

# Engaging Families in Your (not-necessarily-“Family”) Dance

Chrissy Fowler, Belfast Flying Shoes

Do you want:

- Inclusive and sensitive dancers?
- A sustainable series?
- Effective marketing?
- A dancer demographic that’s intergenerational?
- Long-term investment in your beloved dance tradition?

This session covers all of these, and more! In fact, engaging families could be the single best strategy for a successful dance series (for all dances, not just the family ones). Participants will leave with a full toolbox, ready to act on their understanding of the “relative benefits” of engaging families in their dance. NOTE: This session is for everyone, from the convinced to the curious to the curmudgeon! (Come one, come all – even nay-sayers – and find out what it’s all about!)

## Introduction:

I am Chrissy Fowler, from Belfast ME. I am – in order of their appearance in my personal history – a family member, a dancer, a dance organizer, a dance caller, and a parent. This session is about the “how and why” engaging families in your dance series. In the weeks leading up to POTD2, I’ve been increasingly consumed by these questions of how and why – and I’ve also realized that the questions of engaging families happen to relate to my ongoing curiosity about a larger question: “How do we **create a culture** of traditional participatory social dance?”

As it says in my bio, my cousin brought me to my first contra dance when I was still in college, in my 20s and 30s I traveled with my siblings to dances in NH, MA and ME where I also introduced my brother to his future wife, and in my mid 30s I co-founded our local dance with my family, all of whom still help sustain it in large and small ways.

I can’t help adding that I am excited about engaging families, not just because of my experiences as a dancer or my work as a dance organizer, but also because it’s a major part of my work as a dance caller. I call primarily in schools (dance residencies), for weddings and other private parties, at weekly summer gigs at a family camp and a yacht club, and for local community dances. In other words, my paid work *requires* me to engage families in dancing. Over and over again. So I have **plenty of chances to see its magic.** ☺

On our [Belfast Flying Shoes FB page](#) is an album of family group portraits, taken at three recent contra dances in Maine (NOTE: These dances were not billed as exclusively for families, nor were they marketed to families – they were just ‘regular’ contra dances.) I think it’s a pretty nice visual for “What does engaging families *look like*? Who *are* these people?”

## Background:

Here's a quote about dancing in my town:

The people of our city are wild, not Oscar Wilde exactly, but they have a craze fully equal to his aesthetic craze, and it has taken the form of dancing ... The craze is not confined to the young people: the middle aged, the thin haired, the white haired, the lame, the halt, and blind are gathered into the mazy dance ... children, fathers, mothers, grandfathers, and grandmothers, meet in the same quadrille, all the same age ...

- *Courtesy Belfast Historical Society, taken from a newspaper clipping in a scrap book for the Unitarian Parish Party, December 7, 1881*

So, as this quote reminds us, people have been doing traditional social dance as families (in their communities) for generations. ... This is **not new** stuff!

## Why? WHY should you engage families? (*especially benefits for dance*):

I'm a big fan of first things first. For me, a first question might be WHY? As in why should we engage families? How does it fit into our vision for our dance? Why is it a good idea for our dance? Why should I even sit here a minute longer?

As one might imagine, I have plenty of ideas to answer this question. For example, I could offer the circular argument: *"It's a good idea because having families involved in your dance is a good thing."* ☺ The following outline list draws on the collective wisdom of session attendees.

### A. *It's Good for YOUR DANCE*

- **Influences the dance CLIMATE**
  - Keeps the dancing "cleaner." (Like a lot less of the dirty-dancing groin-grinding stuff - prissy I know, but that's me.) Sort of a governor since people might be more conscious of "what do you want the little kids to see?"
  - Discourages hard-core contra snobbery
  - Reminds everyone that this is fun, social, inclusive, joyful community-based activity
  - Allows us to relax (easier for grizzled/jaded "contra dancers" to do so if an 8-year-old is smiling up at them)
  - Cultivates forgiveness, flexibility and a sense that "it's okay to make mistakes"
- **Influences the dance REPERTOIRE**
  - Keeps the dance from getting too serious/complicated
  - May mean more variety in dance choreography
- **Influences dance STYLE/SKILL**
  - Kids become teachers/models, in part because they learn so fast and because developmentally they are "in their bodies" (e.g., *teens in Belfast are among the most skilled dancers. Many adults get tips from them!*)
  - As young dancers' competence increases, their confidence increases
  - Multiplies "inclusivity factor" (e.g., *kids often dance gender neutral or dance the 'other' role; opens it up to adults*)
  - Increases adaptability. Makes obvious the need for all dancers to adjust for each dancer they meet. (e.g., *in crowded sets at NEFFA with my son in backpack, people*

