



The Pay-to-Play Playbook



**How to tell real opportunity from
an expensive invitation**



Why We Made This Guide

Almost every family hears it at some point. A friendly stranger at a competition, a mall, or in a DM says your dancer has "the look," and the next sentence involves a fee. It might be called a registration, a showcase, a portfolio package, or a spot at a convention. The name changes. The ask doesn't.

Those moments are hard because they land right on top of real hope. Your performer has worked for years, and somebody finally seems to be noticing. Saying no can feel like closing the one door that was ever going to open.

It usually isn't. Legitimate agencies and casting teams earn their money when your performer books paid work, and they are rarely the ones asking you to pay first. The offers that depend on a check before anything happens are built to sell access, not to find work.

We wrote this guide so you can tell the difference in the moment, while someone is smiling at you across a table. You'll find the fees that should make you stop, how conventions and opportunity really work, why pressure is a warning sign by itself, and how to check anyone out before you sign or pay. There's also a section for parents, because you are the one holding the checkbook and hearing the pitch.

Nobody is asking you to be suspicious of every opportunity. The goal is simply to be hard to rush.



1. Why Real Agencies Get Paid When You Do

Start with how the business actually works, because everything else follows from it. A legitimate agency makes money by taking a percentage of what your performer earns on a paid job. That is the whole model. If you don't book paid work, the agency doesn't get paid, and that is exactly what keeps their interests lined up with yours.

The Federal Trade Commission puts it plainly: real modeling agencies find work for models and actors, and they get paid when you get paid.

Legit Agencies Vs Traditional Pay-to-Play to avoid (like schools)

Real agencies generate the majority of their income in commissions from booking models paid work.

Modeling schools generate the majority of their income off the backs of their models by selling high-priced classes, curriculum, training.

Once money flows the other direction, the incentive flips. An organization that profits from your fees has no financial reason to find your child work. It only needs you to keep believing work is coming.

How does the company spend the majority of their operational time: By getting models to buy classes or promoting/looking for commercial work for them. That tells a lot about how the company works.

Even good agencies can't promise a steady stream of jobs, since assignments are irregular for working performers too. Treat any guarantee as a warning, not a comfort.

Actionable step:

Before any conversation about money, ask this out loud: "How does your agency get paid?" A real agent answers in one sentence, and the answer involves commission. If it drifts toward fees, packages, or programs, you have your answer.



2. The Fees That Should Stop You Cold

Pay-to-play almost never calls itself a fee. It shows up with a friendlier name, and the list is longer than most families expect:

- Registration, application, or "consideration" fees
- Mandatory classes, coaching, or a "development program" that supposedly leads to signing
- A charge to hold a spot, secure a placement, or be seen by the right people

What these share is timing. Every one asks for money before any job exists. The FTC specifically lists paying for “opportunity/potential”, or to secure a spot as things real agencies don't ask for.

A workable rule: money should reach your performer after they work, not leave your family before they do. The exception is a cost you choose freely for your own reasons, like a headshot or portfolio session, which section 7 covers. That is a purchase, not an entry ticket.

Actionable step:

Write down the fees your family will never pay for representation and keep the list in your phone notes. When a pitch arrives, check it against the list instead of deciding under pressure.



3. The Convention Pitch

Talent conventions and showcases are built around a promise: agents and casting directors from big markets will be in the room, and your performer can be seen by all of them in a single weekend. The ticket is expensive, and travel, hotel, and add-on packages often cost more than the entry itself.

What the room usually delivers is a very short slot in front of a crowd, sometimes as brief as half a minute. Treat a big pile of callbacks the way you'd treat any other flattery, especially if the next step is another payment.

Real agencies don't typically host these kinds of events. Many hold open calls at their own offices at no cost, and plenty of people in the industry will tell you that most performers start by approaching agencies directly, or are scouted directly, not by buying a seat at an event. That's worth knowing before you plan a trip around one.

None of this means every event is a scam. Some are simply expensive workshops. The question is whether the organizers earn their money from placing your child, or from selling you a ticket.

