

Teaching Tough Kids One Kid At A Time
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Identify Our Population

Do you live with or work with a child that has at least half of the following characteristics?

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|--|--|
| Superficially engaging and charming | Cruelty to animals |
| Indiscriminately affectionate w/ strangers | Extreme control problems |
| Destructive to themselves and others | Lack of ability to give or receive affection |
| No impulse control (stealing / sneaky) | Chronic crazy lying (lying about obvious) |
| Learning lags and disorders | Abnormal eating patterns |
| Lack of cause and effect thinking | Poor peer relationships |
| Preoccupied with fire, blood or gore | False allegations of abuse |
| Persistent nonsense questions and chatter | Triangulation of adults |
| Inappropriately demanding or clingy | Parents appear hostile and angry |
| Presumptive entitlement issues | Lack of conscience development |
| Lack of appropriate eye contact | Abnormal speech patterns |

Do you live with or work with a child that has some of the above characteristics and also includes a diagnosis of the following?

| | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Tourette's Syndrome | ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) |
| Asperger's Syndrome | ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity) |
| Bipolar Disorder | Depression |
| Sexual abuse issues | Autism |
| ODD (Oppositional Defiant Disorder) | Conduct Disorders |
| RAD (Reactive Attachment Disorder) | PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) |

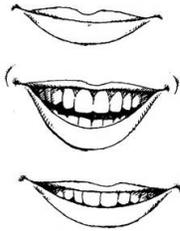
Does the child have a history that includes:

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| Maternal Ambivalence | In-Utero Trauma (drugs, alcohol, violence) |
| Abuse | Maternal Separation |
| Ongoing Pain | Poor Daycare |
| Repeated Moves | Poor Parenting |

These techniques are for you!

For ease, the term "Mom" will refer to the primary caregiver of the child regardless of gender or relation. The included dialogue would be for the average eight or nine year old violent, highly intelligent, actively aggressive child. Adjust the tone and conversation accordingly for age, issues and abilities.

Facilitate family bonding, NOT instructor bonding by first knowing the five keys to bonding:



Eye Contact
Touch
Movement
Smiles
Basic Carbohydrates (like sweets and fruit)



Create situations where the child is reaching for the parent who is the side walker. Create situations where the child is sharing feelings with the parent and feeling listened to and validated.

We encourage respectful eye contact with us as the instructor, when it is appropriate, but more so with a parent. Touch is primarily from the parent. The horse provides the movement and smiles are inevitably created. Instructors never hug the kids, but the parents hug often. High fives are as much touch as we give these kids.

During lessons we encourage breaks for eating fruit and sweets from the parents for bonding purposes, but also encourage eating complete proteins like cheese sticks, hardboiled eggs or jerky as an energy supporter. MSG, food coloring and preservatives should be avoided, as this population can be VERY sensitive to such things.

Lesson structure on a one on one basis with family involvement will enable lesson leaders to begin working with the more aggressive or obstinate clients, and give them the confidence that they can make a difference. Learn how to work dynamically with the child's behavior while increasing success with this population of youngsters. Lesson leaders will learn how to identify appropriate rewards and consequences for the child, while supporting the underlying goals of the parents.

This program helps the whole family by providing much needed mental recharge time and perspective for parents and siblings alike. It gives them hope and encouragement when their child or sibling succeeds and gives them knowledge about where their child's strengths and weaknesses might be. The parents are present the whole time, sometimes passively, often times actively. Empowering parents by modeling clear communication and expectations helps them set appropriate limits for their child, and logical consequences when those limits are tested.

Healthy siblings have access to many fun activities with the animals as well. They are encouraged to explore their own interests or if they choose to participate with one of the other animals, an additional volunteer helps, guides or otherwise coaches the healthy kids safely.

Beginning Limit Setting

Our kids love to “play games” to see if they can outwit the adults they are expected to trust and obey. If you miss the test or lose the game then you have set the child up to fail and the battle of wills begins. No one wins this game.

Prevent this with several tactics:

I use normal language when talking with the family, but I am very businesslike (intentionally emotionally detached) with the child. It is a weird place since what you think they need is MORE emotional attachment, however, they must first have that with MOM. Hug Mom, smile with Mom, be compliant with Mom, follow Mom’s directions and ask for Mom’s input. Once they have a successful relationship with an emotionally present Mom and core family unit, then we can start building attachments with teachers and lesson leaders. Until then, we are potentially undermining the success of the child and family.