*really met me where I was... because they had to! Likewise young people adapt to elders and vice versa.)*

- Respecting needs of children (e.g., whether to pick them up) can be applied to others (e.g., whether to twirl, hold close, lock eyes, etc.)
- Dance skills for accommodating children can be transferred to all ages. (*The “best” dancers of any age are able to both send and receive messages and signals about how they want to dance. Having kids at a dance makes obvious the need to have this signal sending and receiving on the table.*)
- **Influences ATTENDANCE**
  - It’s a family-friendly community event (*e.g., parents can have date night without getting a babysitter!*)
  - Retain dancers and maintain attendance continuity through individuals’ life changes (*and therefore it helps your series withstand the midlife “drop-off” phenomenon, in which dancers with kids stay home*)
    - *NB: Of course, some people will stay home because they don’t like what this might mean for your dance series (too many kids, dances too simple, teens dancing too wild)*
- **Influences SUSTAINABILITY in the LONG TERM**
  - Nurtures future dancers and leaders
  - Today’s dancing children are tomorrow’s dancing parents
  - Increases options of grant funding (lots of money geared toward children or families, especially healthy activities for them)
  - Opens the dance to a wider market (e.g., families with kids)

### ***B. It’s Good for THE WORLD***

- Strengthens families, keeps them connected, lets them do an activity all together
- Connects people within the larger community (especially individuals from other parts of the age spectrum)
- Is an intergenerational, participatory, cultural, physical activity
- Promotes healthy lifestyle for youth (nurturing “strong” and resilient adults – perhaps resistant to substance abuse)
- Cultivates youth growing into healthy, contributing, respectful adulthood
- Children can become leaders
- Provides people of all ages with the cognitive benefits of dance
- Increases trust
- Allows individuals to remember that touch can be okay
- Contributes to greater mental health (of individuals, of society as whole)
- Expands individuals’ world view (dancing with all sorts of people)

### ***Counter-examples ARE useful!***

In some ways, engaging families can have a *negative* effect on your dance series! Here are a few examples of how engaging families can be problematic – with some options to consider for creative, consistent, problem-solving remedies.

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS	POSSIBLE REMEDIES
<b>Callers Can't Accommodate Diverse Dancer Demographic</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Communicate clearly with your callers ahead of time</li> <li>● Hire callers who CAN accommodate diverse dancer demographic</li> </ul>
<b>Unsupervised Child Behaviors, aka "M.I.A. Parents" aka "Feral Children"</b> (non-dancing toddlers/children racing through dancers, toys drifting underfoot, kids romping among sound gear and instruments, kids going outside to play in traffic, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Schedule a sit-down community meeting at a dance (enlist help from all dancers)</li> <li>● Have direct conversations with key offenders (parents and children both)</li> <li>● Arrange for childcare in a separate space (consider liability, meta-messages, etc.)</li> <li>● Encourage parents to organize collective responsibility for non-dancing children (whether playing or sleeping)</li> </ul>
<b>Pockets of Confusion, aka Train Wrecks, aka Rocks in the Stream</b> (inexperienced kids partnering, parents dancing with young children as "sidecars," etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Train regular dancers to mix in (integrate all sets with experienced dancers, invite partners of different skill-levels)</li> <li>● Remind dancers that helping new dancers is part of culture</li> <li>● Remember that kids and sidecars are not the primary cause of confusion (older adults more commonly do this)</li> </ul>
<b>External Circumstances Preclude Family Engagement</b> (venue policy doesn't permit children's presence, underage kids not allowed where alcohol served, family feuds)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Find new venue for the dance</li> <li>● Work with venue owners to change or adapt policy</li> <li>● Realize you can't be all things to everyone and you can't control family dynamics</li> </ul>
<b>Reduced Safety for Adults and Children</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Consistent and constant messaging re: safe and considerate dance habits</li> <li>● Be clear that parents are (and must be) responsible for their children</li> <li>● "Tip of the Month" to reinforce messages</li> </ul>
<b>Problematic Adult Behavior</b> (picking up kids they don't know, assuming kids can't dance, inappropriate boundaries in adult/child dynamic)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Again, have consistent and constant messaging re: safe and considerate dance habits</li> <li>● Have direct conversations with adults whose behavior is problematic</li> </ul>

**REMEMBER!** This is not for everyone. Engaging families isn't compatible with everyone's vision for their dance, and that's ok!! If your dance is a challenging squares series for highly skilled dancers, this may not be for you. If you host elegant costume balls for ECD, this may not be for you. Of course it *might*.... ☺ But that's another conversation.

