

“Talls and Smalls”

By Susan English and Bill Alkire

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Emily (age 7): "I'm really looking forward to your dance class this morning."

Susan (adult dance leader): "Is there any dance you would especially like to do?"

Emily: "Christchurch Bells...but I don't think they're ready for it yet."

Not all children have ideas about what dance is appropriate for a community dance program, and not all dance leaders elicit children's opinions. But, such a conversation emerged from an intergenerational dance setting that stresses safety, trust, and mutual respect. We like to call it Talls and Smalls.

The term Talls and Smalls is not new,ⁱ and concept of intergenerational dance is as old as human creative movement. Yet, in today's information-driven society, adults and young people are only rarely seen dancing together.

The good news is that intergenerational dance is gradually being rediscovered by home-schooling families, social committees, and recreation leaders for many good reasons. It can provide a sense of security and belonging. It nurtures the natural emergence of gender roles and builds intergenerational social units. It engenders empowerment and respect for each person, regardless of age.

In this article, we wish to express our philosophy of intergenerational dance, to describe the planning of an intergenerational dance, distinguish three stages of partnering, and discuss outcomes of this approach. In so doing, we speak to dance planners, dance leaders, and many others who work with youth and community groups.

Philosophical Approach

The Talls and Smalls approach addresses some of the most basic needs of individuals, families, and our society as a whole. We focus first and foremost on the needs of young people. All too often, in dance activities as in life, we see children pushed to fulfill adult expectations or to meet society's competitive standards. We prefer an approach where the child feels safe and is free to reach out and explore. Children rely on parents, grandparents, older siblings, teachers, and other adult figures to create a safe environment where everyone is respected and everyone's opinion matters. Talls and Smalls are partners in both the literal and abstract sense. The adult is both participant and observer in this process, gradually stepping back as the child develops skills and responsibility.

Talls and Smalls focuses second on the family. Here, we define family broadly as a social unit consisting of dependents and their care-givers. In today's complex world, we see a need for non-invasive activities that facilitate interaction within the family. Caretakers are busy with jobs and transporting children. Children, for their part, are lured away from the dinner table by competitive sports, structured youth activities, and technological pass-times. Grandparents may be separated from grandchildren by time,

interests, or geography. We need to create intergenerational activities where young people can learn culture and skills alongside their elders while satisfying basic human needs for communication, physical contact, and a sense of belonging. Dance is one activity where family members can practice healthy relationships and enjoy safe physical contact. It can be a defining moment when child and adult hold hands in mutual trust and affection.

Third, Talls and Smalls focuses on the broader community, where we see a need for non-competitive, cooperative, team-building activities. Group dancing requires everyone to be in sync with each other and with the music. When young and old join hands in a circle, they are defining themselves as part of a larger community, whether in their residential, religious, or school community. Intergenerational dance becomes a means for transmitting skills, knowledge, and values from one generation to the next.

Planning an Intergenerational Dance

Like a mission statement that guides an organization, the Talls and Smalls philosophy influences every decision we make as dance leaders. We begin by proposing a time and place that will accommodate participants of different ages. This implies a time that does not conflict with other adult or child activities. In a school setting, it may mean a class period when younger students can be paired with older ones; at a summer camp, a time when counselors and other staff are available and committed to full participation. At a wedding or bar-mitzvah, it may mean strategically seizing the time when both old and young are present and fully alert.

In announcing a Talls and Smalls dance or dance series, we ask that every child be accompanied by an adult. No experience is necessary, and gender is unspecified. In this way, we steer clear of the "daddy-daughter" or "mommy-and-me" approach that has taken hold in some communities. We may suggest a minimum age for children--generally age 5 or 6--whenever the child is able to separate from their caregiver and independently follow directions. However, younger children, tots, and infants can also enjoy intergenerational dance in arms, on backs, or held closely to the caretaker. In this case, the adult and very young child need to dance as one person, selecting another child as "their" partner.

In planning an intergenerational program, we pull together a wide variety of dances that are conducive to having fun, building skills, and bringing people together. Some are non-partner dances in circles, open circles, and threesomes. Others dances require partners in longways sets, in squares, or in Appalachian or Sicilian circles. There are many traditional American and international folk dances and singing games that are appropriate for--or can be adapted to--an intergenerational program.

