

45th California State Square Dance Convention Youth Panel

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What Brings Youth Dancers In?

People wonder about what gets kids interested in square dancing, so what is the magic key? I asked the people on the Yahoo! youth_squares list how they came to be interested and there was no magic key.

All the kids on the survey started because of their parents, grandparents or a friend. The funniest response I got was "I started square dancing to have a right to make fun of it".

The poll showed that many youth dancers outside our clubs were recruited by friends and family. In our groups, the majority of dancers were recruited by online lists or flyers in the schools. To get Yellow Rock & Rollers started, we printed nearly 12,000 flyers and had them distributed through the schools (sent home through kids' backpacks). We got 5 squares of people each of our intro nights. While those sounds like scary numbers, consider the flyers were printed on 1/2 sheets, so the cost was less than \$300. In our area, many of the kids in the schools are not from this country, so they have no idea what square dancing is until it is taught in middle school. We lost many kids after the first few weeks, because they came just to find out what it was. However, we did manage to graduate 11 dancers at Plus in our first year. We will graduate another 10 this year.

Another problem with recruiting through schools is that the kids are not coming from dancing families. It is more difficult to keep the kids active in dancing if their families are not. The parents don't understand how square dancing differs from other types of dance in the activities it has.

I started homeschooling last year, so this year so we recruited through the homeschooling groups too. One thing we have found is with the homeschoolers, whole families are likely to come. Not only that, but when other parents saw these families dancing, they decided to get up too. When whole families participate, they are more likely to go to hoedowns and festivals. I believe this connection to the square dance community will help with retention.

Lastly, my mom and I have begun teaching in the elementary schools, so the kids will have a positive square dancing experience before they reach middle school and have a negative one. In middle school, the PE teachers are still teaching SQD and are not really teaching it the way we do it. The kids are very turned off, but the PE teachers do not want our help, YET! The one thing I request if that if people do get a chance to teach in the schools, please make sure what you are doing is appropriate for the age and really is square dancing. For example, PLEASE do not do the Hokey Pokey with anyone over 7 years old.

Of course, we have also had more kids coming in through friends and family members this year as word of our club has spread. However, to increase your membership, I HIGHLY recommend contacting your local schools to find out about distributing flyers to the kids.

Music

So what keeps youth dancing once you get them? A big part is the music. A dancer and newer caller in New Jersey took a poll of 50 youth dancers at the National Convention to find out what music they prefer. The responses she received were quite surprising. The top choice was Pink Cadillac and out of the top 15, very few singing calls were from recent songs. American Pie, Beautiful Brown Eyes and Amarillo By Morning were amongst the responses.

On my own survey, the following were the top choices:

1. Pink Cadillac
2. Sweet Home Alabama
3. Wanna talk about me
4. Sold
5. Living Next Door to Alice
6. Fisherman's Luck

Dancers from Adobe Squares also mentioned really liking some Japanese techno music Scot Byars uses. The general concensus was that they do not want "hick" music and the do want upbeat energetic music.

Socialization

Another thing that keeps us dancing is meeting other kids and getting to know each other. We want an atmosphere where we have time to really chat. Most of us like longer tips and longer break, *especially long breaks*. Square dancing is not just about the love for the dance, it is a team activity and we like to get to know our teams.

Challenge and Energy

Square dancing needs to be kept interesting to keep us coming back. We want to be able to express ourselves, show some energy and have fun when we are dancing. Many of us also enjoy being challenged. Just like in any other square dance group, you will have different needs for different people and it is a challenge to meet these needs within one youth group. The most important thing is to keep things fun.

Squaring Up

I have heard suggestions that youth should always be the ones to start a square instead of leaping into an existing one to prevent them from entering an unwelcoming atmosphere. I feel this decision is up to an individual youth. For a kid who is a newer graduate, and not very comfortable with their dancing, being in a square with a youth-hater could be very scary, possibly to the point that they are turned off forever before even giving it a proper chance. In that situation, I would totally agree, unless you see a square where all the faces are well known, start your own square.

That process may work for the less secure youth dancers, but that doesn't cover all of us and will not help the future of youth dancing. I'm outgoing and have been dancing for long enough that I'm secure. I don't start my own squares. In over 4 years of dancing, I have unfortunately crossed paths with many of those who dislike youth. I look at this as a challenge to change their minds and in some cases I even had sweet success.

Also, while I like the idea of people who like dancing with youth wearing frogs, youth should be able to assume they are welcome everywhere. People who don't want to dance with us should need to wear a toad 😊.

For more information about what we have done in our clubs, please feel free to contact me at schotzy@earthlink.net.

Any youth dancer who wants to subscribe to youth_squares, can send email to youth_squares-subscribe@yahoo.com.