I happen to think engaging families is the way to go, especially if one is devoted to the long-term future of the form. For example, I have heard stories of "Dudley Dancers," folks who danced with legendary New Hampshire caller Dudley Laufman, literally in enthusiastic throngs, who then

propagated New England social dance throughout the US and beyond. At his wildly popular dances, Dudley was planting seeds that bore fruit.

Including families can have similar dispersal effect:

- ✓ Kids go to college, start dances there.
- ✓ Kids grow up, have dances at their weddings.
- ✓ Those married couples have kids, bring them to dances, perhaps even organize their local dance
- ✓ Community groups (schools, churches, yacht clubs, camps, etc.) get used to dancing together as families and do it for generations.

But again, you don't *have* to engage families for your series to succeed. Not at all!

However, if we *assume you're interested* in the idea of engaging families, it might be useful to know where this seems to happen. Who is doing this already? Who could be resources?

### Where Are Families Engaged in Dances?

I've seen and/or heard about families engaged in dances in these places:

[Belfast ME](#)      Cape Breton      Quebec      Upper Valley NH/VT  
 Carlisle MA      Huntsville AL (*homeschoolers*)      Nelson NH      Louisville KY (*kids*)  
 Lewiston ME *especially in the old days 16+ sibling families at reunions, weddings, house parties, etc.*  
*I'm sure there are many, many more.*

### Strategies for Engaging Families:

In small groups, POTD2 session attendees brainstormed **at least five Concrete Suggestions** for strategies to engage families. They aimed for specific strategies that actually **Have Been Tried** (not *necessarily* successful strategies!! But tested!). Each group then **ranked the strategies** on their list, with most effective (perhaps sure-fire?) as first rank. We reconvened and shared our results. I organized them in the following chart, and was both thrilled and unsurprised that most of the things I'd thought of on my own were covered – and some of my favorite strategies came up over and over again in the small groups.

<b>ATTRACT FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN</b>	
<b>Why? Because word of mouth is what gets most people to a dance, and if you get families to come, they will bring others.</b>	
Co-produce the dance series with an affinity group	<i>Put on the dance with a church, school, community organization, traditional music school, etc.</i>
Target invitations to other groups that also have high levels of family engagement (affinity groups)	<i>Such as, camps, homeschoolers, private schools, public schools, childcare centers, theater groups, music teachers, mothers' groups, La Leche League, girl scouts/boy scouts. (In Belfast, ME these groups include homeschoolers, Maine Fiddle Campers, UU Church members, and participants in the BFS community dance.)</i>

Invite groups to visit or play a special role in the dance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Theater group, Morris dance team, Scottish dancers can do demos</li> <li>- Art classes can sketch, paint, photograph during dance</li> <li>- Music students play in band</li> </ul>
Support school dance residencies	<i>Especially if committee/board includes callers/teachers. Could be a single special school dance. Engages parents with young children, teachers, and administrators. Can help make dancing a part of the wider culture.</i>
Produce or support a local family dance or community dance	<i>Hook families with young children early on. Dancing becomes part of their family traditions. A family dance can run before your non-family dance, or be a separate series altogether</i>
Hire multi-age bands	<i>Have open bands, hire established family bands, suggest music teachers bring their students to play, etc.</i>
Serve food!	<i>Incorporate a meal, snacks, potluck, or “coffee break” (as in Denmark). People of all ages connect around food.</i>
Include other family-friendly activities in the event	<i>Such as, children’s performers like singers, clowns or balloon artists; toy-making or musical instrument making workshops</i>

