



**Part
3**

Courtesy & Etiquette Guidelines (AKA Shaping Culture)

Create Your Own Courtesy and Etiquette Guidelines

This framework provides example language for local leaders to choose from as they build their own courtesy and etiquette guidelines.

The intent of the toolkit is to save local leaders the work of sifting through dozens of sample documents from other communities, searching for language that reflects their values and meets the needs of their community. We have attempted to do that work for you.

For each topic listed, several text examples are provided. Many of these are adapted from existing culture and etiquette documents used by various communities across the country. Sources are credited at the end of this document.

The examples provided have variations in tone and language. These examples illustrate how different communities have said relatively the same thing, but with slightly different nuances. For this reason, there is some repetition. You may copy and paste the sample language directly, or adapt it further as you create your own document.

In addition, if you wish to see full samples of similar documents used in other communities, contact resources@cdss.org.

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Definitions for the following terms are included in the [Introduction](#) to this toolkit:

- **Safety** • **Respect** • **Inclusion**
- **Courtesy** • **Etiquette**

Courtesy and Etiquette Guidelines

Introductory Language

- Everyone plays a role in building community—dancers, organizers, musicians, leaders, spectators, and more! In order to provide a welcoming environment, driven by inclusivity and the opportunity to leave a meaningful impact on the people brought together, we depend on you to support this goal.
 - The dance community tries to be welcoming to all and relies on everyone to support that goal.
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Communication

General

We are all constantly learning and evolving as dancers and members of the dance community. We can do this best if we have an open dialogue with each other about dancing!

Preventing unsafe interactions – catching problems before they grow

Before each dance

- Check in with your partner every now and then. Everyone is different. We have varying physical abilities, we get dizzy from different things, we have different preferences, we are strong (or not) in different places, etc. Because of these differences, we can't accurately guess how our dancing feels to our partners; the only way to know for sure is to ask.
- Ask questions of your dance partners and people in your circle. For example:
 - Dip?
 - Is it OK if I _____?
 - How do you feel about _____?

During each dance

- If someone is doing something you don't like, it's okay to tell them by saying, "Stop!" or "I don't like twirls," or "Please move your hand towards the center of my back," or "You're swinging too close."

- If you encounter a painful or uncomfortable situation in the middle of the dance, saying a firm “Ouch,” “No,” or “Stop that” can be the quickest way to indicate a problem. If you feel that you are in immediate danger, **you have the right to leave the line.** You are more important than the dance.
- Be aware of and respect the physical needs, skill level, and energy of your partners and neighbors as you dance.
- Non-verbal communication: Be aware of signals from your partner that they may not be enjoying something. Pay attention to body language and facial expressions. If someone pulls away, it suggests they don’t like being so close. Respect their unspoken feedback.

Responding to feedback

- If anyone asks you to stop doing something, apologize and stop doing it.
- “So sorry; thanks for telling me.”

Dance Atmosphere

General

Community statement at the door / promoting group welfare

- We’re all here to have fun. Be aware of and respect the physical needs, skill level, and energy of your partners and neighbors as you dance. Try not to be judgmental; hold your tongue even if you *feel* judgmental.
- Support community culture and avoid being cliquish. For the most part, try not to book ahead. Just turn to whoever is closest or look to the sidelines to find a partner.

Eye contact

- Eye contact can be fun, but keep it light. Remember that your partner’s comfort zone may be different from yours. Err on the side of being respectful.



Thanks to Bruce Hamilton for this New Yorker cartoon by Charlie Hankin.

- Eye contact is fun except when it isn't. On moves like swing and allemande, eye contact helps avoid dizziness. If it's uncomfortable for you, look at a shoulder, ear, or forehead.
- Smiling and eye contact are part of the fun, but refrain from predatory or intimidating behavior.
- While eye contact is encouraged in most social dancing and can help with dizziness when turning, if it makes you uncomfortable, don't feel forced. Always communicate with other dancers if you need to dance differently. If turning, or in a closed couple position, you can look at your partner's ear or shoulder.
- Be sensitive to personal and cultural differences about eye contact. Don't force or judge.

