

Engaging Families in Your (not-necessarily-“Family”) Dance

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Puttin’ On the Dance 2: Hands Across the Border

Ottawa, ON March 21, 2015

Strategies for Engaging Families

ATTRACT FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN	
Why? Because word of mouth is what gets most people to a dance, and if you get families to come, they will bring others.	
Co-produce the dance series with an affinity group	<i>Put on the dance with a church, school, community organization, traditional music school, etc.</i>
Target invitations to other groups that also have high levels of family engagement (affinity groups)	<i>Such as, camps, homeschoolers, private schools, public schools, childcare centers, theater groups, music teachers, mothers’ groups, La Leche League, girl scouts/boy scouts. (In Belfast ME these groups include homeschoolers, Maine Fiddle Campers, UU Church members, and participants in BFS community dance.)</i>
Invite groups to visit or play a special role in the dance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Theater group, Morris dance team, Scottish dancers can do demos</i> - <i>Art classes can sketch, paint, photograph during dance</i> - <i>Music students play in band</i>
Support school dance residencies	<i>Especially if committee/board includes callers/teachers. Could be a single special school dance. Engages parents with young children, teachers, and administrators. Can help make dancing a part of the wider culture.</i>
Produce or support a local family dance or community dance	<i>Hook families with young children early on. Dancing becomes part of their family traditions. A family dance can run before your non-family dance, or be a separate series altogether</i>
Hire multi-age bands	<i>Have open bands, hire established family bands, suggest music teachers bring their students to play, etc.</i>
Serve food!	<i>Incorporate a meal, snacks, potluck, or “coffee break” (as in Denmark). People of all ages connect around food.</i>
Include other family-friendly activities in the event	<i>Such as, children’s performers like singers, clowns or balloon artists; toy-making or musical instrument making workshops</i>

PREPARE YOUR CALLERS	
Why? Because callers have the microphone, wielding extraordinary power to shape the dance experience	
Book callers whose skills match your vision	<i>Those who work well with dancers of diverse skill levels have a welcoming attitude and good sense of humor, have wide repertoire for all situations, are inclusive.</i>
Be clear that your series welcomes dancers of all ages, including families	<i>Knowing this will guide callers for their most effective programming, preparation, and planning.</i>
Give callers advance notice	<i>Surprises can be challenging for even the most talented callers! Advance notice is respectful and considerate, but also in your best interest.</i>
Communicate proactively re: committee's expectations for programming	<i>For example, we like family-friendly and beginner-friendly programming. (See Belfast Flying Shoes caller info sheet.) Proactivity can be critical to counterbalance potentially contrary in-the-moment feedback the caller gets from dancers (likely to come from the "overactive 10%," e.g., the hardcore dancers complaining about wanting complex material, or wanting kids kept out of the hall, etc.)</i>

SEND META-MESSAGES	
Why? Because you want your messaging to be consistent with your goal of engaging families	
Leadership is family-oriented!	<i>Leadership includes youth, leadership brings their family, leadership rejects or ignores advice that may be contrary to family engagement, leadership reaches out to make personal connections with families (both potential attendees and actual attendees)</i>
Families are welcome!	<i>Announcements at dance explicitly state that families, all ages, all experience levels are welcome. (Be consistent, cheerful, unapologetic.) Consider how to accommodate families with young children who may need/want to sleep – without necessarily excluding or segregating children. Include family-specific pricing.</i>
We expect children to dance!	<i>Be clear children are welcome on the dance floor; charge admission for children (even if reduced rate). Address disruptive behaviors ("We are here to dance, not to play tag").</i>
We proactively address any issues that arise!	<i>Solve problems that may be caused by your engagement of families.</i>
It's okay to make mistakes!	<i>Build this into dance series culture. Include in announcements. Book callers with this attitude.</i>

INCORPORATE IT INTO YOUR MARKETING STRATEGY

Why? Because marketing gets people to come to your dance and to keep coming back – marketing must be consistent with engaging families

Directly ask people to spread the word	<i>Children/teens/young adults invite their peers, families invite relatives and family friends.</i>
Have differentiated pricing	<i>Lower prices for children or teens: kids get in free, family maximum price, flat rates for families, group rates (youth groups), etc.</i>
Do outreach at family-oriented events	<i>Festivals, parades, street parties, agricultural fairs</i>
Hang posters in places where you see families, children, teens	<i>Libraries, schools, community centers, churches, children’s museums, dance schools (ballet, etc.), music schools, teen centers, YMCA, childcare center</i>
Use images and video that feature families	<i>Useful for social media and posters and websites (consider parents’ privacy concerns)</i>
Choose terminology deliberately	<i>Family dance, vs. Community dance, vs. Easy dance, vs. Introductory dance (all have subtly different connotations)</i>