Special Dances for Special Kids

by Becky Walker

Over the past few years, the *CDSS News* has featured articles concerning the teaching of traditional dance in the schools. I have found these pieces invaluable in planning the school classes I've taught. I've worked mainly with third and fourth grade children, usually in a weeklong residency, where I meet with the classes each day as part of the music, art or physical education program.

This school year, I was asked to work with the self contained (i.e., special education) classes at our local elementary school. There are three such classes, separated into age/grade groups, with the youngest being second grade and the oldest, fifth. The students vary in age and academic abilities, and they exhibit a collection of behavior problems, learning disabilities and emotional troubles, as well as a few physical and mental handicaps. There is also a projects-oriented class for kids with motivational problems.

Since I have experience with a variety of handicrafts, I decided to share some of my expertise by implementing a Folk Arts program, with traditional music and dance being a large part of it. Through my residencies I had seen the benefits of dance in action — it's a perfect venue to teach social skills, such as cooperation and consideration, and it develops listening skills, while enhancing physical awareness. Besides that, it's fun!

Right away I was faced with a dilemma — the students in these groups were primarily boys, and, as any teachers among you know, boys of that age are very resistant to physical contact. I knew they would not want to hold hands. I needed another approach.

Fortunately, I live close to and dance often at the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, North Carolina. I've taken some workshops in morris dancing, and several friends and relatives dance with the border morris team there. I felt that the kids would enjoy the exuberant spirit of morris dancing and would appreciate being able to relate to their partners and the others in the set without having to hold hands.

Because of scheduling, each class would have to be taught separately with the idea of combining them for performance. I was working with kids with virtually no dance experience and certainly no inkling of morris dance, so we began with a brief history, emphasizing the traditional aspect of predominantly male participation. This captured their interest right away.

I looked to CDSS for material. Paul Kerlee's *Welcome in the Spring* and Heather Braxton's *Country Kids* were helpful, but with the total inexperience of my groups, I decided that even the simplest of these dances might be too difficult initially. I knew that these children become easily frustrated and, therefore, uncooperative, so I needed to begin at a very basic level. With apologies to the morris tradition, I composed an introductory dance (see below) to the Chimes of Dunkirk tune found in the book of the same name by the New England Dancing Masters. I was familiar with the tune, since I often teach the "real" dance in my residency program, but as I am, at best, an intermediate musician, I doubted my ability to play and prompt at the same time. There are ten repetitions of the tune on the recording, so my composition uses ten figures with a chorus following each. Through many hours of practice, I can now provide live music, which enables the dance and the music to fit together more smoothly. If someone forgets what to do, or if several dancers fall behind, I can adjust the music accordingly.

Since we only began dancing at the beginning of the school year, I had planned for a program in the spring to correspond with our annual maypole dance. The school's music teacher, Debbie Rukat, invited us to join her chorus group for a Christmas performance. Since morris dancing is often a part of holiday festivities, I composed a second dance to the tune of Jingle Bells in the spirit of the season, and we began to practice in earnest. We started making costumes — sewing rag strips onto vests and making felt masks, decorating them with beads, buttons and ribbons. We studied pictures of traditional morris dancers, including the team from Brasstown, to get some ideas. (We plan to paint our sticks to complete our kits.) The art teacher, Liz Zumbrunnen, has been helpful with these projects, and each child has worked on his or her outfit.

As I write this in January, I can report that our performances were a complete success. Before the holiday break, we danced at the Christmas dinner at school and accompanied the chorus to the South Carolina Welcome

Center and the county District Office. The presentations were well received, and many people were pleasantly surprised at what these children had accomplished. They worked together, helped each other and put on a very good show.

During the remainder of the school year, we will learn a few more dances and refine the ones we know. Since I plan for this to be a continuing program, as the children progress through the grades, we can add to our repertoire, moving on to more challenging material. Hopefully, we have begun a tradition that will be eagerly anticipated each year by the dancers and appreciated by the school and the community. My greatest reward has been to witness the pride that these children have exhibited in having the opportunity to do something "special" in the positive sense, instead of the usual connotation of that word in reference to them. To sum it up — one of my little "tough" guys was overheard commenting, "Hey, I never knew dancing could be so much fun!" That was priceless!

Chimes of Dunkirk Morris Dance
Longways set: Odds on gents' side and Evens on ladies' side
(12 to 15 inch sticks held in right hands throughout, on shoulders when not in use)

Figures
1 Lead up and back (marching)
2 Odd line around Even line (skipping)
3 Evens around Odds
4 Do-si-do with partner
5 Seesaw (left shoulder do-si-do) with partner
6 Half rounds (Odds face up, Evens face down) going half way around set
7 Half rounds (Evens face up, Odds face down)
8 Low stars (sticks in low) in groups of four
9 High stars (sticks in high)
10 Lead up and back

Chorus (follows each figure):
Bl Odds strike right-left-right, then left-right-left
Partners change places, passing by the right shoulder
B2 Evens strike as above and partners change places

At the end, partners hold sticks high, crossed to form an arch. The first couple then casts under the arch to exit, with each pair following in turn.

Becky Walker is a longtime dancer and a cofounder of the Oconee Community Dancers, where she often plays in the house band and sometimes calls. She's on the roster of artists for the South Carolina Arts Commission and teaches traditional dance and feltmaking under their Arts in Education program. She lives with her husband and daughter in Mountain Rest and can be contacted at beckyw@oconee.k12.sc.us. *"Special Dances for Special Kids" was published in the CDSS News, issue #171, March/April 2003.*