Flirtation

Advice to organizers: *Keep in mind that a number of people in our community want to connect with others but may not be skilled in the nuances. We cannot expect people to “read” their partner's comfort zone in every case, but we can expect people to read and understand rules and norms if clearly stated. Try to encourage a culture of offering direct feedback and gracious acceptance of feedback.*

- While flirtation is often part of social dancing, it can make dancers uncomfortable and is not an essential part of our styles of social dancing. Please limit flirtation to dancers who are known to you and with whom you have built a rapport! If you're at all unsure, ask!
- Flirtation can be fun, but also off-putting. It is important to build rapport with each and every individual partner or neighbor before you add flirtations beyond standard dance moves.
- Consider who might be watching—children, your grandmother, a potential employer.

Respecting space

- While our dancing is often exuberant and fast moving, dancers should never be out of control. Always dance with the safety and comfort of other dancers in mind. There is a fine line between playful shenanigans and interference with others.
- Respect people's space. For example, if you like swinging in a close embrace, ask your partner/neighbor if they enjoy this too before initiating such a swing. If you see a person do this with someone else, it still doesn't mean they want to do it with everyone—ask!
- Be sure to keep your dancing within your “designated” dance space; don't invade others' space with wild moves.

Basic body mechanics / developing dance technique

Advice to organizers: We recommend that your beginner lessons include basic body mechanics for dancers. This is as important as what the moves are called and where to go when. These basics build community, help prevent injury, encourage dancers to develop their technique, and make dancing more fun for everyone. Teaching the concept of shared weight is particularly vital. [If you would like tips towards crafting a strong beginner lesson and on dance technique, look here.](#)

- Support your own weight. Connect with other dancers with equal and opposite tension: this is the concept of shared weight, which is a critical dance skill. Guide others, rather than dragging them. Lead firmly but gently.
- Use open-handed grips that are held together by the tension and input of both dancers; avoid grips that squeeze or encircle another person's thumb, hand, wrist, or body in a way they can't escape.

Flourishes

Flourishes (e.g., twirls, spins, swing variations) are optional embellishments. We recommend waiting to add flourishes until you have learned the basic mechanics. This will help avoid injuries.

- Listen to your partner for what they may need from you, e.g., not too many twirls or no twirls at all. Ask and receive verbal consent before doing anything with a partner/neighbor beyond the moves of the dance as taught by the caller.
- Dipping or lifting your partner on a crowded dance floor can be unsafe for you, your partner, and others around you. Please make sure your partner is willing, and the moves can be executed safely and on time ("When in doubt, leave it out!"). Many local dances don't allow dipping and lifting.
- Each dancer has both the right and the responsibility to maintain control of their body. Do not lift another dancer off the floor. Do not lift children. Do not dip people without their explicit permission.

Asking people to dance / responding to invitations

Historically, some dancers were taught that they must sit out if they decline a dance. This is no longer expected. As our norms evolve, we strive to balance consent and safety with care for inclusion and community.

Asking

- Anyone may ask anyone to dance.
- If someone refuses your invitation to dance, just say “okay!” and then find another partner.
- Ask a partner kindly. Accept their answer cheerfully. If you are repeatedly declined by a prospective partner, it is best to give them space.
- It’s nice to check the sidelines for people who weren’t dancing the last dance but would like to dance the next one.

Responding

- You are always free to say no when someone asks you to dance. You don’t have to give a reason; you can just say “No, thank you.”
- Feel free to decline a dance with someone with whom you feel uncomfortable. If you would prefer not to dance with them, a simple “no thanks” is appropriate. We encourage you to dance with a variety of people both new and familiar, but your safety and comfort come first.

Issues

- Persistently ignoring or challenging another dancer’s expressed wish to not interact during the course of an evening is harassment and is not acceptable.
- If someone has declined to dance with you, the etiquette in some communities is not to ask that person again that same night. If they would like to dance with you, they can come ask you—it’s their turn to do the asking.

