



DON'T BE AFRAID TO DANCE!

An introduction to Dancing with
Older People

By Jenny Edwards



INTRODUCTION



This handbook has been developed by Jenny Edwards, a community dance artist since 2001. Jenny's approach to her work is based upon her training in contemporary and mixed ability dance. She also specialises in inclusive practice in early years, disabled and older communities and enjoys engagement with community groups through workshops, skills development and performance opportunities. Currently working in Sydney at the Royal Rehabilitation Hospital she enables patients to access creative dance as part of their therapy during rehabilitation.

This pack is designed to help you start moving creatively within a range of settings with older people. I am a dance artist with a decade of experience in this field, however, that does not mean I know everything there is to know on this subject. I am going to share with you some ideas and structures I enjoy using with my groups. I didn't create them and I can't recall who did for the most part but it is a safe bet that the majority came from *Jabadao*, a stunning company I had the pleasure of working with in 2002. Leading a movement session is primarily about having fun, so if you are not comfortable or able to relax, then it is unlikely that your group will either. Don't feel you need to be an expert, ten minutes of moving is better than ten minutes of television.

This pack is intended to be used by health professionals, activity co-ordinators and care staff and is the starting point for developing basic movement and dance activities with older people.

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ICEBREAKERS

How would you like to begin?

There are two things that are really important to do – to break the ice and help people forget about the worries of their day to day lives. You need to set the tone for the session and enable people to feel comfortable.

To relax we need to know who is in the group. This is especially important if someone has memory issues.

A register is a simple familiar starting place. So how can this become an introduction into creativity?

- **Could you pass around an unusual object and ask each person to see what they think it is?**
- **Could you pass around a familiar object and see what it reminds them of?**
- **Could you throw a soft object to and fro across the group saying names first?**
- **Combining soft toys and balls Diane Amans created a fabulous game 'frogs and balls'!**
- **Possibly you could roll a big ball to names...**
- **Blow a feather around...**
- **You could ask an unusual question...**

And hey presto, everyone has completely forgotten about their shopping list for dinner!



WARM UP'S

This is very often the section of a dance session that makes non-dancers very nervous indeed. Please don't worry. You do not need to be an aerobics instructor to lead a basic warm up!

I recommend starting with feet and moving up the body parts logically. This way you don't miss any body part out and use the upper and lower body equally. Start very gently moving each joint in turn and noticing how it feels. If you don't feel comfortable then you can lead a 'pass' structure whereby each participant leads a move with a different part of the body going all the way around the circle. Your main role here is to notice and support each person's contribution, no matter how large or intricate.

Some things to watch out for are:

- **If anything hurts, stop!**
- **Flushed faces = have a rest**
- **Those with heart problems shouldn't lift arms higher than their hearts for a long time**
- **Those who have had hip surgery recently shouldn't lift their knees higher than their hips**
- **If you are using appropriate touch then be gentle – older skin can be fragile**
- **Breathlessness = rest time**

These are all logical things to watch out for with easy ways to manage them. If you are not sure about a group members health requirements you can always ask them to watch this week and seek professional advice before the next week.

I enjoy concluding the warm up with a short faster paced dance to a favourite piece of music! So as to ensure that people do not over-exert themselves I conduct them as two groups – verbally and physically showing them whether they are moving just arms / just legs / or both! By having two groups it means I can make sure everybody is having rest periods. A good tune must also involve a sing-a-long to it as well!

CREATIVE DANCING

I very often begin a creative idea by introducing a prop to move with, demonstrating and suggesting a few ideas before facilitating the group to explore these and more themselves. This tried, tested and successful method can be repeated every week with a new item! Here are a few examples...

- **A huge scrunchie that everyone can hold onto**
- **A parachute**
- **A sheet of material**
- **A piece of lycra**

For new groups using recognisable items in new and funny ways can really ease in the notion of creativity. For example a duster can be passed around and the movements copied by the whole group. You also learn how experienced people are with it which is fun.

Individual hand held items are really fun to dance with too especially for eclectic groups. You could try...

