

Ask Diane "My Student Has Body Odor" March 26, 2009

Dear Diane,

One of the students in my group class has a very embarrassing problem and I'm not sure what to do about it.

Several of the female students in my Beginning Social Dance have told me that one of their classmates, "James", has an offensive body odor that makes dancing with him very unpleasant. I have never danced with James myself as it is a large class and I teach from the center with an assistant, but I have heard this complaint from different students in different classes.

James is relatively new to ballroom dancing but this is his third time taking my class and he seems determined to learn. The other students, however, are threatening to drop the class or skip over James in the rotation, which is against one of my express rules. This is a Social Dance class, and I insist that my students are polite and considerate to each other.

Should I say something to James? I feel embarrassed even imagining the conversation. At the same time, I don't want to lose my other students or make my class an unpleasant place to be.

Please help!

Sincerely,

Embarrassed in New Jersey

Dear Embarrassed,

This is a terrific question! You have brought up a tricky situation that will confront nearly every ballroom dance teacher at some point in his or her career.

First of all: Yes, it is your obligation to speak to James about this issue. If he really does have an offensive body odor, it is going to hamper him in every social dance situation. It will prevent him from finding dance and practice partners, and will impede his progress in group and private lessons. No one wants to dance with someone who smells, no matter how flawless his technique.

I applaud your insistence that your students treat each other with respect and consideration. This is the foundation of all social dance. But this rule needs to apply to James as well. It is inconsiderate not to shower and brush your teeth before social dancing, just as it is inconsiderate to step on your partner's feet, jerk her around in an under arm turn, or smash into another couple on the dance floor. I'm sure you would have

no problem confronting James if he had any of these other problems. The great news is that James' issue is very easy to fix!

The first thing you need to do is dance with James yourself, as right now you are relying on hearsay. At your next class, ask James to help you demonstrate a figure, or rotate yourself in when the students are practicing. If he really does have body odor, then approach him right after class to see if he's free for a few minutes.

After class, find a private place for this conversation. Remember that your intention is to be kind and supportive and to help James become a wonderful social dancer. Start the conversation with something positive and true. For example, tell him that you are very impressed with how hard he's been working in your class.

Then, in a matter of fact way, tell him you did notice he had a bit of body odor when you were dancing with him. Mention that this happens all the time in ballroom dancing, often because people don't realize that dancing is physical and there is a great likelihood that they will perspire. Tell him that it is really the best practice to shower and put on clean clothes before dance class. Tell him that the top level ballroom dancers often bring a change of clothes to social dances out of consideration for their partners. Do not mention that other students have complained about this – it would just make him feel worse. Mention again something positive about his dancing, and tell him that you really hope he'll continue in your classes, and that you are looking forward to dancing with him in the future.

That's it! The conversation is brief, factual, and supportive, and is totally in keeping with your intention to help James with his dance goals in the kindest way possible. He *may* still be embarrassed, but your courage in confronting this situation will ultimately redound to his great benefit.

It may not be the easiest conversation, but it's one of the most important. Your willingness to take on this awkward situation is the mark of a great teacher. Your students are lucky to have you.

Good luck with James, and please let me know how things turn out.

Warm Regards,

Diane

Diane Jarmolow welcomes your questions and comments. She is available for consultation on a wide range of issues involving dance teacher training, BDTC-in-a-Box, studio management, and studio culture. You can visit her web site at www.teachballroomdancing.com, and can contact her at diane@teachballroomdancing.com.