picture Day

Photographers who shoot competitions and studio picture days consistently name the same few things that make a session run smoothly: a dancer who's eaten recently, hair and makeup that's finished (not in progress) when they sit down, and a parent who isn't hovering or directing from behind the camera. A relaxed dancer photographs better than a perfectly posed one, and most of what makes a photo feel stiff traces back to pressure in the room, not the dancer's actual expression.

Timing matters too. Photographers scheduling multiple dancers back to back need families ready at their slot, not five minutes after. Being ready early is one of the few things a parent fully controls that directly improves the photos that come out of the day.

Actionable step:

Ask your studio or the competition photographer, in advance, exactly what they need from you: arrival time, what to bring, whether touch-ups are available on-site. A five-minute question ahead of time prevents most picture-day problems.



6. Preparing for a Portfolio or Headshot Session Specifically

A portfolio or headshot session is a different animal from a competition photo, it's slower, more directed, and usually more important for anything beyond this season, whether that's a talent submission, an agency look, or just a good current photo to have on hand. Bring a range of options: a few outfit choices, both natural and styled hair if relevant, and any specific looks a photographer or agent has asked for in advance.

Rest matters more here than almost anywhere else. A tired dancer's expressions read as flat or forced no matter how skilled the photographer is. A portfolio session scheduled after a full day of dance rarely produces the images a family is hoping for.

Actionable step:

Schedule portfolio and headshot sessions on their own day when possible, not tacked onto a competition or a full studio day, so your dancer arrives rested rather than already worn out.



7. The Conversation Before the Camera Turns On

The best preparation for any photo or video session isn't physical, it's a short conversation with your dancer beforehand about what to expect and how to handle it if something feels off. A dancer who knows she can say "I need a break" or "I'm not comfortable with that pose" walks into a session with more confidence than one who's never been told that's allowed.

This matters more as sessions get more professional, agency test shoots, brand content, anything with people your dancer hasn't worked with before. A quick check-in about who else will be there, what the session involves, and that you're reachable the whole time removes most of the uncertainty that makes a new situation feel stressful.

Actionable step:

Before any session with a new photographer or team, walk your dancer through what to expect and remind her that she can pause, ask a question, or say no to a specific request at any point, and that doing so is never going to get her in trouble.



8. When Something Goes Wrong

Even with good prep, something occasionally goes sideways: a costume malfunction, a scheduling mix-up, a photographer or staff member who makes your dancer or you uncomfortable. Knowing what to do in the moment matters more than trying to prevent every possible problem in advance, because some things simply aren't preventable.

Trust the reaction that something's off even if you can't immediately name why. A request that doesn't match what was agreed to beforehand, a set that isn't what was described, an adult who wants time alone with your dancer that wasn't part of the plan, these are all reasons to pause and ask questions before continuing, not after.

Actionable step:

If something feels wrong during any session, it's always acceptable to pause, ask for a parent-present break, or end the session early. No photographer, studio, or competition worth working with will make that difficult.



PARENTS —

Your job on competition and photo days isn't choreography and it isn't hair and makeup, most studios have that covered. It's logistics and calm. A parent who's organized, on time, and steady under pressure does more for how a day goes than almost anything else in the room, because dancers pick up on stress faster than anyone realizes.

The prep in this guide isn't about perfection. It's about removing as many small, preventable problems as possible so the day can go the way it's supposed to: your dancer performing, and you watching instead of scrambling.

Where Dent comes in:

If you're planning a portfolio or headshot session and want it handled by people who do this specifically for young performers, that's exactly what Dent's media day sessions are built for.