<b>PREPARE YOUR CALLERS</b>	
<b>Why? Because callers have the microphone, wielding extraordinary power to shape the dance experience</b>	
Book callers whose skills match your vision	<i>Those who work well with dancers of diverse skill levels have a welcoming attitude and good sense of humor, have wide repertoire for all situations, are inclusive.</i>
Be clear that your series welcomes dancers of all ages, including families	<i>Knowing this will guide callers for their most effective programming, preparation, and planning.</i>
Give callers advance notice	<i>Surprises can be challenging for even the most talented callers! Advance notice is respectful and considerate, but also in your best interest.</i>
Communicate proactively re: committee’s expectations for programming	<i>For example, we like family-friendly and beginner-friendly programming. (See <a href="#">Belfast Flying Shoes caller info sheet</a>.) Proactivity can be critical to counterbalance potentially contrary in-the-moment feedback the caller gets from dancers (likely to come from the “overactive 10%,” e.g., the hardcore dancers complaining about wanting complex material, or wanting kids kept out of the hall, etc.)</i>

<b>SEND META-MESSAGES</b>	
<b>Why? Because you want your messaging to be consistent with your goal of engaging families</b>	
Leadership is family-oriented!	<i>Leadership includes youth, leadership brings their family, leadership rejects or ignores advice that may be contrary to family engagement, leadership reaches out to make personal connections with families (both potential attendees and actual attendees)</i>
Families are welcome!	<i>Announcements at dance explicitly state that families, all ages, all experience levels are welcome. (Be consistent, cheerful, unapologetic.) Consider how to accommodate families with young children who may need/want to sleep – without necessarily excluding or segregating children. Include family-specific pricing.</i>
We expect children to dance!	<i>Be clear children are welcome on the dance floor; charge admission for children (even if reduced rate). Address disruptive behaviors (“We are here to dance, not to play tag”).</i>
We proactively address any issues that arise!	<i>Solve problems that may be caused by your engagement of families.</i>
It’s okay to make mistakes!	<i>Build this into dance series culture. Include in announcements. Book callers with this attitude.</i>

<b>INCORPORATE IT INTO YOUR MARKETING STRATEGY</b>	
<b>Why? Because marketing gets people to come to your dance and to keep coming back – marketing must be consistent with engaging families</b>	
Directly ask people to spread the word	<i>Children/teens/young adults invite their peers, families invite relatives and family friends.</i>
Have differentiated pricing	<i>Lower prices for children or teens: kids get in free, family maximum price, flat rates for families, group rates (youth groups), etc.</i>
Do outreach at family-oriented events	<i>Festivals, parades, street parties, agricultural fairs</i>
Hang posters in places where you see families, children, teens	<i>Libraries, schools, community centers, churches, children’s museums, dance schools (ballet, etc.), music schools, teen centers, YMCA, childcare center</i>
Use images and video that feature families	<i>Useful for social media and posters and websites (consider parents’ privacy concerns)</i>
Choose terminology deliberately	<i>Family dance, vs. Community dance, vs. Easy dance, vs. Introductory dance (all have subtly different connotations)</i>

## Seed Pod:

Our local community radio station has a feature on Friday mornings – Awanadjo Almanack – which never fails to inspire me. The commentator always ends with: “And here a couple of seed pods for you to carry around with you...” Here’s my seed pod – albeit a participatory one.

“Close your eyes everyone – I mean it! This is a thought experiment and you have to do it with your eyes closed. Okay, get an image of your dance. Maybe the town, maybe the hall, maybe the dancers in full height of swinging and whirling with the band going full tilt and the fiddler’s fingers flying. Now, try to imagine your dance 200 or 250 years from today... The intertwined descendants of those dancers and that fiddler are in the hall... Some are dancing, all are smiling, and one is even fiddling... The hall has had some major renovations, and yet there’s still a bit of a tilt to the floor, but the dancers don’t mind... The goodies are on the table, ready and waiting for the socializing at the break... You could trace more than 10 generations of a given family name from your present dance to this future... The Uptons are still here... the Hardys... the Struthers... And the fiddler is a Tolman. ... *Well...* actually, this is not really an abstract future after all. For people who dance in Nelson, NH this is the **now** – and it’s my premise that one could say it’s what happened when people danced with their families in their community. And *kept* dancing with them. For generations.”

Wow! Right?! Wow.

It’s mind-boggling for me, in a good way, to imagine that my son’s grandchildren’s grandchildren’s grandchildren’s grandchildren could be dancing in the same tradition as my son and I do today. And that, for me, is the best reason to engage families in our dance series. The long haul.

