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Overbearing Parents

What to do when a parent crosses the line from involved to abusive

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Out of Control

What do you do when your clients' parents are acting like children?

By Lisa Munniksma

Odds are, you didn't become involved in the equine industry because you love people; more likely it was because you love horses. But horses don't pay the bills.

One group of people that can be especially challenging to deal with are the parents of your younger clients—especially horse-show parents.

Here, equine-industry professionals recall a few amusing and frightening tales of overbearing parent infamy and offer advice on how to handle those who insist they know better than you.

The Spectacle

Overbearing parents can have negative effects on all areas of your business. They can give your business a bad reputation, cause stress and loss of confidence in your students, be potentially abusive to your horses, and cause overall hassle for you.

Often, these overzealous parents can be emotionally destructive to your students, taking the fun and passion out of riding. Grand Prix dressage rider Karen Lipp has coached more than ten riders to the North American Young Riders Championships and the USEF Junior Team Dressage Championships and has dealt with her share of overbearing parents.

A few years ago, Lipp, who works out of Alpharetta, Georgia, and Wellington, Florida, had two students competing for places in the top-12 young dressage riders in the nation. Both were talented riders and were invited to the Junior Dressage Team Championships. One rider had an inexpensive Thoroughbred and parents who were largely uninvolved. The other had an expensive warmblood and a mother who was always present, pressuring and criticizing.

Of the second girl, Lipp recalls, "Her mother would tell her how the other girl deserved to beat her because she rode better even though she didn't have a good horse. And she'd say, 'How could you go in there on that expensive horse and not do well?'"

Some parents can be downright abusive. Veteran hunter and jumper trainer Jo Ann Schaudies of Surmont Farm in Poolesville, Md., remembers a woman who misrepresented her daughter's riding ability and put both her daughter and her new pony in danger. The family lived in Texas and flew to Maryland for a show in which the daughter would ride the pony for the first time.

"The little girl, who I was led to believe was experienced, got on to ride, and the kid couldn't even steer," explains Schaudies. When the daughter and pony came out of the ring, the mother yelled at them, blamed the pony for the bad ride, and then kicked it in the belly.

And always, there will be those parents—or, in this case, grandparents—who are just impossible to deal with. This situation, as told by 4-H leader and Indiana High School Rodeo Association secretary Leah McFarren, is typical: "Once, an overbearing grandmother accused me of scheduling our 4-H meetings so her granddaughter couldn't be there. That's not true; the kids picked the meeting time. They ended up leaving the club because of it."

Heading Them Off

The best way to deal with overbearing parents is to stop them before they become a problem.

Philadelphia-based equestrian-sport psychologist and author, Janet Sasson Edgette, PsyD, MPH, suggests setting boundaries for parents' responsibilities. When you discover you have a parent who interferes with your training or your rules, discuss your concerns with him or her. Edgette says this can be accomplished with statements such as, "You have a lot invested in this. I understand why you want to be at the rail...When she's in the ring, let me take care of her."

Another idea for established businesses is to screen your clients to weed out potential problem parents. While the option of picking and choosing clients is not feasible for everyone, it has eliminated a lot of hassles for Schaudies, who interviews potential students before they ride with her.

"I set up an interview, give them a tour, show them the pictures on the wall. I have certain questions that I ask them about their goals to see if they're going to fit into my program. I save myself a lot of headache by interviewing people before they come into the program," she explains.

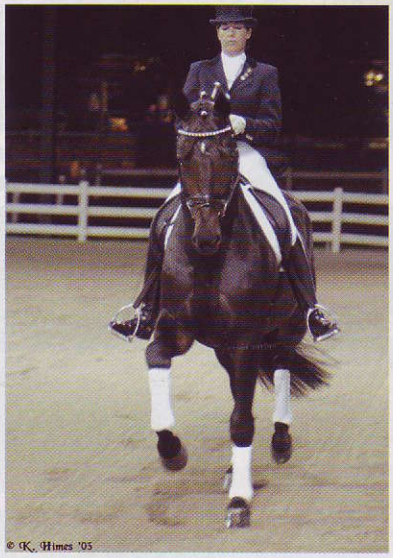
How to Deal

Sometimes, the overbearing-parents issue becomes apparent too late to head it off before it escalates. But, there are still constructive ways to handle and defuse the situation.