Advice to organizers: *“It’s okay to say no” is the bottom line for safety purposes. However, etiquette is nuanced; we hope leaders will encourage kindness in this context. See [“Inclusivity”](#) below. More resources will be forthcoming regarding these nuances. It’s worth discussing within your community.*

Roles

Coming soon: *Sensitive Topics: Dance Roles, Gender, and Language. Check back for a more detailed resource on this issue. Meanwhile, these ideas address this issue in a general way:*

- You may dance whichever role you prefer: gent/lady, right/left, lark/robin, etc.
- Our dance roles are just that—a role, not an identity. Gender identity does not matter in choosing a partner. Anyone can ask anyone. In many communities, it is common to dance either role. Some folks dance one role or the other for a whole dance; some dancers switch back and forth during the dance (but this is more challenging). Many beginners find it easier to pick one role and stick with it for a while.
- You should trust that the dancer coming towards you is dancing the role they chose and respond with the called moves for your role.

- Be aware that the dancer coming at you may be dancing in their intended role or may be a beginner who needs help. (Note: Some communities use visual cues, such as wristbands or neck ribbons, to identify who is dancing which role.)
- Be aware that it is common for any gender to dance either role. It can be helpful to point beginners to their intended position if they are inadvertently switched. At the same time, experienced dancers may be “switched” on purpose and do not want to be doubted or corrected. It is a fine line to balance, whether to attempt to be helpful or not. Consider a quick inquiry: “Are you on the left on purpose?” Or let them know, “I’m the robin.”

Offering to help others

- Help new dancers listen to the caller, especially during the walk-through. The best dancers help others by gesturing: reaching out for their hand in a clear definitive way, gently guiding in the correct direction to go, indicating the correct path or spot on the floor, etc.
- Be mindful that new-to-you faces may not be new dancers. Don’t assume they need help. This applies to children as well as adults! Treat children with the same respect as adults; don’t be condescending.
- Help all dancers listen to the caller by being attentive to the caller yourself. Refrain from conversation. Assist people by gesturing in a friendly manner. Please see [“What to Do When You’re Not the Caller”](#) by Bruce Hamilton.

Learning advice for new dancers

- Most importantly, pay attention to the caller!
- Watch and follow others, but listen to the caller. The best dancers will help beginners through gentle gestures, rather than talking over the caller. See if you can adjust your movement accordingly.
- It is courteous to everyone to refrain from conversation when the caller is talking.
- If you can’t hear the caller, it’s okay to let your chatty neighbors know.

Mistakes in the dance

- It’s only a dance. Just have fun. Mistakes happen, and the dance goes on.
- Don’t fret if you get mixed up. Smile and keep moving. As you gain experience, you will learn strategies for recovering from mistakes. If things really unravel, just take a breath and get in place for your next neighbors and you’ll be back on track.

Inclusivity

(See also the [“Inclusivity”](#) section of the CDSS Resource Portal)

Health, hygiene, and related accessibility issues

(Note: These guidelines are culled from samples that were written pre-Covid. Adapt as necessary for changing times.)

Health

- Hand contact during dancing can pass germs. Please be sure to wash your hands often, and/or use hand sanitizer.
- Be careful not to touch your face or eat until after you’ve washed your hands.

Illness

- Please stay home from dance events if you have any symptoms of illness or think you may have been exposed to anyone who is ill. Better safe than sorry. Dances can be powerful vectors for spreading contagion.

Hygiene

- Because dancing involves close contact, please be sure you have bathed recently, wear clothes that are relatively fresh, avoid scented products, etc., so as not to offend anyone.
- Contra dancing is a physically vigorous activity, and keeping clean and dry can be a challenge. Please be sure your own body and clothing are clean. As a courtesy, consider bringing a hand towel or fresh shirts.
- Sweating intensifies scents, so please avoid using scented products.

Scent / chemical sensitivities

- Please do not wear scented products to our dance events. Some people are allergic or have severe chemical sensitivities. Even small amounts of scent become very intense when we sweat during activity.
- Some of our dancers are hypersensitive or allergic to scented products such as perfume, after-shave, or cologne. Even scented deodorants, laundry, and hair products will cause an adverse reaction. Please do not wear scented products of any kind to a dance.

- All _____ events are fragrance-free (e.g., all Mayberry contra dances are fragrance free). Please avoid aftershave, perfume, tobacco, and all other scented products. This will improve the atmosphere for the significant number of dancers who have severe reactions to such products.

