



Sipping across the dance floor, a young girl waves a fan high above her head. The fan's long streamers flow behind her in a swirling ribbon of aqua and powder blue. This dancer is five years old. Her younger sister, age three, also holds a fan, which she flutters gleefully as their father boogies to some funky hip-hop.

This family is at Soul Sanctuary Dance, a Sunday morning event in Northern California. They're part of a growing movement: the family-friendly freestyle dance. From New England to the West Coast, parents can find gatherings that start earlier, admit kids for free, and welcome the younger set with costumes, scarves, balls, and cozy pillows.

Family Friendly Freestyle

Playfulness rubs off on young and old alike when generations jam at all-ages events.

By Rachel Trachten

In a world where kids and parents are often on parallel tracks, the advantages of family-friendly dance are abundant. Without major expense or equipment, families can enjoy one another by sharing a healthy and joyful activity.

At Soul Sanctuary Dance, organizers provide props like fans and scarves, encouraging playful interactions among the dancers and creating an inviting intergenerational jam. One organizer fondly recalls watching parents twirl in a circle with their 9-year-old, then all collapse into a giggling heap on the floor.

Ariana, a San Francisco–Bay Area mother of 5-year-old twins, has brought them to freestyle dances since the boys were about one. “It’s a treat for me and a treat for them,” she says. Ariana has a deal with her sons—she dances one song with them, the next one on her own. When they’re not dancing with Mom, the boys find lots to do: they interact with willing adults, meet up with other kids, and play with balls, hoops, and streamers.

Because there’s no right or wrong way to do freestyle dance, the pressure is off. Kids can be their energetic, creative selves and can also observe adults acting playful in an environment without smoke or alcohol.

Dancing with children can inspire in unexpected ways. Watching a toddler who was just learning to walk, one dancer found himself emulating the child’s first steps in his own movement. “As I danced,” he says, “I tried to feel what it was like to have just learned to be upright.” A 77-year-old dancer at Soul Sanctuary observes, “it’s freeing for the adults to watch the kids dance.” One of the kids she often

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dances with is six-year-old Dominique. Wearing a bright aqua princess cape, Dominique is still bopping along even though she’s left the dance floor. Asked why she likes to come to Soul Sanctuary, Dominique responds, “It’s fun and emotional.” What emotion does she feel? “Actually, I feel happy.”

Tenaya Hurst, a 23-year-old actress, grew up in a community of dancers. When Tenaya was a baby, her mother Diane hosted a weekly dance jam in Berkeley, California. Diane recalls that her daughter headed straight for the dance floor just as soon as she could toddle. Tenaya remembers that within the dance community,

“I felt totally included.”

Of course, some teens may seem reluctant to do almost any activity with their parents. But dance leaders are looking for creative and fun ways to engage teens. Clever DJs across the country are finding ways to incorporate teen-friendly music that surprises and delights adults. Nancy Farber, organizer of Dance Spree in Northampton, Massachusetts, notes that during the winter months, the teens became engaged in setting up for the dance and then hanging out there. At the Freestyle Frolic in New Paltz, New York, the teens like to stay on the lawn of the dance site, hula hooping and spinning poi.

An inclusive, family-friendly event sounds ideal and can be an amazing experience, but kids will be kids. So it’s also an opportunity to practice “loving what is.” Little ones can be disruptive and even unsafe if they run on the dance floor. Expect a full range of emotions to flow with the music and movement. So along with joy and exuberance, it’s not unusual to see some meltdowns or arguing, and quiet circle time might not be completely quiet.

Mike Thornley, organizer of Dance Away in Southern California, appreciates the powerful effect of combining dancers of diverse ages. Thornley enjoys the supportive atmosphere at Dance Away, where “older people act younger and younger people act older.” Family events like Dance Away offer a freeing environment in which people of all ages can stretch their minds and bodies by trying out new dance moves and listening to unfamiliar music.

Back at Soul Sanctuary, a woman dances in a circle with three young girls. One tips impulsively to the side, lifting her foot and placing her palms flat out in front of her. The woman grins and imitates the movement; the other girls giggle and follow suit. As the music transitions into a gentle ballad, the circle disperses and the girls gradually drift away.

The event begins to wind down; dancers move more slowly, stretch out, or sit in meditation. The five-year-old who started her morning with the blue fan, however, seems determined to dance until the very last minute. In the center of the room, she sways rhythmically, arms flowing by her sides, as the music grows softer and fades away. ✨

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