

All Join Hands

Dispatches from the world of community dancing

Adapting for Young Dancers

By Marian Rose

As laid out in earlier *All Join Hands* articles, the craft of calling community dances is very different from that required to lead contras or squares or English country dances. Attendees at a community dance are likely to be more diverse in terms of their ages, abilities and reasons for attending the dance. Therefore, the caller needs to be able to provide a positive experience for very young and very old dancers, those with limited physical abilities, and attendees whose attention may be distracted by other activities happening at the same time. In this article, we will look at the strategies and repertoire that are helpful when there are very young children in attendance, either just a few in a crowd of adults, or a whole room full of them.

As we get known in our communities as a dance caller, it is common to be invited to call a 'square dance' at an event that includes pre-school children. There may be a moment of panic as we try to figure out how we can successfully call square dances when the average age of the dancers in the room is in the low single digits. It is useful here to remember that the organizers may have a very different concept of square dancing than your average CDSS member does and may just want something to go with a country-ish theme. Hay bales, elbow swings, and fiddle music may do the trick, or you could get away with including references to cowboys and farm animals.

As in every community calling event, dances involving young children require a specifically adapted repertoire, the ability to improvise, and an open and welcoming attitude. The caller must take stock of who is at the dance, what the dancers are able to do, and what they (or the

organizers) want to do. This article includes words of advice from people who specialize in such events and have useful suggestions how adults and little ones can happily co-exist on the dance floor.

Who is at the dance?

There are many scenarios in which a community caller will see children on the dance floor. There may be mostly adults with a sprinkling of young ones, all children of the same age, mixed-age children, children with their parents (who may or may not expect to be dancing as well). At a mostly adult event with a few young children it may be enough to make some adaptations such as relaxed timing, spoken encouragements, and suggestions on how to adapt swings, hand holds, and tricky figures. At a pre-school event with parents and kids, you could choose a completely pre-school repertoire, and encourage the adults to have a joyful time dancing and playing with their children. Other situations would demand some combination of these two.

Kids at the pre-school age are just experimenting with how their bodies move and have tons of energy, especially when provided with dynamic music. There are some exceptional children who, at a very young age, are physically able to do virtually any dance that adults can do, but they are the exception to the rule and still have the emotional reactions appropriate for their age. Children love to interact with their partner and other dancers and to imitate the dancing style of their elders, and they can be delightfully enthusiastic. However, they may also likely exhibit shyness, short attention span, left/



right confusion, short stature, the desire to stay with one partner, and a tendency to be distracted by something more interesting on the other side of the room. Children seem to love successfully mastering the patterns in a dance, and those with some experience dancing will often request their favourite dances, which often include moves such as sashay, arches, galloping, and clapping. They love to be the ones ‘in the know’, to teach their parents how to do the dance, and they also have a strong sense of justice: everyone MUST have a chance to be at the top of the set. If you have the luxury to work with the children before the family dance, they can help their parents put down their cell phones and join in the dance.

Teaching tips

- Keep it simple and fun, use great music, do dances that you love.
- Make sure that the first dance is super easy and allows for latecomers to join in.
- Modify moves to make them easier. Swings can be done with an elbow or two-hands, and do-si-do can be a simple walk-around. Polkas and waltzes can be done in an approximate position.
- Be creative when partnering: use solo dances, trios, and other non-binary partnerships.
- For partner dances, encourage youngest children to dance with adults or with older children. A parent can dance as one person with a toddler attached to their leg, variously referred to as ‘Gemini Twins’, ‘Sidecar’ or a ‘Two-headed monster’.
- Keep transitions brief and seamless.
- Use as little verbal instruction as possible. Physical modelling and moves that were taught earlier can be used in subsequent dances.
- Children are accustomed to sitting down to hear instructions. This can be used at the beginning of the dance, in the middle to teach a move that needs to be modelled, or at the end to calm them down with a story or a song.
- Keep in mind preschool concepts, such as loud/quiet, high/low, fast/slow, smooth/rough, etc. Children LOVE a change in dynamics, and it’s a useful management tool for callers.
- Very young children can melt down in a heartbeat. Know that this may happen in the middle of the dance and adapt when it does.
- Most adults are accommodating and helpful in

the presence of young dancers, but they may need a reminder to let children’s feet stay on the ground and to help them get to where they need to be for the next move.

