

14 Tips for Teaching Line Dancing to Older Adults by Gerard Murphy | dance@trybarefoot.com

We're all aging. But of course you know that, right? And you know about the changes that your mind and body are going through with every passing birthday – because you're living the experience first-hand!

We know that with age comes a corresponding normal decline in sensory function, including vision, hearing, and touch. As we age, most of us lose some coordination, flexibility, and balance - primarily through inactivity, making it easier to fall.

We also know that more than 80% of people over 65 have some form of chronic condition (ie: hypertension or obesity) or are living with a chronic disease (ie: diabetes, asthma, stroke, arthritis or cancer). The effects of these chronic conditions/diseases, together with the normal changes that occur with aging, may impede our ability to learn new information and skills.

So, what does this mean for us as line dance instructors? What do we need to pay attention to when we teach a group of older dancers?

The answer? We need to integrate ***age-appropriate teaching strategies for older adults*** into our classes. Our approach to teaching older dancers must be ***planned, purposeful, and adapted*** to accommodate the potential special needs of the older person.

My years of experience as an adult educator, a line dance instructor and a health educator – combined with what the research says about teaching older adults – has helped me to fine tune my approach to teaching older dancers. And I'm excited to share my top lessons learned!

Here are my ***14 age-appropriate teaching tips*** that every line dance instructor can use to promote healthy, safe, respectful and meaningful learning experiences for older dancers:

1. ***Schedule*** dance classes in mid-morning when energy levels are high. Several brief teaches are more appropriate than one lengthy teach that might fatigue the older adult.
2. ***Pause*** regularly during classes. Have chairs available and encourage older dancers to pay attention to their own bodies and rest when they need to. Suggest that they sit and watch, if that's helpful!

3. **Allow additional time** for the older dancer to process new information by pausing after presenting a series of new steps. Resist the urge to “over-plan” your class with too many teaches.
4. **Encourage reminiscing and storytelling.** Help the older adult reconnect with lived experiences and stimulate memory! This is a fantastic strategy to help with learning. Ask questions such as: “When you hear this song, what does it remind you of?”; “Raise your hand if you remember dancing to this song years ago. What do you remember?”; “What other dance have we learned by this choreographer?”
5. **Emphasize safety and falls prevention.** Eliminate tripping hazards in your dance space, watch to ensure that the older dancers lift their feet off the floor and keep the lighting bright to support clear vision. Note that some dancers may be partially sighted or may be living with vision loss that requires dimmer lights. Take time to learn about the specific needs of your dancers. Notice if they’re holding onto walls, furniture, or someone else when walking or if they appear to have difficulty walking or arising from a chair. Choose music at a tempo that best fits the ability level of your group.
6. **Speak slowly,** but not so slowly that dancers become distracted or bored. Face the group whenever possible to explain a dance sequence, so that older learners can see your face and lips – some older adults with hearing loss may rely on lip reading.
7. **Speak clearly and concisely.** Use words that are familiar to the older dancer. Be sensitive and respectful of the beliefs and values of the older generation.
8. **Provide hard-copies of step sheets.** Use text that is easy to read, using large print (14-16 point font) with high contrast between the print color and paper (preferably black print on white or light cream, non-glare paper).
9. **Use visuals** as helpful aids to your verbal instructions, particularly for older adults who learn best by seeing and watching. Print the name of the dance and song on a white board or use a large piece of newsprint. Include the number of counts or the choreographer’s name too! Prepare the newsprint before class, save them and reuse them at your next class. Make your letters at least 3-4 inches in height.
10. **Give specific directions.** Break down a dance sequence and be explicit about where and how the foot should be placed. Say: “Step your right foot to the right side, about shoulder width apart, so that your feet are parallel to each other and your toes are all pointing forward. Your weight should now be on your right foot. Yes?” vs “Step to the right.”
11. **Engage** the older dancer by encouraging participation during your teaching. Demonstrate a pattern or sequence first, and then describe it. Preview the dance to the song selection – this helps older dancers who may be more reflective and observational in their approach to learning.

12. **Repeat** essential points frequently throughout the class. For example, say the name of the dance each time you start to dance it together. OR ask the group "What's the name of this dance?" to boost their engagement. Reinforce at the end of each teach the name of the dance, song selection and choreographer's name – similar to what you'd say at the start of your teach! This will help the older dancer to retain the information.
13. **Be consistent** in the selection of words and dance terminology that you use during your teach to help the older adult mentally process the information and recall it. Count every dance in using the same introduction.
14. **Approach** the older dancer in a way that communicates respect, acceptance, and support. Create a learning environment in which the person can comfortably acknowledge what is and is not understood. Encourage questions and take the time to respond.

What have YOU learned about teaching older dancers?

Email me at dance@trybarefoot.com with your TOP TIP. I look forward to learning from you too!

Cheers,

Gerard Murphy

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