Evaluation Of An Educational Program To Address Excessive Adult Involvement In Youth Livestock Projects

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Abstract

The issue of excessive adult involvement in the preparation of youth livestock projects has long been a sensitive topic. If an agriculture education teacher or county Extension agent raises this issue at the local level, that individual is often cast in the role of policeman or “enforcer” of any subsequent “restriction of assistance” rules developed to manage adult involvement. This role places the agricultural educator in a precarious and uncomfortable position.

The purposes of this study were a) to describe current perceptions of excessive adult involvement in youth livestock project shows, b) to assess the effectiveness of an educational program designed to raise this issue in an entertaining and memorable manner, and c) to ascertain the participants’ perceptions of the appropriate roles of adults in youth livestock shows. The educational program described in this paper provides a non-threatening environment for the supervisors of 4-H & FFA livestock projects to raise this issue without becoming enforcers of “restriction of assistance” rules. The authors believe this enforcement role is most appropriately located among the youth themselves. The data from these respondents suggests that incidents of excessive adult involvement at youth livestock shows are commonplace, and that this is an issue that needs to be addressed. Providing advice and encouragement were deemed acceptable and appropriate roles for adults in youth livestock shows, while direct assistance, whether supplied or purchased, was generally perceived as unacceptable.
Review of the Literature

The bulk of literature addressing the issue of parental involvement in youth activities is related to formal public education.

There are numerous examples of research documenting the positive relationship between parental involvement and student success. In general, this research shows that many measures of school success (higher grades and test scores, more positive attitude and behavior, higher graduation rates, and fewer placements in special education) are associated with homes where parents encourage learning, set high (but reasonable) expectations for their children, and become involved in the children’s education both at home and in the school (Othrow and Stout, 1997). In her review of the literature on family or parent involvement and student achievement, Hendrickson (1987) concludes that “for now the evidence is beyond dispute: parent involvement improves student achievement” (p. 1).

Literature focusing on excessive parental involvement normally examines youth sporting events. In his well-known book, Alfie Kohn (1992) deplores “the excessive competitiveness of children’s athletic programs, such as little league baseball. The spectacle of frantic, frothing parents humiliating their children in their quest for vicarious triumph is, of course, appalling” (pp. 91-92).

Sport psychologist Jon Hellstedt (1995), who has spent many years researching the dynamics of athletic families, calls this the paradox of the family of the young athlete. Their greatest strength, their unwavering emotional support of their child and their willingness to make sacrifices for the child’s athletic advancement, is also their greatest weakness. The tremendous love and support of parents for their young children can sometimes help a talented child achieve great success, and can sometimes push a talented child to rebel and burn out. There is a fine line between encouraging a child to be achievement oriented and applying excessive pressure.

The literature regarding the excessive involvement of adults in youth livestock shows is limited, but anecdotal evidence abounds. Some states and some major youth livestock shows have adopted “restriction of assistance” rules. Many of these call for drastic measures to insure the absolute removal of the parent or adult from the process of preparing animals for show. The opposite approach, evident in many jackpot shows in the United States, is to have no rules or oversight whatsoever regarding adult assistance in show preparation.

The authors suggest that perhaps a position between these two extremes might serve the youth livestock program better. In the educational video entitled, “The Step Beyond: A Question of Ethics” Jeff Goodwin (1995) encourages the following approach. Adults and professional fitters must abide by the following three concepts:

1) Adults must coach and teach, not do the work for 4-H and FFA members. This means that an adult might clip a part or even half of an animal and hand the clippers to the youth to clip the remainder of the animal.
2) Adults must abide by all livestock show rules and Quality Assurance principles.
3) Adults must assist all youth in their club or community, not just the ones that in which they have a personal or financial interest.

“If parents and professional fitters can abide by these three concepts, they will be welcome at a youth livestock show to work with and teach 4-H & FFA members” (Goodwin, 1995). These three concepts are the key educational messages delivered through the program evaluated by this study.

Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia (1956) described hierarchical levels of learning for the affective domain. In the highest level, called ‘Characterization,’ learners alter their behavior. They make decisions about future actions based on their newly learned belief system. In the typical current system, youth livestock exhibitors rely on adults to regulate and enforce restriction of assistance rules. If the youth are to take control and manage adult involvement in their livestock project shows, a change in their behavior based on the assimilation of a new value system will be necessary. The instructional objectives of a program designed to accomplish these goals will include those written in Bloom’s affective domain, at his characterization level.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to describe the issue of excessive adult involvement in youth livestock project shows. Three research questions were formulated to examine the issue. First, are there differences in the perceptions of the stakeholders (the youth, the parents, FFA Instructors, Extension Agents, and Professional Fitters) regarding whether or not of excessive adult involvement in youth livestock project shows is an issue? Secondly, was the educational program employed in this study effective in developing among participants an intention to change their future behavior regarding parental involvement in youth livestock shows? Additionally, what are the participants’ perceptions of the appropriate roles of adults in youth livestock shows?

**Methods**

A descriptive research design employing survey research methods was used to accomplish the purposes of this study.

During a six month period, February to July, 2001 data were collected during six Clip Master / Pull The Plug events in California, Idaho, and New Jersey.

These six “Clip-Master” programs, as they were advertised prior to the events, were each conducted in the following manner. This event was designed to be presented to a large audience at the beginning of a county fair or livestock show. The event takes place in the show ring so that the entire livestock show audience can participate. Advertisements prior to the event indicate that a clipping contest would be held between three adults and three 4-H and/or FFA members. Each three-member team had 2 square feet of fake fur divided into three equal pieces that they were to clip to a uniform half-inch length in as short a time period as possible. Each
team’s clipping surface was divided into equal thirds so that each team member was responsible for clipping an equal portion of the team’s clipping surface.

The facilitator of the contest instructed the audience and the clipping teams how the contest would proceed. Both teams were to clip their assigned surface at the same time.

A few seconds into the contest the adult team’s clippers would malfunction. [The adult team was unaware, but there was a wireless remote control device able to control the power to either set of clippers. A research assistant in the audience was operating this remote control. No one in the audience or on the clipping teams could detect interference with the equipment.]

When the adult clippers malfunctioned, the contest was stopped and the clippers were inspected. No defect could be observed. The contest would resume and the adult clippers would malfunction again. After three malfunctions, the facilitator would suggest that the adult team trade clippers with the youth team. The youth team members, coached prior to the event, would agree to trade clippers. The contest would resume, and the adult team clippers would malfunction again.

By this time the adult team would be very annoyed with their situation and the facilitator would stop the contest. A ten-minute educational program about appropriate adult involvement at youth livestock shows would then be presented to the audience and both clipping teams. During the course of this educational program all youth in the audience were invited to receive a button to wear on their clothing for the remainder of the livestock show. The button had the words, “Pull The Plug” written on it. The youth were encouraged for the remainder of the show to “Pull the Plug” on any adult in the youth show barn who appears to be engaged in an excessive amount of work in the preparation of youth livestock project animals. After the “Plug is Pulled” on an adult, the youth were instructed to engage the adult in a sincere dialog about the appropriate role of adults in youth livestock shows.

The educational purpose of the “Pull the Plug” educational effort are to empower young people to assume control of their livestock show and to encourage appropriate adult involvement in the preparation of show animals. The interactive and participatory “Clip-Master Contest” / “Pull the Plug” educational program illustrates through comparison. The inequitable “Clip-Master Contest,” where the adult clippers would not function properly, is compared to the inequitable situation at a youth livestock show when one youth participant tries to do his/her own work and across the aisle an adult or professional fitter is doing the majority of show preparation of another youth’s project animal.

The instrument used to collect data in this study was a two-part questionnaire designed by the researchers. Part one identified selected demographic information about participants. Part two used six questions to measure perceptions of excessive adult involvement in youth livestock shows and to elicit self-reported cognitive and affective changes relevant to the issue.

The entire audience at each event was exposed to the 25-minute “Clip-Master / Pull the Plug” Educational program. At the conclusion of the program all audience members were asked to
complete the two-page evaluation instrument. It took approximately 10 minutes for the entire audience at each site to complete the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

The data were coded into SPSS version 10 and analyzed using descriptive statistical procedures. Internal consistency, as an indicator of reliability, was estimated by Chronbach’s alpha for the six (non-demographic) questions in the scale was .64.

