

How to Succeed at Home School

In other words: How to Train a Horse

You read right. I did say Horse. No you are not going to buy a horse and bring him into your living room. However, you are thinking about bringing a child into your living room, calling yourself a teacher and then training him, are you not? Then I say: You need to know how to train a horse.

So, I'll get right down to business. Have you ever tried to teach children? Have you ever entered a room full of rambunctious children and wondered what you were thinking, what you could possibly do, or how you were even going to survive? Why is it that children have this effect on people? Have you ever wondered why grown men and women turn into absolute idiots, fools, and maniacs when faced with a two-year-old child who is throwing a fit? It is these and many more questions which prompted me to find answers.

When I was in college, studying music, I had professors who were learning all of the most current ideas about music, performance, teaching, etc. One of the real challenges for a musician is performance anxiety, or stage fright. I was a classic case. Shaking, sweating, sick to my stomach and almost completely dysfunctional, I would walk onto the stage and try to perform. Needless to say, it was less than adequate. I was offered a book that was supposed to help me. It was called "The Inner Game of Tennis". At first, I laughed. How can a book about tennis help me to be a better musician? I thought. However, after reading the book, I discovered that there were many things I needed to learn that were found in that book and it DID help me, a great deal.

I have taught and lived with, (not just from 10-6 at night, but 24/7) with children. I know how they drive you crazy, and turn you into a raving lunatic. I know how they tick and what makes them work. I know what motivates and what does not. And, honestly, the best method for dealing with children is found by learning how to train a horse. Strange, maybe, but honey, if it works...why not?

Short version:

1. **Get the Horse's Attention** To train a horse, the trainer first get's the horse's attention. Sound easy? Well, it's actually a matter of life and death. Really. So, you walk into the ring with the horse. He approaches you with his ears back and his head up and looks like he might come after you. Most people would say you should be 'nice' and gentle and sweet and be his friend, then he'll be nice and gentle and sweet and be YOUR friend. And they would be wrong. DEAD wrong. If you do that, the horse will know one thing. You are number two, and HE is number one. Eventually, he will bite you, kick you and treat you like a slave. Now, does this sound REMOTELY like some children you know? That's because it's natural behavior for animals. Children are animals to a certain extent. They will do what comes naturally to get their way ALL the time. So will horses. It's how they are programmed. It's not about who is nice enough, it's about who want's what they want MORE than the other one. So, you have to want what YOU want MORE than they do. If you do, then you can begin. The fist thing you do is to drive them away. With a horse, this looks like chasing them. You get a stick and chase them with it. No hurting, just chasing. Chase until they are tired. This lets them know that they are not wanted in YOUR herd. With a child it begins on that first day when you ask them to get up and help with the household chores before school begins. They lie in bed, unwilling to leave. You give them one or two more chances. They continue to balk. What they are saying is this: "I am number one and you are number two. I'll get up when I want and DO what I want when I want." This is the equivalent of the horse coming after you with ears back and head up. This is open rebellion and must be stopped at the outset or you have mutiny and chaos. So, you make it a matter of life and death. You chase them away. You do this by saying something like this:

“So, I am the mom. I provide your food, shelter, clothing, heat, bed, etc. I do this willingly and gladly. You are the child. I allow you to eat, wear the clothes and enjoy all the good things that I provide. However, there are some things that we ALL must do. One of them is to help to keep our home clean. I am the mom. That means I am the captain and you must be obedient to my requests. I keep my requests reasonable, and am open to any reasonable suggestions. You are the child, doing what I ask is part of the bargain we have made as a family that I provide good food, clothing, shelter, etc. and you do the things I ask of you in return, like keeping your room clean, coming to meals on time, doing assigned chores and learning to be a useful adult. If you do your part, I do my part. If you are unwilling to do your part, I am unwilling to do my part.” A parent MUST make this understood to the child! The child MUST know that all good things come from you and that you are unwilling to give them if HE is unwilling to give a certain amount of obedience to your reasonable requests. I will guarantee that if you do not establish this agreement with them from the beginning, you will not be able to succeed as a home school mom. It would be like trying to train a Brumby horse by leaving the gate open, letting the horse run free and going out every day to an empty corral, hoping that the horse would get trained 'somehow'. You can do this in a family meeting in a quiet, but firm way. Obtain an agreement in a non-threatening environment when you are NOT expecting anything at the moment. Then you may remind them of it when they are unwilling to get out of bed or any other time. Most children will accede quickly and happily. There are only a few that are more like Brumbies who will give you a run for your money. But this one thing will save you if you do it consistently. Never accept mutiny from children. It is death to your home school.