I encourage you to take this seed pod and any other seed pods you may have gathered in this session back to your own dance – and if you plant them, may they thrive!

## Resources:

- [Belfast Flying Shoes FB page](#) for “The Face of Family Engagement”
- [Belfast Flying Shoes Caller Information](#)



## Testimonials re: Family Engagement from Mainers:

### ***BFS Meeting Commentary***

- Board member's 12-year-old **ditched Ultimate Frisbee** to play with the All-Comers band and dance.
- Longtime dancer and BFS volunteer brought both daughter and son to dances (**resonated** with son, **not** with daughter), husband-wife dancer/musicians have raised lovely dancer/musician sons who've subsequently brought in their peers as committed dancers.
- One child danced **without his dad** there, two other sons **okay with parents at dance**
- Parental presence can't quash youth participation
- An activity that parents and kids do **together** (parents bring kids, AND kids can bring parents)
- **Energy** of youth under 25 is an **asset** to dance
- Whole span of ages – every age – **variation** – something that's important at all points in the spectrum of young to old – good for everyone
- Kids dancing with elders – all have to **adjust to each other** (crucial in dance, crucial in life)
- This **mutual adjustment** is part of being 'good' dancers
- There's an **understanding of other people that comes** from holding them in your arms (even for a swing.)
- **Empathy** is cultivated.
- You meet up with folks you don't know but you are *meeting them* where they are (and where you are.)
- For kids who grew up with this, all of these concepts built/practiced in dancing are **not "remarkable"** (intergenerationality, adapting to others, being together as multi-age community, having fun with live music, etc.). **It's just what we do.**
- This past dance, the board president got clarity around the big picture. "This is what we've been doing for generations. Everyone showed up out of the snow, our **whole** community. Old people, young people. We're all just finding out how to get through February."
- 1880s quote about Belfast dance – folks are wild (not Oscar Wilde) for dancing!
- More age segregation is not needed (we have plenty, even too much?, of that already)

### ***Long-time dancer and young dancer connection***

Recently, at a sledding party, a mom I know mentioned that she had dropped her daughter off at the dance on Friday. We chatted about the family engagement concept and my session (the mom and her ex-husband were hardcore "contra dancers" and she's a principal at a school where I've done residencies) and I mentioned how many people were lining up for the family portraits. I told about some of the groupings, including a long-divorced couple and their teenaged son. The mom said, "Well, listen to this." She explained that her ex-husband and her daughter (not the ex-husband's kid) have made a connection via contradancing, and sometimes even dance as partners. The dad (a social worker) piped up, "Yeah, how about that? My daughter knows my wife's ex-husband through dancing. In fact, she's danced more with him than she has with me, her own father. And it's great!"

## Summary: Engaging Families In Your (*not-necessarily-“Family”*) Dance

### VISION

I intend to generate excitement for engaging families in a dance series because I think family engagement is a vital element of sustaining our social dance traditions – in both the short and long term. Ideally, workshop participants will share their own experiences, be inspired by the experiences of others, and learn new things – both intangible learning (such as the philosophical underpinnings of the topic) and tangible learning (such as specific on-the-ground strategies to implement).

### GOALS

1. Workshop enhances all participants’ understanding of “what engaging families looks like.”
2. Most participants either have an epiphany re: engaging families (YES! We’re going to do this!) or have their existing practices reinforced (YES! We are on the right track!) (Ideally all, not just most, but realistically some will decide “This is not for us.”)
3. Participants who want to engage families will learn at least one new strategy to try.

### DESCRIPTION

Do you want

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- A sustainable series?
- Effective marketing?
- A dancer demographic that’s intergenerational?
- Long-term investment in your beloved dance tradition?

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### Session Leader BIO

Chrissy Fowler first contra danced at a cousin’s recommendation when she was about 20. In the nearly three decades since then, she has danced with her siblings, parents, son, and various cousins, aunts and uncles. For footwear, Chrissy cherishes her [Belfast Flying Shoes](#) (a.k.a. the thriving Maine dance series she founded with her brother and sister-in-law, and her child’s godmother.) Belfast’s vibrant contra scene engages dancers of all ages, many of whom bring the whole famdamily.



*(photo of Theo Fowler and his mother Chrissy Fowler dancing at Youth Dance Weekend in Vermont)*