Do not stray from your thoughts by addressing distracting questions from the child. Questions are normal for healthy kids since they want to learn about their world, but this population of kids does this not to learn, but to control. Lesson leaders must maintain control by being caring leaders at all times.

Stand up when you are speaking. Do not bend down to their level. This is an endearing gesture that helps build focus and rapport with healthy children in our society, however, these kids see it as a sign of weakness. Because many of them have been abused they need a protector. Having a leader that they see as weak scares them, increasing anxiety and shutting down the learning centers of the brain. Have good posture and a calm, collected demeanor. Use your voice low and slow. A high-pitched voice indicates tension or fear on your part.

Be forewarned, for some kids their defiance will begin immediately, while others have to warm up to it. They will all test you at some point. So be ready and be prepared. Do not be outwardly surprised of anything they say or do.

Have your animals where they are safe. Have eyes on the child the whole time they are near an animal. Under no circumstances should a child with this temperament be left unattended with any animal. Remember animal abuse is common in this population and your therapy animals are valuable partners. Don’t let them be victims!!

Never, Ever, Ever give a child with control issues the reins to a bit, spur to wear, riding crops or fly swatters to “motivate” the horse or any other device that allows them to control the horse using force rather than communication. What are we teaching them when we give them control of a thousand pound horse with a metal bit and then ask them to submit and yield to the ways of their 150 pound parents or 60 pound siblings? This is



a VERY mixed message. No control of the horse should happen in any way until the child is demonstrating exceptional impulse control, the family is happy and the Mom says the child is ready. Control the horse with the use of a lunge line or long line.

Do not respond to repeated, “What?” responses, as this is often a subtle way to control adults by getting them to repeat themselves over and over. Create a quiet space where you, the lesson leader, ask the questions. Remember, there is value in the quiet of the moment. Don’t make questions open ended like, “Why do you think the horse just did that?” unless you want to hear nonsense babble or really funny logic and have all day to listen.

Watch what you say and how you say it. Lessons are not called *riding* lessons as riding will only occur when total safety, strength and compliance are seen. Try not to discuss goals, problems or future events in front of the child (like scheduling the next lesson). Many times they try to sabotage good things since they don’t believe in their heart they deserve them, so don’t give them information they don’t need. Some of our kids worry to the point of panic about things they cannot control and some are so let down if a lesson has to be rescheduled (illness, weather, etc.) so that they take out their frustrations further on their family.

I have a card that the parents/siblings fill out in the beginning of each lesson which helps guide us. Maybe the child is not doing their homework or attacked a kid in class. We will work skills with the horse to support the objective of completing things that are hard or challenging or demonstrating better problem solving skills that do not involve violence. This could be a ground lesson or a riding lesson.

I have another card for parents with a few options to schedule the next meeting. I also leave a spot for notes and areas of progress or focus for the next lesson. This way we don’t need to actually talk about it and can keep that information on a need to know basis.

One of the first things I start with is my introduction.

“My name is Mrs. Thomas. What is my name?” It is amazing how many creative responses I can get with that. We do not move towards the horse until the child is able to repeat back to me what my name is. If your name is difficult make it easier so the battle of wills does not have to happen right away.

I shake hands to see if their grip is strong enough to keep them on the horse. If it is not (or if it crushes the bones in my hand because it was too hard) then the horse piece will wait until I see an appropriate handgrip.



“I see you have kind of a weak handshake, that kind of grip is not strong enough to safely work with the horse. Let me watch you grip that rake over there to move some of that hay from here to there, to see if you can work up the strength.” I don’t care if the hay

actually gets moved, I just want to show the child I am serious and working around horses is serious business.

I ask them their name, and if they speak so I can hear them we shake hands again. If the shake is appropriate, we move to the horse.

I introduce the horse.

“This is Quest. She is 17 years old. What is her name and how old is she?”

When I get the correct answer we move on to the basic rules required to work around the horse. I start with them looking in their Mom’s eyes, holding hands/pinkies as they repeat what I say to their Mom. I want it verbatim so keep it short and simple for more success. After every rule, encourage the parents to smile and hug the child.



It is their job to remember the rules (and the number of the rule), and to repeat them to their parents before each lesson and anytime one of the rules is starting to be breached.