Findings and Discussion

Research Question 1

In all, 394 people completed the evaluation instrument. Of these 166 (42%) were youth livestock show exhibitors. The youth were evenly divided between 8-13 years old (55.1%) and 14-19 years old (44.8%). The 225 adults responding to the instrument selected from among six roles, these data are reported in Table 1.

Table 1.

* Adult Stakeholder Roles in Youth Livestock Shows

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>*f</th>
<th>*%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>69.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ag Teacher</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Fitter</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livestock Breeder</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extension Agent</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>43.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Respondents could select more than one role

The ‘other’ category was the second most popular. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this category was comprised of local agri-industry representatives, buyers, and relatives of the youth exhibitors.

As a group, the respondents clearly perceived that there has been excessive adult involvement in youth livestock shows. These data are illustrated in Figure 1.
Figure 1. All respondents, “Have you ever seen situations of excessive adult involvement at a youth livestock show?”

Adults and youth livestock exhibitors differed somewhat on this question, as depicted in Figures 2 and 3.

Figure 2. Adults, “Have you ever seen situations of excessive adult involvement at a youth livestock show?”
While both groups had clearly seen incidents of excessive adult involvement, youth livestock exhibitors reported seeing fewer than the adults, perhaps because they had attended fewer shows.

When asked whether they thought that excessive adult involvement at a youth livestock show was an issue that needed to be addressed, 94.4% (372) of the respondents said yes. These data are illustrated in Figure 4.

There were few differences between adults and youth on this question as well. Fully 97.3% of adult respondents (150 of 156 parents, all ten FFA instructors, all 16 Extension Agents, and all seven of the professional fitters), thought excessive adult involvement at a youth livestock shows
was an issue that needed to be addressed, and 92.1% of youth livestock exhibitors agreed. Clearly, consensus exists among survey respondents regardless of age and role that the issue needs to be addressed.

Research Question 2

The second set of questions attempted to ascertain whether or not the 25-minute “Clip-Master / Pull the Plug” Educational program was affective in accomplishing its objectives. Question #3 asked, “Before being exposed to the “Pull the Plug” educational program, have you ever taken steps to address the issue of excessive adult involvement at youth livestock shows?” Responses were limited to “Yes” or “No.” Question #4 asked, “After being exposed to the “Pull the Plug” educational program, do you think you will ever take steps to address the issue of excessive adult involvement at youth livestock shows?” Responses were limited to “Yes” or “Maybe” or “No.”

The percentage of those indicating that they had not taken steps in the past (65%) and the percentage of those who indicate that they will not take steps in the future (4.1%) was dramatically different. Of the 16 respondents who indicated that they would NOT take steps to address this issue in the future, 14 were youth livestock show exhibitors and nine of those were under 14 years of age. Very young children can hardly be expected to confront adults other than their parents. The results are depicted in Figure 5.

![Figure 5. Responses before and after the Pull the Plug program.](image)

In examining the groups who indicated they HAD taken steps in the past (“Yes” on Question #3) and WOULD take steps in the future (“Yes” on Question #4), it was interesting to the researchers that the growth (135 to 163) was all from the youth, while the number adults reporting “Yes” actually went down. When offered the opportunity, adults chose “Maybe.” This reduction in adult “yes” responses seemed counter-intuitive to the researchers. One possible conclusion is that their past experience(s) “taking steps to address the issue” were confrontational, unpleasant, etc. and they would hesitate to engage in them in the future. The youth livestock exhibitors had less hesitation, and were more willing to engage in such actions in the future. The data are reported in Table 2.
Table 2.

Indication of Potential Changes in Behavior Due to “Pull the “Plug” Program.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Before the Pull the Plug Program</th>
<th>After the Pull the Plug Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>106</td>
<td>47.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percentages are ‘within group’ (e.g. percentage of adults indicating no).

Research Question 3

The third set of questions asked participants to select the appropriate role of adults in a specific youth livestock show situation.