- 2. Pressure, Release** When asking a child to learn, or do anything this technique for training horses is vital. Pressure, release, pressure, release, is the method by which horse trainers create muscle memory in horses. If you want a horse to turn his head, you simply apply slight, gentle pressure to the headstall in the direction desired, then release the pressure, then apply pressure, then release, until the horse's head is where you want it. Then you release the head completely, and place your hand on his forehead to imprint the memory. I have watched this technique work seeming miracles with even the most difficult of horses. One simply must be patient and repeat the process enough times and the horse will yield, every time. With a child, it looks like this: You go to his room to wake him up. (yes, there is a common theme here). You say: “Johnny, wake up! It's time for school!” Johnny rolls over. “Johnny, let's go. It's time to get up!” Johnny groans. “Johnny!” Johnny groans louder. And this is the point at which you allow yourself to become frustrated. Emotion enters and reason leaves. But this is where the Pressure, Release technique comes in. Recognize that you have a tool that will allow you to succeed. Let go of any emotional connection with Johnny's choices. Simply apply pressure and release. Think of an alarm clock. Pressure, release, pressure release. It effectively gets you out of bed in this way. So, at this point, you just keep trying. No emotions, just persistent tapping. Pressure, release, pressure, release. “Johnny, it's time to get up. Remember, we are doing school this morning. It's time. Breakfast is ready. Let's go. I'm waiting. Etc. etc. ad infinitum. I promise you, they will get tired of hearing your cheerful voice tapping at their ears that they will get up just to get you to stop. Only stop if they are moving in the right direction. If they revert, you simply repeat the process. This WILL get easier every day as you persist and they get the message that you are more patient than they are. They will NOT want a repeat of the same scenario the next day. It gets easier, just like a horse. Best of all, this eliminates the need for punishment. Persistent tappings are MUCH more effective than occasional beatings! And, when they comply, their reward is your happy smile and gentle touch on the arm, shoulder, back or head. This imprints the behavior into their consciousness and makes the next time easier. You don't thank them for doing what they ought to do, only for what they do willingly that is not necessarily expected. Never grovel or beg. YOU are number one. They are number one in

training. Make sure they understand the distinction.

- 3. Biting** When the leader of a herd of horses is displeased with the behavior of another horse, he or she will bite the offending one. This lets them know that they are out of favor. The offending horse must then lick and chew and bow his head in order to be 'forgiven' and allowed to come back into favor. With children, we call this discipline. Few parents today understand the principles of true discipline. They think that discipline is punishment. It is not. As a mom, biting, or discipline, is lecturing. Yep, it's just talking to my children. But, this is a special kind of talking. I make a big deal of a lecture. The person or persons involved are sat down formally, looked at intently, and talked to firmly, truthfully and unequivocally. They know, when I am done, that their behavior was unacceptable and must not be repeated. Apologies are solicited from each offending person, (this is the licking and chewing). If children have done wrong, they NEED to SAY that they are sorry. They need to commit to NOT doing it again. When they have done these things, then both you and they can let them go. There is no punishment, no recrimination, no anger, no violence, and no stupidity. There may be tears, on both sides. There may be heartache, and this is a good thing. But when they have said they are sorry, (and never mind if you don't think they mean it; that's between them and their conscience), then you may release the past and move on to the future. Smile, do something fun, change the subject, act like you have forgotten the incident. Take a break. But above all, let go of it, permanently. In this way, you allow your children to grow WITHOUT carrying all the baggage of the past with them. Always make them feel like the past is in the past and you are not going to carry it with you to hold over their heads. Now is now. Just deal with now. Don't worry that these behaviors keep repeating. Just deal with now. When you train a horse, it only takes a couple of days or so and they will revert to old behaviors. It's YOUR responsibility to be consistent in teaching regularly, not the horses. It's the same with children. If they revert, just keep tapping, keep teaching, keep lecturing. Trying counts. Repetition is more important than ANYTHING.
- 4. Leaders or Friends** If you think that a horse wants to be your friend, you will make serious mistakes in his training. The horse is a two. That means that he is your servant. You ask him to do things and he does them. The horse is not technically your friend. He is an obedient servant. With children, this is slightly different, but similar. As the parent, mentor and first teacher of your children, you have a special role to fill in their lives. As such, it is not safe or desirable to become too much of a 'friend'. Your friend does not discipline you. Your friend may not even tell you that you are doing something wrong. Your friend is not there to train you to be an adult. Friends do not generally expect things of you. Leaders, mentors, and teachers must maintain an air of authority, especially when you are doing home school. You must decide that YOU are number one and your children, though not number twos, are still only number ones in training. They must be made to feel theirs and your position, in order for you to maintain a sense of order in your home school. If you merely ask them, as their friend, to do their school work, they will eventually just shrug you off as an annoyance. You ARE the leader. You must BE it and let them know that you KNOW it. You can be friendly, kind, courteous, and helpful without relinquishing your role as leader. This is a mental picture you form in your mind. Though you may not actually SAY what you are thinking, you must THINK that you are the leader and that mutiny will not be tolerated. This gives them a secure footing on which to base their life. They then can relax and just get down to the business of learning. However, if you are wishy-washy and try to buddy up to them or bribe them, you will lose their respect, and they will feel that THEY can be the one leading. They will tell YOU what THEY expect. In this, children are exactly like horses.

How to Start School:

1. Wake up. Get dressed. Look nice. Be professional.
2. Call children with firm, persistent command to come to school.
3. Wait long enough, but no more.
4. Expect everyone to be dressed, (with shoes) clean, and combed.
5. Have a plan. Decide what you are going to do BEFORE you call everyone.
6. Have a regular routine that begins your school. (I call mine Opening Exercises.) i.e. A song, a prayer, the pledge of allegiance, chapter of a book read out loud, poems, news, stories, trivia, closing song, closing prayer.
7. Then go into individual schoolwork time, exercise time, lunch time, reading time, or free time which may look different for each child, or you might wish for a more formal setting with everyone doing everything together. The older they get, the more independent they can be.
8. Be flexible but consistent. Side-stepping for minor distractions is OK, but derailing is not. Expect success. Persistence pays off. Small success every day is better than big success once a month.