- **Ribbon sticks**
- **Scarves**
- **Feathers**

The dance will need to build and conclude in a progressive manner for the group to enjoy a sense of achievement from the task. This most obviously can be watching the product of the ideas; selected, refined and performed. However, this is not always possible. For group members who cannot rely on memory this will not be appropriate.

Playing a tune with a clear beginning, middle and end can be the frame to 'set' the dance to. That dance may be as simple and defined as slow, fast, and slow.

The group might want to discuss their discoveries from the exploration instead. Reasoning and sharing verbally as a conclusion for this week. This approach to creative dance originates from Jabadao.





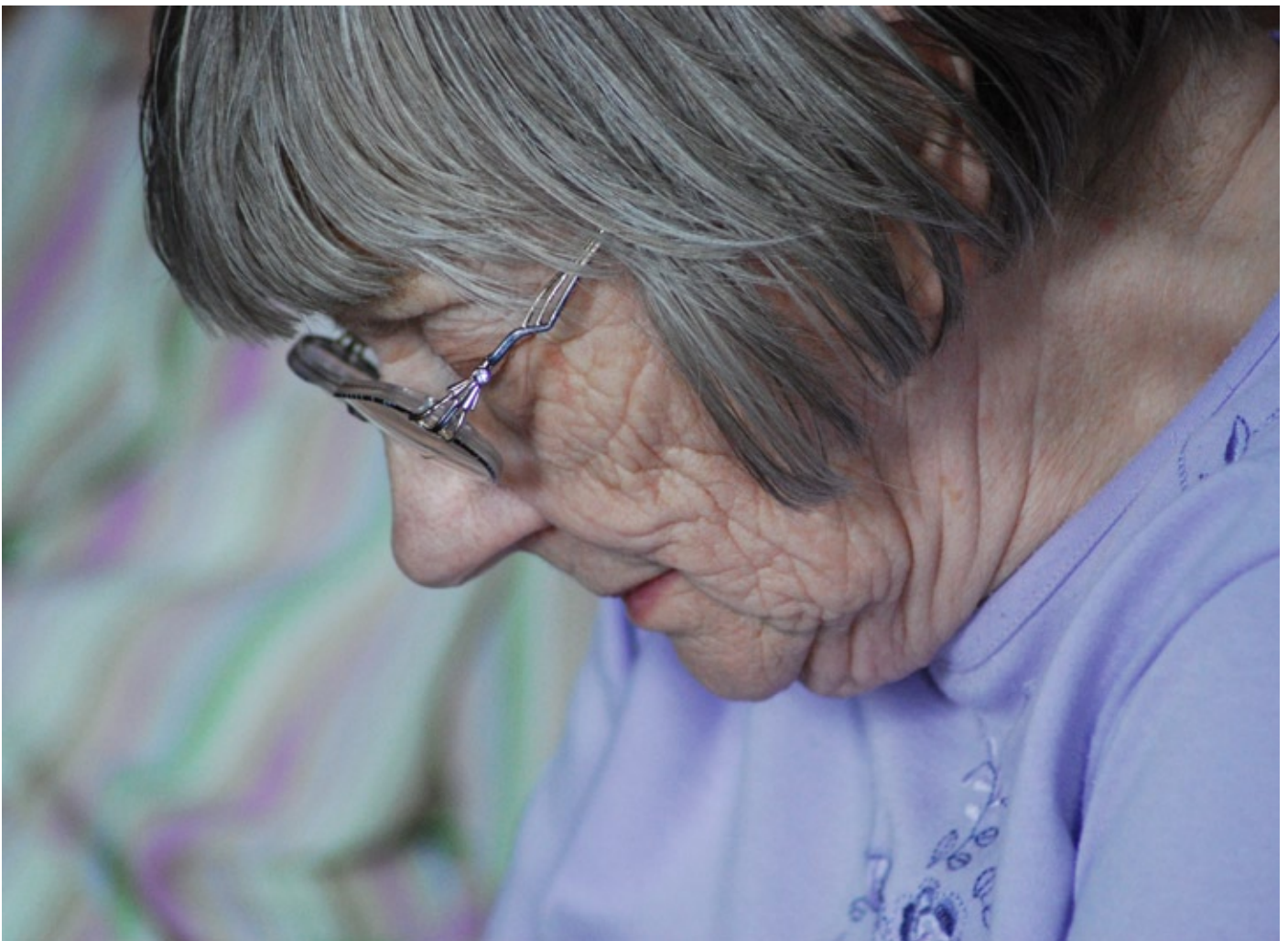
COOL DOWN

In order to stretch out the muscles after the exercise then you can start by asking participants which muscles they feel they have used most? And if you don't know how to stretch them yourself, you could ask others in the group how they would stretch that muscle?

A good whole body stretch is the 'arr,ooo,eee' exercise. I first saw Oksana lead this and it is always a favourite! The whole group will sound out each bit in turn making a stretch for each. 'Arr' is as big a star shape as you can do, 'ooo' is curling up into a small ball and 'eee' is the Yorkshire way to come back to sitting! However, if this is too energetic for your group a more relaxed breathing exercise like passing the feathers around could be more suitable.

Bringing the heart rate down to a relaxed rhythm and allowing the time for people to prepare to continue the rest of their day separately must be given session time. I enjoy giving dancers the opportunity to reflect and think individually. This can be done very effectively through a guided relaxation set to quiet music. Amy Rose, who I first saw established this as a wonderful end to sessions, always reminds people to take time to adjust back to the group afterwards.

As you began clearly, the end of the session must also be obviously defined. I like to close verbally and clap to clearly denote the end. A group bow holding hands may or may not work here – depending on your group members.



TIPS

What to wear

- Loose comfortable clothing is best for moving in
- Flat soft shoes, not heels for the ladies

Where to dance

- Warm, well lit room
- Smooth, dry and even floor surface
- Plenty of stable chairs without arms placed in a circle

Teamwork

- Identify a capable person who can help you whilst you lead
- Ask them to sit across from you so people can easily see them and you are evenly spaced to reach the group member
- Share the logistics of getting people in the space and settled into a chair safely