A six-point Likert scale was employed. The six items were; 1) Absolutely no adult involvement allowed, 2) Adult involvement only to offer advice and information, 3) Clipping and grooming by an adult for instructional purposes only, 4) Youth and adults share clipping and grooming tasks equally, 5) Adults do a majority of the clipping and grooming, and 6) Professional fitter hired to do all the clipping and grooming. Item #6 asked respondents to choose the level of adult involvement acceptable at home prior to arriving at the show. Item #7 asked respondents to choose the level of adult involvement acceptable at the livestock show. In order to standardize the responses to item # 6 and item # 7, both questions carried the qualifying statement: assume the situation involves a 14 year old with 3 years experience showing that species of animal.

With an N of 394, the mean score for Item #6 was 2.95 (SD = .8039). The mean for Item #7 was 2.38 (SD = .7427). This would indicate that prior to the show; adults may conduct “Clipping and grooming for instructional purposes only.” During the show, they should “only offer advice and information” for youth exhibitors. The researchers found it interesting that the group’s definition of appropriate behavior changed depending on whether or not the adult was at the livestock show.

While useful as a summary, mean scores often fail to tell a complete story. Frequencies and cumulative percentages provide additional insight into the participant’s levels of agreement with the six statements. The frequencies reported in Table 3 are summarized by whole number rounding down to include those participants who chose the statement and those choosing numbers between that statement and the next higher one. If for instance, a person marked 2.75, they would be coded as a 2 on this table. The researchers believe that this coding system best reflects the number of people who would not agree with the next higher statement. They were, in the researchers opinion, unwilling to cross the threshold proposed by the next higher statement.
Table 3.

*Frequencies and Cumulative Percentages of Acceptable Adult Involvement Before and During the Livestock Show.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Before</th>
<th></th>
<th>During</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f</td>
<td>Cumm. %</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>Cumm. %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1: Absolutely no adult involvement.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: Only to offer advice and information</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>37.2</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>68.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: Clipping for instructional purposes only</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>80.5</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>93.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: Share clipping and grooming tasks equally</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>98.2</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>99.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5: Do a majority of the clipping and grooming</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>99.2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>99.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6: Professional fitter does all the clipping</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>394</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>394</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The frequencies would suggest that adults should carefully consider their actions any time they touch a clipper to a youth livestock project. Over a third of our respondents think this is “too involved” before the show and two-thirds share this belief after the show begins. Agricultural educators should demonstrate and allow youth to practice clipping and grooming procedures on animals other than those to be exhibited.

Clearly in the minority, both of the people selecting responses 5 and 6 “During the show” were youth livestock exhibitors and they were both 14-19 years old. The researchers had anticipated that at least some of the “Professional fitters” would select response #6, but no professional fitter chose a response greater than #4 either before or during the show, and the majority chose responses below #3. So if the youth livestock exhibitors hired professional fitters, they were not these professional fitters.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

The data suggest that incidents of excessive adult involvement at a youth livestock shows are commonplace, and that this is an issue that needs to be addressed.

Those responsible for administering youth livestock shows should adopt programs to educate stakeholders about excessive adult involvement. In addition, procedures should be adopted to assist youth livestock exhibitors in assuming control of this issue in their shows.

Youth livestock exhibitors are much more willing to take action to deal with excessive adult involvement at a youth livestock shows following the Pull the Plug educational program. Adult participants are less willing to take no action following the Pull the Plug program. The Pull the Plug educational program can serve as an effective model for the creation of programs to inform stakeholders about excessive adult involvement at a youth livestock shows.
Advice and encouragement are acceptable and appropriate roles for adults in youth livestock shows as they are in any other competitive event for youths. Direct assistance, whether supplied or purchased, is generally perceived as unacceptable.

The authors found the instrument used in this study to identify appropriate adult roles in youth livestock project shows (Figure 6) to be efficient and effective in assisting a wide variety of stakeholders to explore their perceptions on the subject. We therefore recommend that the instrument be used to promote dialog about this issue.

Figure 6. Adult Involvement Continuum.

References


