

Helpful Hints From Charlie Wheatley
From
The Happy Squares and Olympic Stars (Kentucky)

Teaching and calling for the handicapped means you may be working harder than ever before. You will come in contact with folks with various disabilities and you need to be very patient with them. Do not underestimate them. They amaze me with how fast they catch on and retain some things. They may not be able to tie a shoe but they can learn to dance. You will have to adjust your timing. Do not use a lot of fill-in for timing purposes; this confuses them. Use helper words, such as for four ladies chain: ladies star right, boys courtesy turn the girl. For right and left thru: right hand pull by, boys courtesy turn the girl. They understand this. You can do this and keep the dance flowing smoothly. I would rather sacrifice some flow in order to keep them dancing.

Singing calls: four ladies chain, four ladies chain back home, face corner, swing, promenade works well. If changing partners is too challenging, don't do it for a while. Work it in gradually. Spoon feed them. Call to them.

Most of these folks are on medication which may cause them to move very slow or too fast in some cases. I like to mix the ones that move slow with some that move faster and also mix the slower learners with the quicker learners. Although my early caller coaches advised against singling someone out, I will call their name if I see anyone not paying attention. Medication may also cause unruly behavior. I insist that someone attend the dance and be responsible for each dancer. My clubs dance one hour per week with a five minute break. We accept new dancers around September and we do not graduate.

Angels: the experienced dancers are the angels and we have some parents/caregivers who are willing to fill in the squares if needed.

I insist on being the only teacher and I am the only one that goes on the floor to instruct. Do not hesitate to go out on the floor to demonstrate a call or physically move them through it.

I do not split my dancers up even though some have more ability than others. Many parents/caregivers have said they appreciated me not doing this. I try to keep them happy. They pay the bills and me.

My club dancers are all mobile. Many times I am invited to teach folks that do not move so well. They may be in wheel chairs, on walkers or canes, blind or lack the ability to take instructions on their own. These folks are usually in adult day centers. Then, I use staff members or whoever is available to help those that need physical assistance. Again, I am the instructor and these angels listen to instructions and help the dancer move about, not instruct.

Getting started. A mother in one of my regular groups asked if I would try to teach her handicapped daughter and some other handicapped folks to dance. Twenty-nine people

came for the first class and the Olympic Stars were born. Currently, we have fifty-three members, five also dance Mainstream and one dances plus.

We formed the Happy Squares when a brother of one of our members heard about the Olympic Stars and asked if I was interested in teaching another group. We have twenty members.

Most parents/caregivers are associated with organizations that deal with the handicapped, such as Special Olympics, Down syndrome foundation, association of retarded citizens, that you can recruit from. Newspapers, radio, and TV are great ways to spread the word. But I feel word of mouth is still the best advertisement.

For the past thirty-four years, I have had the opportunity to call club dances (basic through A2) one-night stands, Festivals, conventions , beginner classes and recorded records, but calling for the handicapable is the most rewarding aspect of my calling career. Keep the music lively (they love music and love to dance). Do not talk down to them (they are not babies). Praise them, smile, keep it simple (kiss) and keep it fun.

Charlie Wheatley, Caller
Happy Squares (Handicapable)
Olympic Stars (Handicapable)
Charlie's Angels(mainstream)
Daytime Squares & Rounds (Mainstream)
Fun-plus-squares & Lines (Plus)