First and foremost, understanding the situation is key. Before you address anyone you believe is being unreasonable, look at your perspective of the situation.

Explains Edgette, "A trainer might construe a parent as overbearing when that parent might be frustrated, trying to speak to the trainer. The parent might press their point a

To avoid overbearing clients, trainer Jo Ann Schaudies screens all clients.



Because Karen Lipp trains clients at the highest dressage levels, she's had her fair share of difficult parents.

Psychologist Janet Edgette has written volumes on the horse-show parent syndrome. See below.

little bit and the trainer, rather than thinking, 'Wow, this parent really has a point,' dismisses them as one of 'those' horseshow parents."

While this is sometimes the case, ignoring parents who really are being overbearing does no one any favors—your staff, students and other clients included. "(Staff members are) often on the front line and they're the ones that have to experience that and deal with that," says Edgette. "They often should not be in this position, because they don't have the authority" to deal with these clients properly. The responsibility lies with the trainer or manager to properly defuse overbearing parents with a chat or with further action.

"If (trainers) were to try and ignore something happening in their barn that is objectionable or compromising, they really do need to address it, because otherwise the issue of credibility comes up. That is damaging, because the child notices that, the other parents notice that, and most important, the trainer herself notices that," she continues.

Remaining calm and dignified is important in dealing with any clients, although there are some times, as in the case of the pony being kicked, that grace and tact do not work.

"I would advise other people not to air their dirty laundry in public," says Schaudies. "I think it's important to maintain your composure and dignity. If you're frustrated, don't deal with it in public. There's nothing worse than listening to people argue and bicker."

Lipp adds, "I try to act as professionally as possible and say, 'Hey, that's not good behavior, and you can't act like that.' Even if the mother's not being tough on the kid, if she's saying (negative) things about the other riders...it doesn't teach the kids good sportsmanship."

In addition to dealing with the parents, pay attention to the affected students. McFarren keeps a good rapport with her 4-Hers and rodeo contestants, making it easier for her to discuss their parents' pressure with them. "As a group leader, you have to be able to talk to the kids, be a coach to them, and tell them how you think they're doing. Kids tend to respond to other people better than they do their own parents."

Better yet, involve both the parents and the students. One of the best methods for handling the parent who puts too much pressure on their child or who likes to "coach"—meaning, yell—from the rail is a taste of their own medicine.

Edgette recalls one situation she mediated: "I suggested to the trainer that she hold a horse show at the barn for parents on hobby horses. All the parents had to register for a horse show class and take a hobby horse. The kids were the judges, and they would bother the parents, pester them as the parents would run around the ring; walk, trot, and canter."

This candid approach works for well-intentioned parents who may not even realize they are doing anything potentially destructive. Obviously, having a good relationship with your clients and having clients with a sense of humor is helpful.

Properly dealing with overbearing parents upfront means more time to work on what you love, the horses. Before allowing the parents to intimidate you, consider that the reputation of your business, the emotional well-being of your students, and even your own self-esteem are at stake. While confronting a situation like this may be difficult, compromising will be far more difficult and damaging. [sm]

As a 4-H leader, Leah McFarren deals with parents on many levels.

For More Info

Psychologist Janet Edgette's website is www.HeadsUpSport.com. Her books are "Heads Up!: Practical Sports Psychology for Riders, Their Families, and Their Trainers" and "The Rider's Edge: Overcoming Performance Nerves, Negative Thoughts, Perfectionism and The Other Psychological Challenges of Riding, Showing, and Loving Horses."