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COTILLION TEACHING CHILDREN

PROPER STEPS

DANCE CLASSES INSTILL YOUNGSTERS WITH OLD-FASHIONED MANNERS



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MILTON, MASS - The ladies, ankles demurely crossed, sit side by side, poised for the onslaught. Facing them, seated in a row of chairs across the chandeliered room, the fidgety gentlemen strive for perfect posture as they await their cue. "Conduct yourselves as ladies and gentlemen," they are instructed. "Smile when asked to dance, and always say yes." Let the music begin.

As spit-shined boys zero in on their dance partners the cotillion held at the Milton Woman's Club gets off to a lively start. The formal dance class is to teach young ladies and gentlemen the art of ballroom dance and the importance of social etiquette.

This particular Sunday evening class - a "Fabulous 50's" theme party is followed by a "Roaring 20's" party.

In the younger class, boys and girls alike faced the same dilemma: They love to dance, but the thought of dancing with

the opposite sex makes their skin crawl. Asked how the cotillion class was going so far, 8-year-old Andrea Harris of Milton said, "I'm really enjoying it. The dances are cool."

Asked if she minded dancing with boys, she answered for the group with a flip of her beribboned pigtails: "A little bit, I mind because they are total geeks."

Be that as it may, Andrea and the other girls smile and say "yes" when the boys ask them to dance an unlikely foxtrot to a rocking Elvis tune. The children are instructed to look their partners in the eye, introduce themselves and find out at least two pieces of information about them. Those girls not asked to dance are instructed on how to politely cut in - a gentle tap on the shoulder, if you please.

Unlike some past cotillion programs in the region, no one checks bloodlines at the door here. The Milton cotillion,

directed by the *Jon D. Williams Cotillions* of Denver, is open to any child and provides scholarships for those who cannot afford it. Inclusion is strictly on a first-come, first-served basis.

Last Sunday night's class represented a diverse racial and ethnic mix. With everyone dressed in their best 50's finery, social status was undetectable. Many girls sported similar pink poodle skirts, made for the occasion by one of the parents. And, to avoid any semblance of sexism, an equal number of "lady's choice" dances were offered.

"There is a lot of concern that it's upper class," said Ward Sear, director for the *Jon D. Williams Cotillions*. "It is open to everyone. It is affordable enough that anyone can take it."

More than 10,000 children enroll annually in more than 50 Williams programs nationwide, he said. He added that the company contributes to charities that directly benefit its host communities.

The program emphasizes that appearance, manners, and deportment are keys to self-esteem and future success. The Williams philosophy struck a chord with many parents:

It is not where you are from, but where you are going and how you conduct yourself in the process that matters.

Leslie Durgin, of the Milton Cotillion, first heard about the Williams program through a friend in Winchester, where another class is running. She and her husband, Paul, along with Roxanna and Jeff Hurst co-chair the program.

"Respect for other people is so important," said Roxanna Hurst, a chaperone at the recent party.

"In this hurried world, courtesy is gone. We need to remind them and remind ourselves."



Her son, Slater, who is 9, sported sockless penny loafers, jeans, and a white shirt in keeping with the night's 50's theme. But on nonparty nights, boys are required to wear suits or sport coats, ties and dress shoes.

Girls must wear a dress or dress skirts, blouses, flats or low heels and white gloves. The gloves are optional for the older girls. The invitation warns ... "to avoid any unnecessary embarrassment the dress codes are strictly observed."

The gloves serve a practical purpose Sear said, "At that age they don't like to touch each other."

Young Slater will vouch for that. He said he wasn't so sure about dancing with girls at first because, as any boy here will tell you, they are "yucky". Now he practices newly learned steps at home with his sister, Madeline, 10, who is in the older children's class. He and others agree the classes are fun. "He came under duress," his mother said. "But I have not had any trouble getting him dressed in a coat and tie."

Offering tips and conversation starters, Mr. Sear fits right in with his students asking, "Gentlemen, do you ever sit down before your partner?" he asked between numbers. "Never! Always wait until the lady is seated first."

Such adherence to tradition, including bowing and curtsying to each other and to parents in a receiving line before class, may seem outdated to some. Girls must sit with crossed ankles find boys are expected to serve them cookies and punch

"It's kind of old fashioned," Roxanna Hurst said. "But there are other things built in. Things like holding doors, things we forget, but, were once commonplace."

Hurst and other parents

point out that manners may sink in better when they are taught by a third party instead of by a nagging mom or dad.

Sear insists good manners, proper table etiquette, and consideration for others are more important than ever in today's competitive world. "I don't see it as not being contemporary," he said, "I think it's very contemporary. They learn to treat each other with respect."



Ward S. Sear
JDWC Director

"Dance is used as a tool to teach practical skills in social etiquette and communication while the children have fun," she said. "As they grow, children will always face situations in which they will need to know how to dance."

Dancing is part of our American culture," he said. It is a good thing to know how to do."

Along with teaching how to move one's feet to the box step, Sear solicited examples of good manners from his students. "And why do we have good manners?" he asked. "To show respect for other people."