Actionable step:

Before paying for any event, email the organizers three questions: which agencies attended last year, how many attendees signed with them, and whether you can speak with a family who did. Notice how quickly and how specifically they answer.



4. The Photographer You're Required to Use

Good photos matter, and any agent will tell you which ones a performer needs. The red flag appears when the agency tells you who has to take them.

The FTC lists an agency that makes using its photographers a condition of getting assignments as a warning sign. The setup is simple: you pay for a session, the files go into a package, and the agency's recommendation quietly becomes a requirement. Ask whether the agency has any financial tie to that photographer.

A healthy version looks different. A real agent might suggest a few photographers, explain the kind of image they want, and be fine with you using someone else. Plenty of photographers and agents work together honestly. The test is whether you have a real choice.

This protects your child, too. Any shoot with a minor should have clear written terms, a parent or guardian present, and a photographer you had time to research, not one assigned at the last minute.

Actionable step:

Ask the agency in writing: "Am I free to use any photographer, and will you still consider my performer if I do?" Keep the reply. An answer is often clearer on paper than in person.



5. Pressure Is the Product

A deadline that comes from the other side of the table is almost never about your family. "We only have two spots left." "This price ends today." "If you leave without signing, I can't hold this." Lines like these exist because they work on a tired parent who wants to say yes for a child who is standing right there looking hopeful.

Pressure to rush a contract as one of the clearest warning signs of a possible scam. Real opportunities survive a night of sleep. A casting director who wants your performer will still want them tomorrow, and an agency worth signing with will expect you to read the paperwork.

Pay attention to how the pressure feels, too. Flattery that keeps escalating, big claims about past stars with no names attached, or attention that turns cold the moment you hesitate all say something about the business model.

You are allowed to say, "We never sign or pay on the spot, but we'd love to see the paperwork." Say it kindly and say it early. Honest organizations will say fine. The others start changing the terms.

Actionable step:

Adopt a family 24-hour rule: no signature, deposit, or card number on the day an offer is made. Tell your performer about the rule ahead of time so it feels like a family policy, not a rejection.



6. Check Them Out Before You Check Out

Verification takes under an hour and is the best use of that hour. Start by searching the company name alongside words like scam, review, and complaint, and look past the first page of results, since paid listings and glowing testimonials are easy to produce.

Ask for references from performers who recently booked paid work through them, then contact those families directly. Ask which clients they have actually placed talent with, and see whether you can confirm one. Check that they have a real business address that isn't a private residence, and a working website with a history that matches their story.

The FTC also suggests contacting your state attorney general's office about licensing and bonding for talent agencies, and getting every promise in writing. Rules differ by state, so check yours instead of assuming.

One more question tells you a lot: where does most of their income come from, job placements or services they sell? A straight answer is a good sign. Vagueness is the other kind.

If a lead is hard to judge, Dent's Lead Screening & Assistance service can review the offer, the organization, and the paperwork with you before you respond.

Actionable step:

Run the one-hour check on any offer you're seriously considering: search, references, address, attorney general. Write down what you find so the decision rests on facts instead of the pitch.



7. Paying for Growth vs. Paying for Access

Not every cost in this world is a trap. Dancers pay for classes, competitions, coaching, and costumes all the time, and good headshots and portfolio sessions are a normal part of getting started. The difference is what the money is for and who decides.

Paying for growth means you chose it, you can compare prices, and it holds its value whether or not anyone ever signs your child. A headshot session is worth it if you like the photos. A class is worth it if your performer learns something.

Paying for access is different. It's money handed over because someone implied it opens a door, or because it was presented as a requirement for being considered. If the value of the purchase depends on a promise of "potential opportunity", you are buying hope, and the seller has no obligation to deliver it.

A practical example is our own \$50 Studio fee for in-person shoots - the fee is small. Nobody's sustaining a business operation with \$50 shoots. Commercial spaces cost money - this fee helps to offset the overhead we assume while we're investing in you to prepare you for the industry. It's a purchase an exchange for a returned product photos (and on-set camera/posing experience/education). Not hope and potential.