- Don’t worry too much if people are using the right foot or the left hand.
- Consider slowing down the music. Once they know the dance, offer them the challenge of doing it at warp speed.
- Easy way to form a circle of partners: get a partner and start promenading around the hall while inviting other dancers to find partners and follow.
- Silliness is a language that children understand, but it should be used with discretion.

Repertoire

It is difficult to know where to begin to recommend the repertoire that works when there are young people in the crowd, as the possibilities are endless. It is not within the scope of this article to include the instructions for each dance, but the following are some general suggestions of how to approach your repertoire. The good news is that there are dozens of resources created for just this purpose, many of which are available in the Children and Community Dance section of the CDSS store.

If you are a caller who is also a CDSS member, you likely have a repertoire for community dances that includes circles, longways, scatter mixers, and possibly squares. All of these can be used when there are children present, but they will likely need some adaptations. For instance, in a cast-off (as in *Virginia Reel*), a three-year-old at the front may need some help to turn and go the opposite direction from their partner. Many square dance figures can be done with three or five or more couples and no reference to the right-or-left-hand partner. Any dance with arches may become problematic when two short people are making the arch. Encourage them to let go and make a virtual arch, which makes life easier for the tall dancers and doesn’t seem to diminish the pleasure on the part of the little ones.

You will also benefit from a wider repertoire of dances which may include international folkdances, (such as *Zemer Atik*, *Alunelul*, *Yesh*) which can be modified according to your needs. Classic children’s dances such as *Bluebird Bluebird* and *Grand Old Duke of York* can be tons of fun, even for adults who tend to get caught up

by the children's delight in them. Others that are more game-like such as the *Paddle Dance*, *Musical Chairs*, and *Tunnelmania* can provide variety. If the crowd consists of a mix of ages, including other-aged children, the very-yongs get swept up into the mix and it is not necessary to use much specifically preschool repertoire.

Here are some other repertoire suggestions:

- Start with a no-partner circle: forward & back, circle left and right; improvise other figures, maybe add a spiral, a swing, or a promenade.
- Simple circles are great, but if you are calling to a group that is mostly children, you'll need a few adults to anchor the circle. There will likely be pulling, walking backwards, a kid who doesn't want to hold hands, etc.
- Use lots of variety: a solo dance, then a partner dance with family, then a circle, then a line dance, then a game, then a story.
- Dances with claps, stamps, vocalisations, and freezes tend to be winners.
- Scatter mixers such as *Sasha*, *Traffic Jam*, and *Chaos Mixer*.
- Singing games with stories like *Highland Gates* or *Thorn Rosa*.
- Cumulative dances like *Seven Jumps* or songs like *Rattlin' Bog* and *Comin' 'Round the Mountain*.
- Simplify dances such as *La Bastringue*, *Heel Toe Mixer*, and *Family Waltz* so that they don't change partners.
- Stories are a wonderful addition, as an introduction to a singing game, as a break in the activities, or as a calm-down at the end of the evening.

Your repertoire for calling family-oriented community dances is your greatest tool, and collecting it can be a whole lot of fun. If you possibly can make it to a Pourparler event, held in different regions of the U.S. each fall, you will meet others who specialize in community dance calling and are more than willing to share their expertise. More information at nfo-usa.org/pourparler/. CDSS family camps are a great way to collect repertoire and meet some great families who love this stuff. The National Folk Organization supports the Pourparler, holds events, and includes many people who know international dance repertoire and how it works for

children. If none of these are possible for you, then go the CDSS store and buy a few of the resources you find there. Many of the authors of those resources are regular attendees at Pourparler and other camps, and are some of the most fun, caring, and generous people on the planet.

Transferrable Skills

It may occur to you that much of the advice contained in this article is applicable for callers of any style and dancers of any age. Adapting swings and dance styles, modifying a figure to suit individual needs, helping people get where they want to be, and smiling at everyone are essential skills for every great dancer. Presenting dances appropriate for the assembled crowd, helping them be successful with a minimum of teaching, having a warm and welcoming attitude, and choosing great music are all qualities of great callers. When young people learn to dance, they are learning community, cooperation, and courtesy, all skills that will serve them and us well in the coming years.

As with all the All Join Hands articles, much of the wisdom you have read here comes from discussions at Pourparler weekends and the associated PP listserve. This edition features contributions from Sue Hulsether, Peter Amidon, David Millstone, Deirdre Murtha, Denise Weiss, Amy Cann, Andy Wilson, Eric Maring, Chrissy Fowler, Donna Frankel, and Claire Takemori.

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