

# The Deerfield Contra Dancers' Guide to Contra Dance Etiquette

Contra dancing is a safe, friendly, and fun activity able to be enjoyed by the entire family. Newcomers can feel comfortable that they will be warmly welcomed into the contra dance community, and they will find experienced dancers to be helpful, as well as forgiving of miscues and mistakes. The following information is provided in order to help ensure an enjoyable atmosphere for every dancer, new and experienced alike.

## GENERAL

The Deerfield contra dance is an alcohol-free affair. The agreement made with the Deerfield Select Board for the use of Deerfield Town Hall clearly states that no alcoholic beverages will be served or consumed by guests, members of the public, or anyone in attendance (during the event). Similarly, it is our policy that other mind-altering substances are also unwelcome. Individuals violating this rule, or judged to be under the influence, will be asked to leave the dance, without receiving any refund.

Although newcomers to contra dancing sometimes arrive as a couple, each individual is encouraged to begin dancing with an experienced partner, as learning the steps will be easier and happen faster.

It is a part of contra dance culture that both men and women may ask anyone to dance. Experienced dancers will know to observe whether there have been individuals sitting out during a dance, and that these should be the ones who are approached and asked to dance first – doing so helps to promote an inclusive atmosphere. It is acceptable to decline to dance, but should, of course, be done politely.

Same-sex couples may be encountered on the dance floor, particularly when there is an imbalance in the number of available men and women dancers. In such instances extra effort may be required to identify who is dancing the opposite-gender role -- neckties are available, if desired, to help identify any woman who has chosen to dance the male role.

When the caller is conducting a walk-through before a dance, please be courteous to him or her (as well as to the other dancers) by giving your full attention.

## SOCIAL BEHAVIOR & PERSONAL SPACE

Contra dancing is a highly social activity, providing every dancer in a line the opportunity to dance with every other person in the line at some point during that dance. Eye contact is fundamental to what many find appealing about contra dancing, although it is something that often takes newcomers a while to get used to. Eye contact can be interpreted as flirting, which may not necessarily be intentional -- as with all personal interactions, it is hoped that respect, discretion, and common sense will serve as guides to what is appropriate.

Eye contact additionally serves to minimize any dizziness that may be experienced during swings, but if direct eye contact with your partner is difficult, it is suggested that you focus instead on another part of their face, or just simply the collar on their shirt. Avoid focusing your gaze anywhere that might make your partner uncomfortable.

During a contra dance, it is important to keep in mind that each individual is dancing not just with a particular partner but with everyone else in the line as well. It is one of the joys of community dancing, which also requires every dancer to respect all others on the dance floor. Be aware of the dance styles of those you encounter as you progress along the line, adjusting to accommodate anyone who, for various reasons, may find certain aspects of contra dancing

(such as swinging) to be a challenge. Anyone should not hesitate to mention if they are experiencing dizziness, or have a physical limitation. Experienced dancers can be considerate by proactively asking how a newcomer's dance experience is going.

Should a dance be especially crowded, keep in mind that the physical space available to each dance couple could be constrained -- aggressive swinging in such instances might need to be minimized. Similarly, the embellishments and styling that experienced couples sometimes use to enhance their dance experience may need to be reined in, in order to maintain a safe and enjoyable environment for all. Being on time, and helping your partner stay on time, is more important than trying to impress.

The interval between individual dances is typically brief. Please be considerate of those who wish to continue dancing by simply thanking your partner, then moving on to ask someone else, keeping conversation at the end of a dance to a minimum.

## THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN DANCING

Master the basics of good dancing before trying to add flourishes. Flourishes are twirls, dips, and cuddle-style holds. These are added by mutual consent of both partners, usually only after developing a sufficient comfort level between them.

Typically it is the person dancing in the man's role who leads into a flourish, but it is the woman's prerogative to either follow or refuse. If the woman chooses not to twirl, she should indicate this to her partner by applying sufficient force to hold her arm down when the man goes to raise it for the twirl.

Contra dancing can be fast-paced and exuberant, but should never be out of control. Every dancer's primary concern should be for the comfort and safety of the other dancers. Lifting a partner off the ground is never acceptable.

## CHILDREN

The Deerfield contra dance is intended to be a safe family environment, and parents are encouraged to bring their children if they wish. Most contra dancers are enthusiastic about bringing a younger generation into the contra dance community, and will be eager to assist even kindergarten-aged dancers. To maintain a safe environment for all, however, it is requested that parents keep non-participating children away from the dance floor during a dance, as a stray child is potentially dangerous for everyone.

## ISSUES OF A SENSITIVE NATURE

Most of us feel uncomfortable mentioning to someone about their personal hygiene or behavior. The hints presented here hopefully will preclude the need for any embarrassing or confrontational conversations.

Contra dancing promotes close physical contact among a multitude of dancers. Such proximity requires everyone's cooperation regarding our own personal awareness. Some dancers may be sensitive, or even allergic, to highly scented products – it is best to avoid perfumes, colognes, and aftershave. Before a dance, refrain from eating spicy foods involving onions or garlic. It is always advisable to arrive freshly showered and in clean clothes. Experienced dancers know to bring a dry shirt to change into (for their partner's comfort as well as their own), if the one we are wearing becomes saturated with perspiration.

Sexually suggestive, lewd, or indecent behavior, either on or off the dance floor, or harassment of any kind, will not be tolerated.

Should an incident arise that makes you or anyone nearby feel uncomfortable, you are encouraged to discuss it with the organizer. Your concerns will be taken seriously.

## Contra Dance

by Paul Pindris

The band of three musicians pause,  
deciding what will next be played.  
Each dancer – men and women both –  
now scan the room, as partners trade.

Their eyes lock first, though ways apart.  
Approaching, both already know.  
But either asks the other, "Dance?"  
Then on the floor, hands joined, they go.

A caller drones the steps he wants –  
in groups of four it's all walked through.  
Now, jigs or reels, the music starts.  
It's magic what will then ensue.

kaleidoscopic movement timed  
to frenzied fiddle energy  
produces spinning whirling pairs  
derived from perfect synergy

At some point, we have all been a newcomer.  
Strive to be kind and considerate to  
everyone on the dance floor.

If you wish to view web-based instructional material,  
go to [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) and search for  
"contra dance training."

Among what you will find will be  
a series of videos created by the  
Atlanta Chattahoochee Country Dancers.

We welcome your feedback and suggestions  
on this brochure of information.

Contact us at [papindris@metrocast.net](mailto:papindris@metrocast.net)

Join us on Facebook at  
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/deerfieldcontra/>

# The Deerfield Contra Dancers' Guide to Contra Dance Etiquette



COME DANCE AT DEERFIELD TOWN HALL  
6 Church Street, Deerfield, NH  
1<sup>ST</sup> SATURDAYS, SEPTEMBER TO JUNE  
8 to 11 PM