

## Coach Character

By Jean's Boots blog writer  
A Call for Action in the 4-H Livestock World

I witnessed something this week.

Within an hour of arriving to the county fair, I saw an adult completely humiliate a child showing livestock.

Their tactic:

Stand ringside, verbally (and loudly) comment on the showmanship of the child and wrap up the disgusting charade by visually displaying disappointment in the kid.

I wanted to throw up. But I had just eaten a \$6.50 Kemo sub and I couldn't waste that kind of money. Then I saw something I had never seen before: a broken heart with a buzz cut, pig whip in his hand and tears on his cheeks. Unbearable.

Let us chat.

Showing livestock is about building character.

It is about learning responsibility and working hard towards a goal and also understanding what makes sheep bloat; which is, apparently, everything. Showing livestock is not about the adults' financial investment, the adults' prideful reputation or the adults living vicariously through someone a quarter of their size. Showing livestock is not about last names.

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It is the county fair. Not a national show in Denver. And even if it was Denver, scolding rather than coaching your child in front of a national crowd isn't going to help any way.

This is where your child will meet the friend that they will go on Spring Break 2027 with. You will approve the trip because they are "in 4-H together". This is local. This is your back forty. These people - the ones gauging how you react to winning or rejection - are their village.

By the way... one of the young men your daughter is showing against will probably take her to prom in five years. Brace yourself.

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Your kid is not going to make a living precisely parading livestock, keeping the flawless stock between himself and the judge. Your kid may go on to make a living breeding and selling sought genetics, building relationships far and wide, developing a brand and

cultivating a passion which generations to come will benefit from. But perfect showmanship tactics? They come and go. The county fair is the place to cultivate those interests and polish those talents. No one becomes famous here. Calm down.

Showing livestock is about building character.

It is also about displaying character. They are watching. And when you scold them in public? You are breaking their confidence. And when you throw a fit? You are giving them permission to do the same. And when you return to the stalls or the show box and bad mouth the judge? You are teaching them how to discount anyone who ever offers them constructive criticism.

In a world where kids get trophies for showing up to three practices, constructive criticism is crucial!

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Trust me. No one comes to the county fair and expects to lose. No one puts their family through the familiar tough times that is the week before the county fair for the heck of it. You have worked hard to coordinate. The kids are tired. The stock is ready. You are fixin' to hide in a closet and shut off your phone. I get it. But everyone - *everyone* - comes to compete and do their best. Their very best. Your kid included.

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At the end of the day or the auction, showing livestock teaches kids how to win graciously and lose gracefully. Appreciate the blue ribbons. Accept the rejection letter. Balance a checkbook. Read a feed sack label. Find confidence in a flood of embarrassment. Fail the interview but dominate the closure handshake. Sincerely thank the judge that buried the best steer that will ever come off the farm.

Because...who knows...that very judge may hire her right out of grad school, a decade later.

Remember: This week is similar to vacation for your kids. A week of sunshine, snow-cones, their favorite stock, long lost friends and way-past-bedtime nights.

If you must coach from the sidelines, coach character.