

# Circle Dances for Children: report of experiences

By Deborah Dubner\*

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Circle Dance for children, does it work? Is it just a recreational activity for fun? Is it possible to bring about the qualities in children that adults feel in the circles of Sacred Circle Dances? Should the repertoire include only happy and lively dances? How to make children interested in songs and rhythms that are completely out of reach of the Mainstream Media? Can the principles and symbols that guide the teaching of the Sacred Circle Dances be used with children? From what age should children have access to them?

These are some of the many questions I had before start teaching Sacred Circle Dances for children in 2009. The questions never end because teaching children is a never-ending challenge, but my experience has answered me some of my concerns. I know the biggest problem nowadays is not in the children, but in our adult mind, which many times masks the fear of facing our inner child and the universe which we do not know. It's necessary to cultivate an opening quality to build up, with children and teenagers, a relationship in which we effectively teach and learn equally, in the teacher-student relationship that the circle offers. And it's not easy to unlearn! This is the greatest challenge. I intend, with this article, to share some achievements along the way, through joy and disappointments, sorrows and love, moments of deep gratitude and extreme tiredness. But I can easily say, in short, that the result is pure accomplishment.

## **Circle Dance for children, does it work?**

For sure! It works mostly for everything! It works to soothe, to reduce the "inner circles" in the classroom, to work shyness, to bring the children a sense of respect for themselves and the classmates, to expand body awareness, to create interest in other cultures and languages, to broaden the musical and gestural repertoire, to develop self-esteem, to overcome challenges, to connect with the silence, to learn with fun, to arouse curiosity, to bring them hope.

Practical example: normally, at the end of the class, we sit with the children in a circle and I ask them to say a word, a feeling or a thought generated by the activity of that moment. The words peace, love, friendship, hope and joy are always pointed out in conversations.

## **Is it just a recreational activity to have fun?**

Definitely not! It is recreational for sure, and it brings a lot of joy, but what the teacher harvests goes a lot deeper, because the seeds that are planted in the hearts of these children bring forth sweet, diverse, tasty fruit (results), most importantly, they generate new seeds. Many children teach the dances to their families, siblings, parents, cousins and when they do it, they broaden the universe of their coexistence.

Usually, when the group has never experienced the Sacred Circle Dances, it is common to see in children an attitude of disregard, calling them "little dances". This happens mainly concerning older children, from 9 to 10, when they start feeling ashamed of doing a "childish" activity. For boys the difficulty increases because many of them think that dance is for girls. These are challenges! But

when we can overcome these first barriers, the change in the group's perception is impressive, and it is possible to go deeper in the same intensity as we do with adults, sometimes even with greater intensity.

Practical example: I have always received letters from students thanking me and saying how they feel about the Circle Dances. This letter, from 2011, is amongst the ones that have touched me the most:

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This girl studies no longer in the school I teach (because the school only accepts children aged up to 12), but she is still in contact with the school, she dances frequently at home with her family, and she has already danced with me in a circle of adults in a Park (public square).

Is it possible to create in children the qualities that adults feel in circles of Sacred Circle Dances? Yes! It's amazing how children pick up the message and can express it very clearly. Recently, when teaching the very slow and quiet dance "Meditation for the Flower" by Nanni Kloke to children from 6 to 8 years old, a 6 year boy told his friend, and I, luckily, heard: "It is like a prayer".

Picture

In these few words, you can realize the connection with the sacred, with life and with the best there is in life itself.

The word "obedient" brings the connotation of belonging and adaptation in a pleasurable way, instead of fighting. It's important to note that children who belong to this institution live in dysfunctional families, often in violent environments, with parents involved with crimes and/or drugs.

### **Should the repertoire contain only joyful and lively dances?**

That's what I thought at first. But talking to friends who have taught this age group for longer, I realized that the dances that were more meditative were also very welcome with a very surprising result.

Practical example: I started, timidly, offering a Mantra for Peace dance, with simple and very slow steps, and there is a step in this dance in which the pairs swap, separating the dancers in "sun" and "moon" by turns. They love it and it requires practice in attention and concentration. I was impressed to see they liked it so much! And, frequently, they ask for this dance to ease their minds or to end their class.

### **How to make children interested in songs and rhythms that are completely out of reach of the Mainstream Media?**

When beginning the first Circle Dance class, it is common to hear children asking about the most famous songs that are on TV. Some of these songs have a very questionable quality and, on the other hand, some others are even interesting. At the beginning, we can see some resistance to rhythms and melodies that sound "strange". But this is normal! After all, even we, adults, often prefer to choose what is known because it gives us a feeling of comfort and security. However, after two or three classes, the unknown songs become children's great friends. It is important to repeat them several times, not only to have a good quality dance, but also to provide a sense of familiarity. Therefore, making children interested in new rhythms is easier than it looks. There is an inherent

curiosity that sprouts, spontaneously, in the child. We just have to overcome the initial resistance and create delightful learning opportunities. In a short time, they will not only ask for these songs and dances, but they will also be listening to them in the classroom and at home, with friends and family. And, therefore, the seeds will spread itself.

