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Cotillion Teaching Children Proper Steps

By Karen Hayes GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

MILTON, MA - 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, always say yes." Let the music begin.

As spit-shined boys zero in on their dance partners, the third class of a new 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 '50s" theme party - consists of 8- to 10-year-old children in the third and fourth grade. Afterward, fifth through seventh graders will Charleston the night away at a "Roaring '20s" party.

"The dances are cool."

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, CO, is open to any child. Some scholarships are available for those who cannot afford the \$180 fee for six 1-hour, 15-minute classes, and 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 '50s 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 Daniel Webb, one of the directors for the Jon D. Williams Cotillions. "... It is open to everyone. It is affordable enough that anyone can take it."

Many of the 10,000 children enrolled annually in more than 50 Williams programs nationwide are disabled, he said. She added that the company contributes to charities that directly benefit its host communities.

Webb takes turns with other Jon D. Williams Cotillion instructors flying into Massachusetts weekly to teach the Milton class. In addition to the cotillion programs, the Company instructs at high school and college levels and to businesses and corporations. The program they established at the United States Air Force Academy became a required course for the cadet population.

The Milton 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.

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"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 '50s theme. But on nonparty nights, boys are required to wear suits, or sport coats, ties, and dress shoes. Girls must wear dresses 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. Webb 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."

Chaperones include plenty of fathers, dressed properly in jackets and ties, to serve as role models for boys. Jim and Betsy Baldini, committee members, watched last week as their older daughter, Thais, helped assist Webb for community service credit, while their younger, Yasmin, a petite 8-year-old in white gloves and a gray poodle skirt, shook a leg. Their son, Rory, who is 12, attends the program for older students.

Offering tips and conversation starters, Mr. Webb fits right in with his students wearing dignified suit and tie, as he directs the class from the center of the dance floor with a portable microphone.

"Gentlemen, do you ever sit down before your partner does?" he asked between numbers. "Never! Always wait until the ladies are seated first."

Such adherence to tradition, including bowing and curtsying to each other and to parents in a receiving line before class, seem to some to be outdated in the '90s. Girls must sit with crossed ankles and boys are expected to serve them cookies and punch.

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

And Webb 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 courtesy and respect."

"Dance is used as a tool to teach practical skills in social etiquette and communication while the children have fun," he said. As they mature the social skills will play a major role in their lives with anyone they meet."

While last Sunday's group brushed up on their jitterbug and fox trot, other classes teach dances such as the waltz, swing hustle, the electric slide, and cha cha.

Along with teaching how to move one's feet to the box step, Webb solicited examples of good manners from his students. "And why do we have good manners?" he asked. "To show courtesy and demonstrate our respect and education."

