

Helping other dancers

Dancers have raised the question of when it is appropriate to help other dancers and how to be helpful. In response, the Executive Committee and the teachers have put together the following guidelines for teachers and dancers. Our guiding principles are to help the evenings run smoothly, to enable the teachers to do their job, and above all to ensure that everyone has a wonderful dance experience.¹

*“And some kind of help
Is the kind of help
That helping is all about.* *And some kind of help
Is the kind of help
We all can do without.”*

From Shel Silverstein, ‘Where the Sidewalk Ends’

1. Keeping quiet while the teacher or MC is talking

Even if someone is only whispering to one person, they send a message that it is not important to listen to the teacher. Moreover, the people in conversation may miss something important, which could spoil the dance for them and for others. In class, questions should be addressed to the teacher, not to a neighbour, even if he/she is also a teacher.

2. Resisting the temptation to coach other dancers

There are times when anyone can use a little help from a partner (for example: “How does it start?”) But before coaching a partner or anyone else during a dance, it is essential that the other person has clearly indicated that they would welcome such help. “Help” that is offered in any other situation is likely to be resented. Moreover, it does not help dancers to learn if they are constantly being “helped”.

3. Not touching other dancers unless the dance calls for it

No-one likes to be manhandled. As with the talking kind of help, if this kind of help has not actively been sought, the dancer will probably resent it.

4. What help *can* be given?

Avoiding talking and touching seems to cut out everything, but it doesn’t. Helping can take subtle forms such as small gestures with the eyes or a hand, or positioning of one’s body, but again it is important to know that help will be welcome. ‘Help’ that is given when not needed or desired is something the recipient may remember for a long time!

5. What would you do if mistakes happen? If your attempt to help doesn’t work, let it go, both physically and mentally. For example, suppose someone is headed for you, about to give left shoulder into a reel that you know begins with right shoulder. You catch their eye, give them a big smile, and angle your body slightly for a right shoulder pass. You may also do other things, but suppose none of it works, and the time comes when this is going to be either a left shoulder reel or a collision. Shift your body around and make it a left shoulder reel. Just as important, shift your mind around and decide that a left shoulder reel is OK: it moves, it takes the right length of time, it leaves you all in the right place (though possibly with wrong momentum), it may produce some nice mirroring with your partner, etc. You can be planning how to get out of it gracefully, and you may be wondering how to make this work better next time, but don’t let that interfere with your genuine enjoyment of the figure and the people in it. Teach that mistakes are no big deal by acting as though they are no big deal. There are many repetitions, there are other dances tonight, and there will be other nights.

6. Dancing well, enjoying yourself, and letting it show.

By dancing well (not stopping to “help,” for example), experienced dancers teach both choreography and style, and help ensure that the vacant spaces appear in the right places at the right times. Their genuine cheerfulness allays the beginner’s fear that they are hindering the fun of the rest of the set. This kind of help is the kind of help that helping is all about!

¹ This guidance note draws on a note shared by Bruce Hamilton at a teachers’ workshop in New York in January 2014.