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Kreative Khoreo for Kids
by Corben Geis (CALLERLAB Member)

Submitted by - Naomi Fisher (ARTS Email Tree Contact)

This just in... I had 5 different ideas for this article, and as I started typing it, I realized that I had to break it down into multiple articles and not just one big one. Having said that, here is the first article about 3 primer games which can really help before learning how to square dance.

I love teaching children art, music and dance...especially the wee ones. They are like sponges when it comes to learning. They absorb everything and anything. I've had caller colleagues tell me repeatedly, "I can't believe you are teaching square dancing to 5-year-olds! They are too young to learn square dancing!" Most of the time, their heads shake side to side as in 'no way'. I pause first, and then think before I speak, "is it really worth it to defend my case to this person?" Sometimes it's a yea but mostly it's a nay. *I do, however, follow up by sending them a copy of an article I wrote about a decade and a half ago called IN THE LONG RUN, which can be found at the CALLERLAB website, if you are searching or researching.

Are you kidding me? Kindergarten is a great age to introduce the blueprints of square dancing!

Take note, here are three simple dance games that are fantastic for commencing dance to the T-ball leaguers. Two of these games are super-duper, and one of them is good enough. SIMON SAYS and THE HOKEY POKEY! Nuff said. But you know I am going to expound. Did you know that playing a simple game of Simon Says gets the children to LISTEN and FOLLOW INSTRUCTIONS, but most importantly, to LISTEN? (By the way, I'm writing about instilling these lessons to 5-year-olds, when I still call to 55-year-olds who STILL DO NOT KNOW HOW TO LISTEN TO THE CALLER! Fortunately, this has been quite beneficial to yours truly for the mounds of cartooning material for my Spin Chain Spoofs for many years.)

The best song out there to teach little ones the difference between their LEFTS from their RIGHTS (and I've been preaching this one since Hector was a pup) is THE HOKEY POKEY...and, yes that IS what IT'S all about!) Just for fun, I like to put on the HP at my handicapable square dances and my special populations dancers seem to dance it a lot better than my helper/angel dancers. True dat.

If you are aged 16 and up and still don't know your L from your R, might I suggest you take the time to learn a trick, hint, clue or game to help you. HOW DO THESE PEOPLE GET DRIVER'S LICENSES? or give directions to people who may be lost?

The third game, which I mentioned was 'good enough' is MUSICAL CHAIRS or a variation of it. Sometimes MC can lead to a fight to the finish, and I personally do not like that. Square Dancing, in general, is not to be competitive or a full-contact sport. It's more like partially contact. The important thing with Musical Chairs, as with Simon Says, is helping the little ones LOOK & LISTEN. Two very huge components of square dancing, n'est pas? It's not about fighting for that last chair in the hopes that second to last kid does not fall on his arse or yet get mad and already have the 'this dancing stuff is stupid' attitude. We don't want that in our activity! We don't need anymore of that in our activity!

Here's a fun (and not too competitive game) I've had success with over my 40-year square dance run,... cross-run, fold and cross-fold tenure. It's a creative mix of Musical Chairs and a Cake Walk...and no one gets hurt, and feelings don't get hurt also. Firstly, I find a big sack or a large trash bag. I then contact the school, camp, pack troop, VBS (vacation bible school) etc. to get the exact number of children/students/campers who will be in the group. Next, I get a bunch of hand-me-down clothes, hats, neckwear, gloves ... you know, KIDS LOVE TO PLAY DRESS UP stuff. Important note: it is a smart move to take a can of Lysol or Febreze with you nowadays to spray the costumes before and after your presentation.

Now, fill the bag with these accessories. Also, if you know you are going to have 25 kids in your group... be proactive and throw in 30 articles of clothing. TRUST ME. Make sure your wardrobe you are packing in the sack has variety as well. Pull the ropes tight to close the bag. Don't tie in a knot. Get the children to sit on the floor in 'crisscross applesauce' position...back in the old days we called it sit in 'Indian style'.

The students, with the help of their teacher making sure the clothes don't fall out of the sack, pass the bag around in the circle, while YOU, the caller or dance leader is playing music. Traditionally, in a cake walk, the music man or DJ is to put their back to the audience. I kinda peek to see how the floor is doing. Don't worry, they are focused on the bag and not you, at first. Although, later into the game, they may be looking at you to see when you are going to STOP the music. For when you do that, whoever is holding the bag or sack has to open it up, reach in and pull out something fun and fancy to wear. Absolute fun! It's much more of a surprise in present times because in the past, kids would be able to see if I was going to put the needle on the record. Today, we have remote controls, phones, Ipads/pods and we can basically stand with our hands in our pockets, thumbs on the button and they'll never know when the music is gonna stop. Ha!

A couple of notes here that need to be mentioned, mostly to folks who do not work with children who are still in their one-digit years:

*Not all kids like to play dress up. That's fine, just pass the bag along. No worries, mate.

*Depending on the individual, some like to look in and select their outfit while others like the art of surprise and will reach in the bag and feel around and pull something either dull or outrageous out themselves or get an adult to help them.

Quite often with K-2nd grade, there are two other adults in the room (sometimes more). A teacher and a teacher's aide, or a volunteer, or even a parent. If they are good sports, encourage them to play also. At times, when children see adults having fun, they too will get into the act. When explaining to the room how this dance works, I will reach in myself and pull out a few things to put on. This will get lots of laughs. I also purposely pack some ferociously funky things on top like a squid hat or funny glasses with a fake nose or mustache. (To those who don't know me, I was a sports mascot for 10 seasons of baseball and have a novelty shop collection of costumes) Callers have told me they have shopped at thrift stores and consignment shops to find their fun they will conceal in their sacks and bags.

I also tell the kids there are funny items in the bag, and if they don't like what they picked out to put on, it's okay to make another selection. Put in shirts and scarves... they usually are good choices. Fun when the kids put on adult shirts, and they hang low on them. Spray that Lysol into the hats, if you choose to do caps or any kind of headwear. Some steer away from that, totally up to you. Ask the teachers ahead of time, because lice is still a thing folks.

I realize I went into a lot detail with the PASS THE BAG game. The real game used to be not to put enough clothing and costumes in the bag and the loser had nothing to wear but the potato sack everything was in at the end, but we do not want any losers. We want everyone to be engaged. And, no, it's not everyone's a winner ...it should be EVERYONE IS HAVING FUN!

I've had kids in the past who absolutely loved the dress-up game. I've also had kids who were quite shy and I asked them if they would help the teacher 'guide the bag' around the circle and if anything falls out of the sack if they could kindly put it back in to keep the game going and they were happy to help. I found out later from a couple instructors that those quiet kids really needed that sense of purpose and belonging. WE WANT EVERYONE TO FEEL WELCOMED IN OUR SQUARE DANCE ACTIVITY even in the early ages and stages.

Post script; Getting back to those callers who think I'm nuts teaching the little ankle biters about square dancing... I will have these little ones having a blast dancing CIRCLES & STARS galore. Yep, they are square dancing! They aren't doing Relays, Gears and Boats... oh, my!... not yet, at least.

BUT THEY ARE SQUARE DANCING

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Editors' Note - We have know Corben for MANY MANY years. We believe he is exceptional teaching and calling for all ages. We thank Naomi Fished for submitting this information.