- Ask them for their opinions on how to improve the quality of the sessions





CONCLUSION

I hope this pack enables you to find a place to start and ideas to develop over a number of weeks. As long as the movement you lead has a clear start, middle and end then it does not matter how long it is. I lead hour-long sessions at the most for this age group and I wouldn't recommend doing any longer.

Even after years enjoying dancing with older groups I still have to plan each session. Consider what they have already done, what do they know, where would you like them to go next and how do you make what you do better each time.

**HAVE FUN AND KEEEEEPP
DANCING!!!**





FURTHER RESOURCES

www.napa-activities.co.uk

www.city-arts.org.uk

www.baringfoundation.org.uk

www.jabadao.org

www.communitydance.org.uk

www.lincolnshiredance.com/freedom-in-dance



City Arts Nottingham aims to develop and inspire arts participation that brings people together, stimulates change and creates stronger, healthier communities.

This aim stems from our belief that participation in the arts can enrich and transform people's lives and we have been pioneering innovative and creative approaches for over 30 years.

City Arts has a community focused approach to the development of the arts and its staff. Commissioned artists have a wide range of skills to enable them to work with groups or individuals, including some who are marginalised, face particular barriers to inclusion, or have personal issues that can be supported through the arts.

To achieve our aims we:

- **Direct resources towards creative work with vulnerable and marginalised groups including at risk young people, exiled communities, people with enduring mental health issues and others with specific needs**
- **Develop outdoor arts that happen in accessible community spaces, raise the profile of the arts and encourage wide audience engagement**
- **Develop programmes and partnerships that enable participants to access wider cultural, learning, volunteering and employment opportunities**
- **Support artists with training and resources to achieve the highest quality artistic and social outcomes in our programmes**
- **Advocate for the benefits of participation in the arts through partnership work and by developing and disseminating research-based evidence**
- **Ensure sustainability is based on robust business models and the continuous building of new markets**

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This report is one of three practical handbooks that carers, activity co-ordinators, health professionals and support workers can use to develop creative activities with individuals and groups.