Expectations are high for the children in The Joffrey Ballet's The Nutcracker. And Willy Shives, ballet master of the Joffrey's children's cast, says these very diligent young dancers rise to the challenge. They have been in rehearsals since October for this 25th anniversary Nutcracker season.

"I'm having a blast," says Shives, a dad of two dancers who also spent years in the children's cast and who admits The Nutcracker is his favorite ballet. "I love working with the children. I absolutely love it."

The children help make The Nutcracker so successful. "It becomes one big, beautiful picture," Shives says. "At one point, the children are the picture you see and the company members become the frame for the children. And then it swaps. The company becomes the picture and the children become the frame for the company."
Chicago Parent gets a behind-the-scenes peek at the hard work (plus the fun) that goes into The Joffrey Ballet's children's cast.

The older dancers perform as both the mice and the pantomime, while the younger dancers transform into the dolls.