1. The instructor is in charge at all times. (Who is in charge at all times?)
2. I want you to be gentle with the horse. I do not want you to kick, pull or do anything mean. (How do I want you to be with the horse?)
3. I want you to listen and follow directions.
4. No talking except to answer questions or share feeling. What feeling might you have?

Fully breaking the rules will end the lesson. No discussion. Another family member may take over the lesson while the child works on figuring out what needs to be corrected. If it takes a reasonable length of time (our kids love wasting everyone’s time) and a small restitution is offered (massage Mom’s back for a minute or pick grass for the horse), then the lesson may resume. Testing the rules is common and can be redirected easily with a, “What is rule #3 or #2 or whichever is in question”. If they are truly testing they will play a game here, otherwise they will parrot back the rule and the lesson commences.

Notice the use of the words I *want*, not I *need*. I don’t NEED the child to do anything, so articulate what you actually *want*. Keep it short and sweet.

We move to meeting the horse only after the rules are repeated back to Mom word for word (or as she states them).

Tell them what you want, show them what you want then have them either parrot back what you want to their parent (with eye contact and face to face contact), or have them

demonstrate what you want. Provide lots of positives for successes and immediate correction for defiance. There can be no grey area with this population of kids.

Since work comes before play, the child must groom the horse and pick up the front feet to clean them out. Some kids must work on asking for help, so this is a perfect time to have them practice with their Mom. “Mom, would you please help me?” Hugs are given and joy is expressed when the child can ask that while looking into the eyes of their parents.

Give them clear parameters for each task. Tell them exactly where to brush (withers to point of shoulder to elbow) and in what direction. Put an X on the ground where they should stand.

Have them feel around the horse’s leg to find the chestnut, ergot and hoof (areas with no hair on the leg).



The hoof is the horse’s weapon of choice in the animal kingdom, and our children are acutely aware of this. Kicking is a form of defense our kids often recognize and perpetrate on their victims. Running away is also a technique they recognize as survival, as does the horse. Picking up the hoof can be terrifying for some kids and tackled like a life threat by others.

Explain and then demonstrate exactly how to pick up a hoof. Which hoof? Where should they stand? Where should they put their hand first and how hard should they press? What should they say? Break it into small bites and work only a few directions at a time to set the child up for success. Have Mom give the directions after they have been repeated a few times. This is a great time for some children to practice asking for help rather than blowing up, especially if they have tried and failed a few times. I use this as a barometer for child progress for the first few lessons.

Encourage the correct affect to go with the emotion. Show how the horse’s face is expressive by knowing your mount well enough to elicit some of these feelings. Remember you have herd dynamic to work with which can show some clear emotions from certain horses.

Validate the feelings that result from fear, anger and frustration, but don’t wallow there. Do not be afraid of their emotions. Rage and anger can manifest themselves in strange ways and come out sideways, especially with kids that have attachment issues.

Have them look in their Mom’s eyes and say what they are feeling. “What feeling are you having being around this horse?” Some kids need some options like, “Are you mad, sad, glad or scared right now?” If they give you a farfetched answer, responding with “Most kids would feel _____ when faced with _____,” can help them learn to normalize.

Sometimes kids can't be honest with their feelings because they might not even know what glad or sad might look like because of all the MAD. "Look your Mom in the eyes and say, Mom I feel _____." "Make a face to match the feeling of _____". Encourage mom to reflect love and acceptance in her eyes and listen to her child's feelings. Follow with big hugs and smiles, and if it was a hard feeling to express give the child a bite of fruit from Mom's (clean) hands directly into the child's mouth.



While the horse is tacked up, the child reviews the four rules again with hand holding, eye contact and impulse control. This is a great time to have the child work on having a quiet body. Watch their hands. Show them how you want their hands. Watch their feet. Encourage them to stand still. Expect them to have composure off and on when they are addressing their family. Start with little bits and gradually start asking for more and more.

Once the horse is ready and the child's helmet is adjusted and has shown they can be compliant and safe, they are ready to mount the horse. Some kids don't get to this step until the third or fourth lesson. It is best to move methodically, conservatively and with clear intentions.

Mount step by step. "Put your boot this way, hop this way, hold with your left hand here, hold with your right hand here". Instruct them clearly how NOT to injure, confuse or direct the horse. "I want your right boot tip aimed into the cinch so as not to poke the horse. When you can stand in the stirrup with a straight left leg then I want your right... Which one is your right leg? Keep that leg straight as you cross over the horse's rump and gently sit in the saddle. Is plopping in the saddle being kind to the horse? And what rule number is that?"