A quick test helps. Would you still be glad you spent this money if nothing came of the opportunity attached to it? If yes, it's growth. If you'd feel cheated, treat it as access and pause.

Actionable step:

Before paying for any training, session, or event, finish this sentence out loud: "I'm buying this because ____, and I'd still be glad I did if no agency ever calls." If you can't finish it honestly, wait.



8. Investment vs. Expense

This one is probably the most challenging aspects of vetting the value of a pay to play opportunity.

Some (we stress SOME) pay to play opportunities may be worth pursuing if there's clear, demonstrated return that will forward your career. This is a high bar and should be evaluated carefully.

Models seeking to advance their career need to get in front of the right people. Agencies do alot to help facilitate that. Sometimes this can include select, vetted, pay to play opportunities. Jaze Companies, Dent's parent company, maintains a select number of these that they consider based on a consistent track record of those opportunities providing direct benefit and advancement of a model's career goals.

- The value of measurable benefit should exceed the cost to participate. This one is hard because there's a fine line between 'hope' and 'product'. **Measurable** is the bar. What verified historical evidence of results (and is it a high percentage) can you point to. If you can't name a tangible return, it's more likely an expense, not an investment.
- Does the recommending party profit from your participation? Be cautious if the party suggesting the opportunity financially benefits from your participation. This should cause you to pause and review more carefully.
- Networking does have a value - but only if it's the right environment. Paying for access to a group of people who can move your career forward can be beneficial but it has to be right place, right time, right people. Talent showcases are rarely those forums. Look for 'mixers' and networking social events. Places where you can actually have a dialog with someone beyond a 30-second walk across a stage or boiler-plate 5 question interview. Fashion show/Photoshoot events can be great backstage networking opportunities if you use your time wisely.
- Is it you or everyone? Mass-marketed pay to play opportunities should be viewed more skeptically. If an organization is 'inviting everyone' it's probably more likely it's a money grab. Proceed with caution and lots of questions.

Actionable step:

Dent's opportunity review process is designed to help talent and parents navigate these kinds of situations. If you're evaluating opportunities like this we invite you to leverage our industry experience to help ensure you're making a properly informed decision.



9. Parents: Be the Calm One in the Room

Your child watches how you handle these moments more closely than you think. If you light up at flattery and reach for the checkbook, they learn that being noticed is the goal. If you stay curious and slow things down, they learn that good opportunities can be checked.

Talk about this before an event, not during it. Tell your performer that people sometimes make big promises, that it's fine to feel flattered, and that your family always looks at the details before deciding anything. Agree on the plan together so you aren't saying no in front of them to someone who just praised them.

Keep one adult in charge of money and signatures. Anyone who wants your performer to sign, pay, or attend something should be talking with a parent or guardian, and a pitch that tries to go around you is information in itself.

If you do say no, don't let it land as a verdict on your dancer's talent. It is a no to that offer, not to the dream. There will be other chances, and the ones worth taking will still be there after you've read the contract.

Actionable step:

Pick a calm line now, like "Thanks, we'll look it over and be in touch," and practice it once with your performer so you both know it before the next pitch.



10. Decide Your Walk-Away Rule Before You Walk In

The families who get caught are rarely careless. They are usually tired, hopeful, and deciding in a hurry, in a room built to make that easy. A rule you set in advance does the work your judgment can't in the moment.

Put it together at home: the fees you won't pay, the 24-hour waiting period, the people you'll check with, and who has the final word. Write it down, share it with whoever travels with you, and bring it along.

It also helps to build your own visibility instead of relying on anyone's stage. A clean portfolio page that agencies can find on their own gives your performer a presence no one can charge you to access. Sitelink.Pro is built for exactly that, so your performer's best work stays easy to find without paying anyone for a seat.

If you've already paid and now have doubts, you still have options. Gather every document, receipt, and message. Contact your card issuer promptly if you paid by card. Check your contract for cancellation and refund terms, and contact us for assistance. Acting early helps, and it helps the next family too.

Actionable step:

Write your walk-away rule on one page and keep it with your competition travel documents. Read it together in the car before any event where agents or recruiters might be present.