



## Folk Dancing for Young Children

By Francis Wardle, Ph.D.

Teaching folk dance to young children fulfills many goals of a good early education program. It provides fun and developmentally appropriate ways to develop physical abilities and coordination (Bredenkamp and Cople, 1997), and to enjoy physical exercise—critically needed in today's society, where many American experience health problems related to being overweight and not getting enough physical activity. It also presents an excellent outlet for active children and kinesthetic learners (Gardner, 1983), desperately needed in school that are more demanding more and more traditional academics and passive behaviors. We must provide a variety of appropriate physical activities for our quickly developing, naturally active young students (Gallahue, 1993). Folk dancing teaches basic concepts of rhythm, repetition, sequencing, patterning, predictability, anticipation, musical cues, auditory discrimination, and counting. And it is very multicultural—exposing children to dances from around the world, to dances representing different historical and social times, and showing children how all cultures, nations, and people are connected and interrelated (Wardle, 1999). For example, American square and contra dances are based on French dances; Israeli dances have steps, formations, and music from throughout the world (brought to Israel by Jews who emigrated there from every corner of the globe); and Mexican dances are influenced by the Spanish Flamenco, Native cultures, and emigrants from the Caribbean and Africa. But maybe the main advantage of teaching folk dances at an early age is that it creates in children a disposition toward a fun, loving way to provide life-long physical activity and exercise.

### Teaching Folk Dancing to Young Children

Folk dance performances for the public present a highly structured, controlled, intricate, and choreographed activity. This is a shame, because true folk dancing is not a performance activity, and because these performances give the impression children need to learn complicated steps and formations to enjoy folk dancing.

They don't! The best way to start young children folk dancing is to teach singing games, such as "Ring Around the Rosie," "bingo," "Hokie Pokie," "London Bridge is Falling Down," and other activities where a group of children do certain activities to music or chants, and often sing along. Every culture has some form of singing games, and there are several sources to learn new ones.

The revised edition of *Sing Through the Day* (Swinger, 1999), includes some new and unusual singing games from around the world.

Another introductory activity is the grand march. A grand march is a line of dances dancing to rhythmic music that changes emotion and tempo often. The teacher should initially lead the line; then other children can take turns. Once the children learn to follow the leader, and repeat the leader's steps and body movements in time to the music, simple steps (high steps, little steps, two foot jumps, skipping) and simple formations (making an arch and everyone going under the arch) can be introduced. Grand marches can be done inside, or outside on a nice day—and with a good sound system (or live music). Make sure you use a variety of music, and start introducing the children to specific folk dance music: Virginia Reel (American), Irish Washerwoman, Jesusita en Chihuahua (Mexican), Mayim (Israel), Circassian Circle, Fado Blanquita (Brazil), Jarabe Tapatio and La Negra (Mexican), Rakes of Mallow, Twelfth Street Rag and Salty Dog Rag (USA), Caribbean and African dances music, and the Russian troika. For the grand march, the use of these dances provides appropriate music that changes tempo, feeling and character frequently. These dances—and other recordings of dance music—can be obtained from a variety of sources (see box). Knowledge of the dances used for music in the grand march is not necessary.

### Simple Folk Dances

Move from the singing games and the grand march to simple circle, square and two line dances: Seven Jumps, Little Shoe Maker, La Raspa; simple versions of Circassian Circle, Fado Blanquiata (Brazil), Mayim (Israel), Sellinger's Round and Gathering Peascods (England); two line dances such as Virginia Reel and Jesusita en Chihuahua, and square dances like Gustav's Skoal (Sweden), and the American square dances Red River Valley, Pop Goes the Weasel, and Ladies to the Center. There are many other simple dances that use a walking, running, or simple skip step, and very simple formations. Don't initially do dances that require partner changing, intricate footwork, complex formations or knowledge of right and left hand, right and left feet.

### Seven Jumps

This dance was originally danced in Denmark, Belgium, Germany, and Holland. There are various tunes that can be used for the dance, and different variations (as with all folk dances).

#### Formation

Dancers join hands in a large circle, facing the center. No partners.

#### Action

The action is accumulative; each time the dancers do everything they have done before and add a new figure.

**First jump.** Dancer moves to the left with seven running steps, pause, then to the right with seven steps. Drop hands and place hands on hips, and on the long note of the music, raise one knee and hold

it as long as the note holds, then lower it.

**Second jump.** Repeat the first section, then the first jump, and then repeat the first jump by raising the other knee.

**Third jump.** Repeat the first section, the two previous jumps, then kneel on one knee

**Fourth jump.** As above, then change to kneel on both knees

**Fifth jump.** As above, then place right elbow on the ground, resting chin in palm

**Sixth jump.** As above, then place both elbows on the ground, resting chin in palm

**Seventh jump.** As above, then place both elbows on the ground, and chin in palms

**Eighth jump.** Repeat all above action, add: bend down and touch your forehead on the floor. Keep forehead on floor until music changes.

Then repeat entire sequence

(Note: Right and left hand and feet designations used by adults and older children are eliminated in this version.