A practical example: Recently, a regular group teacher told me her students like to hear Circle Dance songs while they are doing activities. She said they prefer the most meditative songs, and also that these songs bring silence and keeps them quiet. This is a great example that children are open and interested in other types of music that aren't on hit parades. It is a matter of presenting, offering and waiting for the good results!

### **Can the principles and symbols that guide the teaching of the Sacred Circle Dances be used with children?**

Yeah, totally! They can be worked with children and young people, making use of an age-appropriate garb, both in the language and suggestions correlated to the dances. A metaphor I like to use, and which children, easily, incorporate, is the fact that we give our hands to keep love and friendship within the circle, as a belt of union.

Practical example: it took me a long time to find a way to make the children feel the importance of the center in the circle. One idea that worked out very well was suggesting the children to bring something important to put in the center while dancing. Every week some of the children bring some object. I ask them to share with classmates why the particular choice of that object. We've danced around photos, house keys, diaries, toys, cards, stuffed animals representing their pets, prayers, amulets, and other objects having relevant symbolism. So, the experience becomes very real and significant.

### **What age should children start Circle Dance classes?**

I believe that beginning at the age of four is quite possible to have nice Circle Dance groups. But, of course, each age brings different challenges and opportunities allowing that the learning process through the experience of dance is done in steps. It's always important to bear in mind the stage of child development, and how they impact on body awareness, coordination, emotions, etc., by choosing a repertoire and teaching method according to each child stage.

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**Patricia Preiss**, a very active teacher, has been teaching Circle Dances for children since 2002 and she adds: "The practice of circle dances with small children from the age of three to six is almost magical. Whether the teacher makes use of dances with lyrics or not, they go deep into history, we can even say that they impersonate the character itself, and their movements sometimes become huge, and other times very small, all depending on the type of dance. The circle is a welcoming place, we hold hands with the colleagues, make small 'trains', jump from one side to the other, and for them there is no mystery, it's a complete frolic. And if they like the dance, for sure they'll want more!

In the next stage, from the age of seven to ten they are bigger, and they feel they are older, therefore we can't just teach them any dance, because certainly we'll hear: 'this is kid's stuff'. Even some of them who are a little wary at first when holding hands, as soon as the activity begins they rejoin their inner child and they can't hold back the euphoria.

At the teenage stage, embarrassment takes place and they are also now choosing their musical preferences. Sometimes it's hard to compete with other styles, but we keep making adjustments, we learn some of their songs and we teach them ours. At this age group, fast dances and couples

dances are their favorite ones. I believe that this is due to agitation and challenges, and also the dances that work with space orientation, depending on their ability in the virtual world, they can easily learn and the dance becomes almost a game.

By the end we notice that they become more friendly towards their classmates, try to help each other, improve their self-esteem and self-confidence as well. Learning happens there, because they are not only dancing, but creating images, making synapses, listening to music and different rhythms, getting to know other cultures and learning about diversity, equality, equanimity. Children are usually very open-minded; they want to participate and be united, and the circle gives them just that, actually that doesn't include only the children, but anyone, and it might just be one of the best tools for education. Assuming that each one does his part and together support one another, we establish bridges that connect us far beyond our circles."

## **Throughout Brazil**

There are dozens of people working with Circle Dances for children. The environments are schools, integration centers, SESC's, parks and other public places. To offer a wider panorama, I asked two teachers to share their experiences.

Patricia Preiss (Porto Alegre / RS) brought us on the above text a practical guidance on the Circle Dances by age group and their results. Fatima V. Aguirre Ramos, who has taught circle dance since 2000, reports in the text below her many years of experience as a teacher in a public school in Vitória (ES).

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## **Circle Dance in School**

**By Fatima V. Aguirre Ramos**

*"Let us first teach little children to breathe, to vibrate, to feel, and to become one with the general harmony and movement of nature. Let us first produce a beautiful human being, a dancing child."*

"The Circle Dance is practiced at the Municipal School of Basic Education - EMEF José Alvaro Monjardim - JAM since 2004. Since then it was so named: 'Dancing All Nations: Circle Dances'; 'Sow Seeds: Circle Dance', 'Sow seeds, Cultivate, Care: Circle Dance', 'Children In Circle Dance: making the difference.' In 2013, we danced under the name CIRCLE DANCE IN SCHOOL.