Note to organizers: Please see additional resources for deeper discussion of chemical sensitivities, including a list of unscented products that some highly sensitive folks have found acceptable.

Awareness of physical abilities

Accommodating those who need it

- Individual dancers vary in their ability to move on the dance floor, from highly agile to limited mobility, so it is important to be aware of the dancers around you and accommodate individual differences as needed.
- Consider that some physical challenges are not obvious. Be aware if your partner has any limitations.
- It's our culture to communicate with each other a lot! We encourage dancers to ask and inform each other about any physical limitations and to accommodate each other as needed, graciously.
- We aim to be welcoming to everyone. This includes participants with any ability/disability. You may encounter dancers who are blind or deaf, dancers who use crutches, a wheelchair, an oxygen tank, etc. Feel free to ask them what they need, if anything, and enjoy their company.

Don't try to be helpful when it's not needed

- Be aware that other dancers may be modifying their movements to accommodate their individual situations; trust that dancers know their own bodies and needs.
- If someone is skipping moves or taking other shortcuts without disrupting the dance, presume they have a reason for doing so and don't try to "fix" them.

Eliminating Emotional Barriers

Advice to organizers: *Vocabulary matters! In everything you say—written or oral—take care to use vocabulary that welcomes the diverse community you seek to engage (welcome poster, dance instructions, code of conduct, ...). For example: saying he/she/they rather than just he/she conveys sensitivity to gender diversity. Similarly, calling college students “young adults” conveys more respect than calling them “kids.”*

Anti-oppression or diversity, equity, and inclusion training is available from other organizations. For more information, search online to find a provider that suits your needs.

Consider possible efforts to intentionally engage underrepresented populations—promote or increase diversity (age, ethnic, etc.).

Some communities display posters or other visuals (“Everyone is welcome here!”) to convey openness to newcomers and to remind regulars that this is a core value of the community.

Insensitivity and harassment

- Sexual harassment and predation are not tolerated in our dance community. We strive to be kind here. Please seek out the dance host, if anything makes you uncomfortable at the dance.
- Sexual harassment and predation are not tolerated in our dance community. Please refer to our complete code of conduct for details on behavior and consequences.
- Harassment and predation are not tolerated and are covered in our code of conduct. Insensitivity and offense are nuanced challenges that require awareness and sometimes education and/or modulation.
- Please refrain from sexual innuendo, and think carefully before commenting on a dancer’s appearance, ethnic heritage, or any other potentially sensitive topic.

Welcoming marginalized populations; being aware of and avoiding microaggressions

Definition: Microaggression is a term used for brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative prejudicial slights and insults toward any group, particularly culturally marginalized groups.

- We value diversity and strive for respect for everyone. Microaggression refers to brief and commonplace verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, intentional or not, that communicate

derogatory or hostile prejudice in the form of slights or insults toward a particular group. We encourage our community to be aware of individuals' differences and to be aware of and avoid any microaggression on or off the dance floor.

- Avoid verbal or environmental unfriendliness when approaching dancers whom you don't know well.

Advice to organizers: *Regarding marginalized populations: Address prejudice, beratement, and verbal harassment in policy documents. Then cross-reference them here—explain that overt offense is a policy violation, while microaggression is a culture, courtesy, and etiquette concern.*

Body comments

- “Have you lost weight?”, while meant as a compliment, can make a person feel their body is being scrutinized and judged. You don't know what might be going on with someone—maybe they lost weight due to illness or gaining is healthy for them.
- “That's a pretty dress” or “great shirt!” is better than “that dress looks great **on you**”—comments about bodies can be intrusive, even if well-intended. Comments about clothing are less personal. Focus on the clothing or the art of someone's costume, rather than the person's physique.
- Unsolicited comments, even well-intended ones, about any aspect of appearance, can make people uncomfortable.
- Any comment about a person's appearance may have a negative effect, regardless of the speaker's intent. It's a boundary thing. When in doubt, leave it out.
- Some people feel put-upon when people exclaim “Smile!” The implication is that their resting face is unattractive.