Learning an emergency dismount is mandatory for any rider in our program and we start all of our kids with that. We address the feelings that inevitably come up at having to "fall off" the horse correctly and safely. If they cannot fall off safely, then they cannot ride.

If you are the one asking questions, you are in control. Ask lots of questions to keep them engaged and thinking on your terms, rather than thinking on theirs.

Sometimes have Mom instruct the child.

Allow Mom to give simple directions to maintain control for safety's sake to the child encouraging eye contact. I also like to encourage the child to answer Mom's direction with a loud and clear "Yes, Mom" or an "I don't want to, but I will, Mom" answer.

Coach Mom on giving clear directions with reasonable expectations if necessary. I have had one Mom so angry at her child (which is a trait among parents of this population of children) that she continually made the kid way overreach to meet her demands. "Come

up with 15 things you can smell right now” was one of her sensory integration questions. I think a bloodhound could come up with 15 things, but in Colorado’s arid country I would be hard pressed to come up with a half dozen at any given time. Intervene gracefully if you realized you handed off more to Mom than she can handle. Do not strip her of her power in front of her child and instead guide the process to a more reasonable end. We are here to empower Mom, not marginalize her decision-making.

We have mom side walk close by with her hand up ready to grab the child if needed or ready to respond to the child reaching out. Some parents do a “death grip” on the child’s leg not allowing the child to reach and ask. Guide the parent to be ready for their child to reach for them or to ask for help. This gives them that opportunity for growth but also readies them to support the child if they are falling off or not capable of asking for help due to trust issues or language difficulty.

There are lots of equitation lessons you can add by simply modifying them to be age and ability appropriate with VERY clear directions. All directions MUST be followed correctly as instructed. An example of taking a normal involuntary task and giving it clear direction might be, “I want you to take 5 deep breaths in through your nose, out through your mouth and I would like you to count out loud clearly enough so your Mom can hear you wherever we are in the arena”.

The lesson is filled with hugs and High Fives from Mom, and lots of Mom and family input. It is fun, enthusiastic and exciting, but all the typical bonding activities we humans do are fully redirected to the family and funneled through them.

Give positive comments that are conditional and regarding the present. “I like how softly you handled the horse right then” as opposed to, “You are always so nice to the horse”. This population of kids often has to prove you wrong (they especially have to prove Mom wrong) so making a blanket comment like, “You are so handsome” often causes a knee jerk reaction to prove you wrong, so they show you how ugly they can be.

Reverse Psychology goes a long way with these kids in some instances. Do not become predictable when using it, especially with repeat lessons.

Using third parties to reveal the answer to the child indirectly can also work, but only when used once in awhile. “It’s okay if you can’t remember your horse’s name. Mom, do you remember? I know I remember. We have had so many adventures, Quest and I together...”



Without serious help these kids will grow up with little or no conscience development, and no empathy or compassion towards others. This is extremely costly for our society in terms of destruction, crime, welfare and prison creation and maintenance. Many are not compliant enough as adults to hold down a job and will often repeat the parenting cycle on their children, perpetuating the cycle with more disturbed children.

Learning how to support and build up the rest of the family, especially the parents, who

are often exhausted and the target of the child's anger, frustration and resentment, is critical for the long term success of the child. Learn how to create an environment of authentic trust and safety with the structure needed to "soften" children that have become "hard". Learn how to enable the child to trust themselves, their parents, their environment and have a high success rate in making a difference in the lives of these children.

Always end the lesson with the child thanking the trainer, the parent and the horse. Hugs are for the horse and parents. High Fives are for the lesson leaders, side walkers or Equine Specialist. Apples or carrots are shared as a gift from child to mount. Mom's hand should support and control small hands for safety. Treats can be doled out of a pan as well.



Thank you for making a difference in the lives of tough kids.

Resources

www.HoovesForTheHeart.org

www.attachment.org

www.NeuroTherapyNW.com

www.eagala.org

www.cbeip.com

www.stopviolentyouth.org

www.americanhippotherapyassociation.org/

www.du.edu/humananimalconnection/programs-education/eamh.htm

<https://www.autismspeaks.org/>

www.horseboyfoundation.org

Notes