### **Simplifying Dances**

Remember the purpose of folk dancing with young children is to have fun, dance in time and temp to the music, and develop a love of dancing. Everything else is secondary. Initially don't worry about right and left feet, right and left hands, proper holding positions, and correct steps. You might use a two handed swing instead of a right or left handed swing; simplify steps so children can first learn the dance. If a dance requires children to pair off in couples and you feel that are not ready, have them join hands in a large circle; if a dance requires too many different activities, simplify by repeating the same ones. Children love to repeat something they have just learned. Keep it simple until the children can use the music as a cue to know what to do next. Progress from calling the basic instructions over the music, to allowing the children to anticipate the next sequence without your help. Once the dance has been learned you can add more complicated steps, formations, and expectations—just make sure they are developmentally appropriate.

Up to about age six, children should do dances where they use a simple running step, or other step involving simply transferring weight from one foot to another. Changing partners should not be required; nor should formations that involve right and left hand sequences. Swinging should be tow hand swings, with dancers facing each other and skipping around each other. After about age six, you can use a mark to on the hand or a piece of yarn to determine right and left hands. Dances that require a knowledge of left and right (both for hands and feet) can be attempted at this age. Dances requiring partner changing can be introduced. At age 7-8, more sophisticated steps can be taught—setting, grapevine, kolo step, etc.; the square dance swing can be taught, and dances with more complex formations and changing of positions taught.

### **Using Dance in the Curriculum**

Folk dancing can be easily used in all sort of curricular activities (Wardle, 1975), from inclusion in units being studied (Mexico, Russia, pioneers, different cultures, units around books), social studies activities and celebrations and festivals, to learning about specific countries, climates, customs, and concepts. For example, most Israeli dances concern water (waves, springs, etc.) because most of Israel is a desert country where water is very valuable; Gustaf's Skoal (Sweden) shows the peasants of Europe imitating (and making fun of) royalty; Jessusita en Chihuahua tells of the joyful return of Mexican revolutionaries, and Sicilian Tarantella imitates the activity needed, according to folk myth, to rid oneself of the poison from a tarantula bite (Wardle, 1975). Some Mexican dances show the influence of the bull fight; some English dances have formations that symbolize repairing of fishing nets by coastal fisherman; Maypole dances celebrate the return of spring, as do many Native American ceremonial dances.

### **Be Sensitive to Contemporary Cultures**

In most cultures and countries today, folk dances are used for recreation, performances and ways to preserve aspects of a culture. But some folk dances—for example specific Native American dances—are a central part of a nation's or group's contemporary culture. and, as such, these dances often have deep spiritual and symbolic meanings. These dances should not be performed "just for fun." Be sensitive to this distinction, and ask individual from the group whose dance who wish to do, if you have a questions about its appropriateness. Almost all cultures have specific dances designed to be danced in a spirit of fun.

### **Conclusion**

Folk dancing is a wonderful way to introduce young children to the world's rich diversity, to teach the enjoyment of dance, music, and rhythm, and to begin a lifelong habit of the social enjoyment and physical activity of dancing. Teaching folk dance is also an excellent way to provide a legitimate outlet for kinesthetic learners, and an avenue to challenge the active children who often become frustrated and behavioral problems in programs that do not provide for young children's basic needs. Finally, folk dances lend themselves to a variety of curricular activities, projects and units.

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### Teacher Training

Many teachers do not know how to folk dance. You can't teach dancing unless you can do it (and enjoy it) yourself! Most cities and universities have folk dance groups that meet on a regular basis and invite beginners. Call local colleges and universities to find out whether they have folk dance clubs. High/Scope provides a training program, *Education Through Movement*, provided throughout the country (734-485-2000, ext. 218). (Educational supply companies also provide manuals you can use as reminders of how to do a dance. It is not recommended that you learn a dance directly from these manuals.) There are also specialized dance groups in some communities, such as Mexican, Polish, English, Scottish, and Appalachian dance groups.

Join one of these groups. Learn the different dances, then adapt and simplify them for your children's ages and abilities. You may also find people in these groups who would love to come to your center to teacher other teachers, and to work directly with the children. Set up workshops, and invite these people to your class when the children are ready. Using volunteers enables you to provide more diversity in the dances your children learn. Make sure these teachers understand the developmental level of your students, and their dancing ability.

### Source of Music

One of the great values of teaching young children folk dances is exposing them to the rich diversity of national, ethnic, and regional music. The more authentic the music you use, the better. Find out from dance groups in town the sources of the music they use, and get copies; ask parents if they have recordings of folk dances; visit ethnic shops in your town (for example, most Mexican stores have a variety of Mexican folk dance tapes and CDs); and buy from educational supply companies that carry tapes and CDs:

High/Scope Educational Foundation  
600 North River St.  
Ypsilanti, MI 48198 (An extensive series, with instructions)  
800-407-7377  
[www.highscope.org](http://www.highscope.org)

Educational Activities, Inc.  
P.O. Box 392  
Freeport, NY 11520  
800-645-3739  
[www.edact.com](http://www.edact.com)

Educational Record Center  
3233 Burnt Mill Dr., Suite 100  
Wilmington, NC 28403  
888-372-4543 (World of Fun Folk Dances—Manual and 3 discs)  
[www.erc-inc.com](http://www.erc-inc.com)

Melody House  
819 W. 92 St.  
Oklahoma City, OK 73114  
800-234-9228 (World of Fun series, manual and tapes/discs)  
[www.childrensmusic.org/MelodyHouse.html](http://www.childrensmusic.org/MelodyHouse.html)

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