Gender language

Note to organizers: *Some people feel that use of gendered role-terms (e.g., ladies and gents) falls under the umbrella of microaggression toward LGBTQ+ dancers. We do not address role-terms in this section of the toolkit. Please see [additional resources](#) for discussion on how to address this question in your community and form a local policy in a positive way.*

Other microaggressions

Stereotypes and assumptions about or evaluations of people based on their appearance can be unconscious, and when they come out in conversation they can be very hurtful and make people feel othered. These can be about race and ethnicity, religion, age, class, national origin, sexual orientation, gender identity, and many other qualities. Some examples:

- In 2007, some people commented on how articulate Barack Obama was, implying that that is unusual for black men. If you are surprised by learning information that contradicts a stereotype you hold, try to keep that to yourself in the moment, and think about why you had that response.
- Asking people who don't appear white, "Where are you from?" and disbelieving their answer is a microaggression.
- Saying, "Wow, you sure are spry," to someone over 40 implies that contra dancing is only for people of a certain age or fitness level. Saying, "Are you sure you're at the right dance?" to a 20-something at an English country dance implies they are not mature enough or somehow won't be skilled enough for the dance. These are microaggressions.

Booking ahead

Advice to organizers: *Booking ahead is a delicate question of inclusivity—too much to put into this section of the toolkit—but an important issue to consider and address as a community. We suggest that you carry out a community input process (or leadership discussion) to agree on the guidelines that feel right for your community.*

- Booking ahead works against community building. Dancers who book ahead are minimizing their connection to the larger group—a new friend is waiting to meet them tonight!
- Be willing to dance with many different partners, including ones you have not met before.
- Balance your selection of partners between favorites, new friends, and people sitting out.

Singles welcome

- The dancing is done in sets of couples and is very social and interactive. One or more callers provide instructions, and there is a tradition of friendliness and changing of partners. One need never hesitate to come alone.

- Everyone is welcome! No partner or previous dance experience is necessary. Come alone, or bring a friend!
- It is our culture to change partners throughout the evening, even couples who attend together. This helps singles integrate seamlessly in finding a new partner for each dance.

Attitude

- Strive to be flexible, welcoming, and non-judgmental in your attitude and expressions. Be your best self.
- Be friendly to new dancers, supporting them as they learn about your community. Remain sensitive to how much conversation and coaching new dancers appreciate.
- Some new dancers appreciate a lot of interaction as a warm welcome, while others prefer the opportunity to figure things out on their own. Try to be aware of different people's reactions and adjust your initiative accordingly. Some people may feel "pounced upon" even if the welcomer did not intend to be aggressive.
- Be willing to dance with many different partners.
- Show appreciation for the organizers, musicians, caller, sound tech, etc. If you have complaints or concerns, express them with respect.

Promoting a culture of consent

See also ["Communication"](#) and ["Flourishes"](#) (under ["Dance Atmosphere"](#)), above. These three are intricately interwoven.

- Get consent for flourishes or for more energetic dancing: Do you like to twirl? Do you like to swing fast?
- Every dance move is an interaction between two or more people. Invite another dancer in; do not force them.
- Before you have permission to flourish with someone, you have to develop a rapport with them. You have to get to know their preferences, their dance skills, and their comfort level.
 - The contra dance culture does embrace some level of free-spiritedness and friendly flirtation, but it has NOT discarded mutual respect as a primary tenet.

- Consent is about communication. Receiving consent includes verbal communication and physical cues. If someone resists a move or pushes you away, respect the response—don't do it again.
- Feedback:
 - It is common in our dance environment to give each other feedback. If anything makes you uncomfortable, speak up right away and let the person know.
 - If you don't feel comfortable giving feedback to a dancer, please approach an organizer. They can help as needed. At the very least, it's helpful to know if someone is making others uncomfortable in case it is a recurring pattern.
- Never lift anyone without their explicit consent, especially children or any dancer who is easily picked up.

Take care of yourself

- If you're tired (physically or emotionally), feel free to take a break.
 - Dancing is exercise—be sure to drink plenty of water.
 - Wash your hands after dancing—see [“Health, hygiene, and related accessibility issues”](#) above.
 - Wear comfortable shoes, and clothes that allow movement.
- Talk to your partners:
 - I'm dizzy. Can we slow down?
 - My shoulder/wrist/hand hurts. Can we find an easier way to swing/allemande?
 - Thanks. That swing was perfect.
- See [“Communication”](#) section above for more detail.
- If you have an injury, tell people verbally, or flag it by wearing a brace, red bandana, or badge.

