

## ***Do We Have to Hold Hands?***

Anyone who has taught dance in a school setting will be most familiar with children's reluctance to hold hands. The phenomenon is so universal among school-aged children that at times I've questioned my right to ask them to do so. However, extensive self-examination always leads me back to the belief that holding hands is a powerful and lifegiving gesture, and I renew my commitment to helping kids feel the same way.

When I meet a new class on the first day of a week-long school residency, I spend a few minutes on introductions and warm-up activities, then I utter the ominous words "Please join hands in a circle", and watch for the predictable reaction.

Immediately I see groaning, squirming, and jostling for position. Rolled down sleeves, just the pinky extended, whole bodies recoiling in horror at the thought of touching the person next to them. Usually there are one or two who resist longer than the others, but when they see that I'm serious, they reluctantly oblige. Only then can the fun begin.

For the rest of the week, I insist on assertive hand holding, and have little time for 'virtual holding' or rolled-down long sleeves. As the students predictably relax and become engaged in the fun and challenge of dancing; usually the anxiety and resistance dwindle to insignificance.

### ***What does holding hands mean to children?***

As adults, we have gone through enough cultural training that, if called upon by custom, choreography or circumstance, we are able to join hands in a circle, even though we may not be acquainted or comfortable with the other participants. This is much more difficult for children. It's as if their souls extend undiminished to the tips of their fingers and therefore the implications of touching another's hands are immense.

There are many things that may be happening to contribute to this reluctance.

1. Germs, cooties, goobers.  
Anyone who has worked with children knows that these are decidedly real.
2. Lack of precedent or familiarity – where else do we hold hands with our peers?
3. Physical sensation – it's warm, sweaty, may be an uncomfortable position. Children may not be able to keep up with the speed of the circle or may lack the coordination to quickly join hands.
4. Fascination with/fear of the opposite sex – the desire to touch, the fear of doing so.
5. Homophobia – the fear of being teased about being gay, or the fear of discovering their gay nature.
6. Echoes of holding hands with mom – something that only babies do.
7. Social anxiety – they may be standing beside someone that (for any number of reasons) makes them feel very uncomfortable.
8. Awareness – some children simply don't notice that they are the only ones in a circle who are not joining hands.

9. An audience – many students will refuse just to get the attention, and if they are the only one in a circle not holding hands, they get just that.

### ***Why should I insist that they hold hands?***

We live in a world where touching can be a fearful thing – we teach children to know their boundaries and when to tell adults not to touch them. In this context, why do we feel we can require the children to comply with our request to hold hands?

1. An integral part of our cultural training is to learn how to touch each other appropriately. Handholding can variously mean:
  - Protection or friendship with a parent/child/friend
  - Ritual – handshake, greeting, sealing a deal
  - Play – thumb wrestling, high five
  - Assistance - helping someone walk, or get up
  - Support or compassion
  - Affection, sexual attraction
2. It's a powerful connector – think of a family giving thanks around a dinner table, mourners at a coffin, or revellers dancing around a maypole. When we join hands, we create and reaffirm solidarity, connection, community.
3. It encourages us to find a way to coexist with those who are different from us.
4. Geometry and the choreography demand it. A circle is not a circle unless all pairs of hands are joined.
5. Because everyone else is doing it, so no one has the right to criticize or tease.

### ***Teaching Strategies***

1. Be confident in your belief that holding hands is a worthwhile goal.
2. Be firm and consistent. Kids always test me on the first day, but when they realize that I really am serious when I ask them to join hands, they usually stop resisting and comply. Of course, teachers bend their own rules all the time, and you'll sometimes have to ignore things in order to get on with the dance.
3. Get them used to touching. Use clapping games, thumb wrestling and other activities that require physical connection outside of the context of dancing. (Crack the whip, Red Rover, Blob Tag)
4. Introduce dances that are so much fun **because** of the handhold, i.e. anything with front or back basket holds. Choose a fast, easy one so that kids forget whose hands they are holding. (Farandole, Labadu, How'd ya dootee)
5. Break it down into steps: First, make a mitten of your hand, Second-extend your hand, Third- place your palms together, Fourth-smile at your partner. This somewhat formal approach can defuse some of the anxiety, especially if used with humour.
6. Remember the power of terminology. When I was a novice at this game, I would simply repeat "Hold Hands" over and over until everyone complied, or my vocal chords seized up. I was thrilled when I discovered some alternatives:

- “Close the circle” or “Ready”
  - Use a musical sound to direct them to hold hands. It doesn't really matter which sound you use, as long as you're consistent. A trill on a recorder. A rumbling chord on the piano. A vocal warble. Any distinctive sound that you can sustain until they are all holding hands.
7. You can always resort to trickery. “How many seconds will it take for everyone to join hands in a circle?” Time them, and dream up some reward for doing it quickly. We all know that this will only work a few times, but hopefully they will be less shy about holding hands by then.
  8. Take their hands and do it for them. I find that if I do the joining, they are able to continue to hold hands – it's the initiating that's the real hurdle. Make sure you are smiling as you do it!
  9. If cleanliness seems to be the problem, you can arrange for everyone to wash their hands before and after class. Hand sanitizer has fallen out of favour these days, and at any rate I have always found it to be mostly a time-consuming distraction.
  10. Occasionally you will find students who genuinely cannot bring themselves to hold hands, often for emotional or religious/cultural reasons, or because they may suffer from eczema or warts. For some kids with disabilities, touch can actually be very uncomfortable to painful (tactile defensiveness, or tactile sensitivity) These are rare, but you can see deep discomfort in their eyes, and holding hands with a partner may be agonizing. A bit of creative arranging or the scarf/glove trick (see #11) may alleviate the problem, but sometimes it's most prudent to turn a blind eye.
  11. In some situations, you may want to avoid the actual situation until the kids are hooked – use scarves, tubes, nylons, etc as connectors. The smaller the better so that they don't become distracters. Gloves work well because they soon become too warm and everyone wants to take them off. My stuffed monkey is a great icebreaker, and I find that boys in particular will turn themselves inside out to dance with ‘Victoria’.
  12. As in any anxiety-producing situation, humour is a powerful ally. Once I have them holding hands, however tenuously, I tell them to let go, blow all the germs off their hands and then immediately tell them to hold hands again. It only takes a couple of times for them to get the idea.

## **Conclusion**

I can't say it often enough. Your biggest ally is your belief that dancing is a good thing all round, and that holding hands is an integral and positive part of the experience. Once children are engaged in the dancing, the anxiety is quickly replaced by the joy of moving and creating patterns to the music with their friends.

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