As dance leaders, we like to begin the program by asking every Small to take the hand of their Tall and form a large circle--a formation where everyone can see and hear. We ask for the Small to stand to the right of their Tall, facing the center. From this moment and throughout the program, we teach both Talls and Smalls their responsibilities through quick demonstrations, brief explanations, and compliments to those setting a positive example. Intergenerational dancing does not mean children being lifted off the floor and swung around like a merry-go-round, as fun as that can be. It

means everyone supporting their own weight, using eye contact, hands, ears, feet, and smiles to dance together and with the music. To remove the temptation from well-intentioned people who like to play floor manager, we ask all adults to model good listening skills.

As the music or singing begins, we continue to use the terms Talls and Smalls along with gender-free terms such as "partner," "neighbor," or "opposite." For example, the caller may say, "Talls go forward and back," "Smalls chain," or simply "Take your partner and promenade." With practice, this kind of selective terminology can become automatic for any dance leader.

Three Stages of Partnering

How many adults recall the childhood trauma of being forced to dance with someone of the opposite gender? In the Talls and Smalls approach, partnering honors natural bonding, readiness, and personal choice. We think of partnering in three stages: Keeping Partners, Changing Partners, and Choosing Partners.

1. Keeping Partners

At the initial stage, Keeping Partners, we recognize the emotional need for some Talls and Smalls to stay together. We therefore select dances that maintain partner contact and proximity as the dancers move about the floor. Most open circle folk dances, visiting squares, Sicilian circles, and Appalachian big sets will accomplish this, and mixers can be modified so that everyone keeps their partner.

We gradually add figures that require dancers to leave their partner, but only briefly. In a dance like the Virginia Reel, for example, the Small and Tall cast off and individually lead their lines to the bottom of the set, where they are reunited as they form an arch. We may lead a circle dance that requires individuals to come into the center for a few counts. The Appalachian figure "Birdie in the cage" becomes "Small in the cage with three hands round; small hop out and the other hop in; circle up four and you're gone again." In a square, individuals can be asked to promenade the inside or outside of the set. Eventually, more complex figures like the "grand right and left" can be used to encourage increasing responsibility and independence.

2. Changing Partners

As the dancers gain in skills and confidence, as may occur in a dance series, they may be ready for the second stage--Changing Partners. This is the point where both old and young are comfortable with everyone in the room and can interact as part of a broader community. This is the time when we add mixers to the program, whether circle mixers or squares or any dance requiring partner change. It is also the time for threesomes (one Tall with two Smalls or vice versa) and arches for the smallest dancers to tunnel through. Still other dances, like a scatter promenade or gender-free "Ninepin," can mix up the group by requiring partners to change frequently and rapidly.

3. Choosing Partners

As hours, days, months, and years go by, and the dancers develop yet more experience and confidence, some groups will enter a third stage: Choosing Partners. This is the point where the Small has the confidence to choose a new Tall or even another Small as a partner. We have heard young people say, "This time, I'll be the Tall, and you be the Small." At the Choosing Partners stage, pre-adolescents will generally choose siblings or friends of the same gender, and confident teens may begin to ask members of the opposite gender. Talls abandoned by their Small may find each other: husband reunites with wife, or neighbors joins neighbor. Unexpected combinations can bring surprise and amusement to all. The husband and wife will naturally assume the roles of Tall and Small respectively, but the caller continues to use the terms Talls and Smalls.

Conclusion

How can the success of intergenerational dance be measured? We have witnessed the outcomes of this approach in a variety of settings. Children step out more confidently onto the dance floor and, hopefully, into life, while adults take great satisfaction in seeing young people gain in skills and confidence. Other outcomes include empowerment and mutual respect, as adults and youth develop increasing respect for each other's skills, knowledge, and ability to make decisions. Parents and caretakers have a chance to relax and have fun with children, and children come to associate fun with adults and family. People go home with stronger bonds, feelings of closeness, and newly opened lines of communication.

The young bring energy and enthusiasm; adults provide structure and stability. It seems to be a winning combination. By taking conscious steps to ensure safety and comfort, build trust, and teach both awareness and skills, we have witnessed remarkable growth in young and mature dancers as well as in ourselves as dance leaders. We encourage others to try the approach we like to call Talls and Smalls.

Author Profiles

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ⁱ See *Listen to the Mockingbird* by Andy Davis, Peter Amidon, and Mary Cay Brass, published by New England Dancing Masters Productions in Brattleboro, VT, 1997, p. 53.