Comfort with close proximity

In many kinds of dancing, you are brought into close contact with others. Comfort with close proximity varies among dancers. Accommodate individual differences as needed. Be aware of body language and facial expressions. Don't pull anyone in closer if they seem uncomfortable or resistant.

Eliminating Socioeconomic Barriers

Cost of admission

Note to Organizers: This section is not really part of culture and etiquette, but rather simply examples of how some communities have set their admissions policies to help eliminate cost barriers:

- Consider sliding scale or other options to support dancers on tight budgets, e.g.:
 - \$20 supporters
 - \$12 non-members
 - \$10 members
 - \$6 students or low-income
 - or pay what you can
- Admission: \$6–\$12. (When people hand over a \$10 or \$20, ask how much change they want, or how many people this is covering.)
- We offer a work-trade option for volunteering. Sign up to help us run the dance (openers, closers, door-staffing), and as a token of thanks, we'll invite you to dance for free.
- This dance follows our “pay what you can” policy: We suggest \$10/person to cover costs, but please come and pay what works best for you.

Expectations for footwear and clothing

- Please wear soft-soled, non-marking shoes to protect the floor. We recommend smooth-soled shoes for good gliding. Basic sneakers are fine, but rubber soles stick, rather than sliding. A good solution is to wear old socks OVER the toe of the shoe.
- We recommend wearing clean, comfortable shoes to keep the floor clean, and breathable clothes that allow easy movement. Nothing fancy is required!
- Please carry in clean-soled shoes so as not to track in dirt and damage the floor.
- Festive dress—whatever that means to you (and fragrance-free! Please see the [“Health, hygiene, and related accessibility issues”](#) section above).
- (When the event is a costume event:) Costumes admired but not required.

Transportation

- Dancers in need of transportation may contact organizers.
- Here in (city name) we often meet for carpooling to dances at the ___ parking lot. Feel free to show up and join the carpool. Contact ___ for more info about ride-sharing.

Dealing with Problems

Advice to organizers: *It is common for first-time attendees to have a discomfiting experience and never return. If encouraging reporting is something you want to do, the language you choose from this section needs to be communicated verbally at each dance. New dancers will not read your written guidelines during their first evening. Announce at each event that, as organizers, you encourage reporting, and will take every comment seriously. You might also post a small sign at the door and in the bathrooms, and perhaps hand out a small postcard aimed at newcomers with the most essential points of these etiquette norms, especially welcoming feedback.*

Reporting

Encouraging reporting

- If anyone makes you feel unsafe, uncomfortable, or embarrassed, you can address it with them directly during or after the dance.
 - If you're not comfortable addressing it with them, we encourage you to approach one of the organizers *[note local ID method]*, who will work with you to resolve the situation in a way that helps you feel safe and comfortable. This will typically involve the committee members reminding the dancer of our community standards, and asking them to change their behavior.
 - For full details about our complaint response procedures, please see this policy document. *[Add local detail for where to find it.]*
- If someone treats you in a way that is intrusive or unwelcoming, or makes you feel unsafe, we want to know. If we don't know about it, we can't address it.
- If you would warn your friends to avoid someone, it is worth reporting. We won't know that there is a pattern of inappropriate behavior unless people report single incidents.

Response to reports

Note to organizers: Your complaint response procedures should be a separate document that you provide to your community. Complaint Procedures are the topic of Part 4 of this toolkit. See the [Resource Portal](#) for some resources to get started. Once you have developed your own complaint policies and procedures, you can reference them at this point in your own etiquette guidelines.

References

- [Scout House \(Concord, MA\) poster](#)
- [Contra Etiquette from Country Dance New York \(CDNY\)](#)
- [Chicago Barn Dance Company \(CBDC\) Etiquette](#)
- [Statement of Principles from Hands Four Dancers of Ithaca \(HFDI\)](#)
- [Bay Area Country Dance Society \(BACDS\) Code of Conduct](#)
- [Bay Area Country Dance Society \(BACDS\) Fragrance Free Policy](#)