

SOUTHERN MARYLAND

MAGAZINE THIS IS LIVING

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The Jon D. Williams Cotillions program offers children in Southern Maryland the opportunity to learn social graces through dance, snacks and a lot of fun.

Good Manners & Dancing Go Hand-in-Hand

How many times, as an adult, have you found yourself in awkward situations? You meet the company president in the elevator and you're at a loss for words. Or, everyone is dancing at a wedding, but you have two left feet and they're pointed in opposite directions. How do you appear calm on a job interview when you're as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a rocking chair store?

students gather in their suits and party dresses to learn these social graces through the Jon D. Williams Cotillions program. The young ladies wear white gloves and the gentlemen wear jackets and ties. Students from third to eighth grades gather for the five-week session. Each class begins with a receiving line so students can practice introductions and hand shaking

While some people have an almost magical ability to seem at ease in any situation, it may not be the luck of the gene pool, but rather, basic etiquette survival skills learned at a young age. Across Southern Maryland,



skills - “make eye contact, use a good clear voice and keep a firm grip.”

The classes are coordinated with others in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area and instructors travel from the Jon D. Williams Cotillions headquarters in Denver, Co. Instructors cover basics like maintaining good posture, how to tie a necktie, how and when to curtsy or bow and the importance of courtesy and consideration. They also cover little tricks to project confidence even when it’s lacking - eye contact and posture play a big part - and having a reserve of polite questions to put others at ease.

And then the dance lessons start.

Immediately, eyes are diverted to the floor. Feet shuffle. Tiny voices get even smaller. But then the cotillion instructor puts everyone at ease with a light joke. She explains how to ask a partner to dance; how to guide a partner to the dance floor; even how to make appropriate small talk while waiting for the music to begin. The dancing starts out with a simple box-step foxtrot and progresses to swing dance, the waltz and more complicated variations. Veteran cotillion students help by assisting with the classes and demonstrating how the steps should look.

disinterested whenever their child looks over, but ready to capture the precious moments when the children begin dancing.

About halfway through the dancing, the children’s eyes go wide when refreshments are brought out. The cookies and punch are another teaching tool. The children must line up and the boys escort the girls to the refreshment table. The gentlemen must serve their partner first and properly escort the young ladies back to a chair. The following week, the roles will be reversed when it’s ladies choice for dance partners. Proper table etiquette and dining skills are covered in later sessions.



This is also where the white gloves play a critical role. “The gloves make the younger children comfortable because sometimes they don’t like touching each other when dancing,” explains Dawn Szot, Southern Maryland cotillion organizer.

At one end of the room, excited parents with covert cameras execute their own dance of trying to appear

By the end of the class, the children are giggling and having fun with a ballroom dance version of musical chairs, where the object is to dance with as many different partners before the music stops. Cotillion in Southern Maryland began more than 12 years ago when Mrs. Szot was looking for a way to teach these social skills to her own daughters. “I was trying to teach those skills at home and I needed some outside reinforcement,” she said. The closest program she could find was two hours away, so she set

about organizing a program in Southern Maryland.

“How you act is not only a reflection of your character, it is also a demonstration of your education,” Szot said. “Some of the children might not appreciate it for years, but it’s certain they eventually will.”

In the fall, classes are held at Annemarie Gardens in the new Arts Building. Winter sessions begin after the New Year at the Old South Country Club in Lothian.