Circle Dance was included in the school programme of EMEF JAM three years ago. It's a 10 hour/class weekly schedule, divided into 08 classes. This project attends students who are part of the Federal Government Program 'MAIS EDUCAÇÃO' (Further Education), the Municipal Government Program of Vitória 'TEMPO INTEGRAL NA ESCOLA' (Full Time In School') and also students of all classes who return after school to have Circle Dance classes.

The CIRCLE DANCE SCHOOL project goal is to achieve the development of dance in its multiple and integrated languages. It is an activity in which the body is challenged to practice the exercise of movement, rhythm and balance. With songs and circle dances from people of all nations, what is in focus is affection, experience and the challenge of the new which opens the doors to the experience of cooperation, creativity and integration, asserting cultural, personal and community identities in the group of students.

The 'gathering' of the Circle Dance takes place at the school auditorium every morning and afternoon on Thursdays. Some students are already present at school and others return after school accompanied by a relative, in small groups or alone, on foot or by bicycle. Those children, most of the time, are in a situation of social risk, others have great learning difficulties and their financial situation is very bad.

I witness how transforming and rewarding it is for them to be in this circle of coexistence and love. In this space and time we share not only the dance, but mainly the affection, joy and expressiveness. It is the speech being transformed into movement. According to some teachers, the students involved in the Circle Dance Project and who had problems with discipline, concentration and learning, have responded positively with attitudes of greater commitment towards the school, colleagues and themselves.

And, it has been like this, year after year, on a daily step by step and in each dance, they arrive to 'dance life'. And I am always there waiting for them. I often wonder - will they come today? Yes! They will come! With a smile on their faces to meet another circle of collective construction, of friendship and discoveries. They arrive!

I know this is the way. The way of taking care of oneself and others, of involvement with school, in both social and cognitive processes.

Despite the difficulties, it is in the lovingness of the meetings in the auditorium and in the involvement provided by the Circle Dance that they overcome the "noes", and transform themselves into points of light that are so important to one another, at the JAM EMEF daily educational process and in life as well.

"Children, when well cared for, are seeds of hope and peace." (Zilda Arns Neumann - last conference, Haiti, 2010)

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## **The choice to teach children**

I've heard from a lot of people: I don't like to teach circle dances for children. That's right, we all have our preferences and choices. I started teaching children by chance, and I was totally surprised by the love and openness that this experience has provided to my life. Honestly, I did not think I would be so delighted!

Teaching children constantly brings the challenge of dealing with indiscipline, noise, agitation. It is also a situation that always requires from us a state of attention to unlearn and relearn. Many things work perfectly for adult circles, but with children it is different! The surprises are many! Sometimes we think it will be all right and nothing happens, it is a disappointment! Other times everything works perfectly and they just love it, they get silent as if by magic, and the excitement is great.

Concerning children, everything is TOO MUCH. Both the good and bad things are enhanced simply because emotions run high, words come out spontaneously, smiles are sincere and hugs overflowing. We may finish class either tired and discouraged or completely fulfilled with a feeling that we are actually helping to change the world.

I hope this text will bring some ideas and especially the willingness to try and share experiences of teaching children.

I know that my testimony, combined with Fatima V. Aguirre Ramos's, and Patricia Preiss's, will add up to the ones from many people who have found in Circle Dances for children the seed of hope to plant a better world. As Beto Guedes says in his song: "We're going to need everybody ... one plus one is always more than two.. "Then here's the invitation to expand this universe and allow, day by day, that more children hold hands to build a great circle around the world!

\* **Deborah Dubner** is a psychologist and Sacred Circle Dances teacher in groups for adults, youth and children. In 2009 she worked with groups of children, women and youth in two CRAS (Reference Center for Social Assistance), associated to the Municipal City Hall of Itu. Since early 2010 she has taught Circle Dance at Centro Educacional Madre Teodora (Itu / SP), where she works, weekly, throughout the year, with two groups of children from ages of 06 to 12 years old. These children live in different neighborhoods from Itu suburbs and attend this Project after school. They live at risk and social vulnerability, being affected by their parents' unemployment and other social and family dysfunctions. She has also taught Circle Dance, weekly, for students from the 6<sup>th</sup> grade of Basic Education, since 2012 at a private school in Itu.

Deborah Dubner created the website **[www.dancacircular.com.br](http://www.dancacircular.com.br)**. She has written three books about Circle Dance: "Dancing life – Learning Journey at Circle Dance Circles" (2014), "The Therapeutic and Integrative Power of Circle Dance" (2015) and Dancing Life 2 (2019).