

Kids World from Style Spring

Etiquette and Social Savvy

FOR KIDS AND TEENS

“Social savvy is like a magical invisible cloak you can wear anywhere.”

By Carol Ann Hixon



CONFESSION: When asked to write an article about etiquette and the Cotillion, I expected to encounter a stuffy elitism (cries of “Liberty, justice, and equality for all” welled from the depths of my soul). Imagine my surprise, when reading and interviews won me over. Read on . . . you’ll like what you learn.

Denise Rechnitz and Christine Burge, the forces behind bringing the Cotillion to Fort Collins, identify the focus well, “Etiquette is a life skill.” Children must learn to be “competitive,” both socially and academically. Children -- and adults -- who feel comfortable in formal situations, will have skills to behave appropriately in all situations.

Echoing those sentiments and adding additional dimension is *Social Savvy* by Judith Re. Subtitled “A Handbook for Teens Who Want to Know What to Say, What to Do, and How to Feel Confident in Any Situation”, the easy-reading paperback goes beyond traditional social graces to confronting daily dilemmas for teens. Key word throughout the book is “respect” -- for others and for one’s self.

For example, on the homeless: “. . . just because the life of the homeless person is not your life, it does not mean that his or her problem should be ignored. It is your *responsibility* to be aware -- not to shut out all unattractive aspects of the world because it seems they have nothing to do with you. They *do* have to do with you. And it is up to you to find a way to give in a manner that suits your circumstances.” And the book tackles other issues -- drugs, divorce, religions, illness, prejudice -- in an appealing, helpful manner. We’re not just talking about how to sip your soup when we discuss etiquette in 1994. We’re taking a serious look at what behaviors make sense in a world that often makes no sense.

Once I'd established that etiquette is, indeed, a life skill, I had another question. What is a cotillion? Derived from a French term for petticoat, the cotillion has come to mean an intricate ballroom dance, and in this case an assemblage of young people for the purpose of developing respect and appreciation for their role in society through learning social etiquette and dance.

The course of study in Fort Collins consists of six Sunday evening sessions conducted by Jon D. Williams Cotillions, established in 1949 to "bring back the traditional values of the past and translate them into the social demands of today." Jon D. Williams III says, "The days of stuffy, cloistered dance classes are over. By educating our students in a party atmosphere learning becomes . . . an experience that they can put to practical use . . ." And young people in more than twenty cities around the country are participating in this education.

Christine and Denise can attest to the practical use. Both have children, from 4th grade through 9th grade, enrolled in this third annual event and they note that they are complimented on how the children behave. When introduced they know how to shake a hand, no limp, dead fish-types here, and they understand the value of eye contact.

Those niceties that make positive first impressions are oft best taught by someone other than mom and dad -- after all, the prophet is without honor in his own land.

Classes are divided into two age groups, consisting of equal numbers of boys and girls. Fourth, fifth, and sixth graders meet together and seventh, eighth, and ninth graders meet later. Classes are an hour and fifteen minutes long and during that time the participants learn dance from the traditional fox-trot to the Texas two-step, music appreciation, and proper etiquette.

Chris noted that having her son as a dance partner was a special benefit reaped from the classes.

Females in the younger class wear white gloves, not an easy commodity to find. There's a practical reason for the gloves -- they're not just affectations. Ten year-olds often have an aversion to "holding hands" and the gloves make the practice acceptable. For the older girls, gloves are optional.

Current class enrollment is over 160 and there's a waiting list. Denise said their best advertising has been word-of-mouth. Kids have had fun learning how to be socially savvy and they tell friends and the list grows.

Scholarships are available -- Christine and Denise stress that they don't want any young person excluded because of the membership fee. Nor does attire need to prevent attendance. It would seem that considerable loaning and exchanging takes place as youngsters outgrow one season's Cotillion-wear. Girls must wear party dresses or dress skirts and blouses, flats or low heels, and white gloves (optional for 7th-9th). Boys wear traditional suits or sport coats, ties and either black or brown hard-soled shoes. Asked about hair and jewelry regulations, Denise indicated there are none; the intent is not to make everyone look alike but rather to help kids understand what "dressing up" is.

Think about this: The Cotillion is an opportunity to look across an entire room and not see one single "billed" cap. Relish that thought, it happens ever too rarely.

And there are traditions that can help youngsters regain those skills, returning "civil" to civilization. Before you assume that a Cotillion is not your cup of tea, assess whether you know how to pour that cup graciously. I have been humbled. You may be too. More importantly, borrowing from William Wordsworth, let's enable the next generation to participate in ". . . that best portion of a good man's life, / His little, nameless, unremembered, acts / Of kindness. . ."

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