

# Perfect parent — or a pushy one?

Without the support of their parents Laura Tomlinson, Charlotte Dujardin, Scott Brash and William Fox-Pitt would never have made British teams. But when does a supportive parent become a suffocating one? **Andrea Oakes** asks how parents can get the balance right

**H**EAD groom, transport manager, finance director, general dogsbod — it's all in a weekend's (unpaid) work if you're the parent of a pony-mad child hell-bent on becoming the next Scott or Charlotte.

The emotional and financial investment needed to get a budding young rider to the top can be huge, while the practical aspects of keeping the show on the road frequently dominate family life.

Tough decisions must be made. Should college work come before competitions? Is it worth remortgaging the house to buy that potential team pony? And how best to support hopes and dreams without piling on the pressure and becoming — dare we say it — the dreaded pushy parent?

## Smoothing the path

THERE is no magic formula for producing a winner. The varied backgrounds of our equestrian stars show there are many roads to success. What is certain is that Team GB can thank the initiative and sheer commitment of an army of parents for their current world-beating status.

Take Charlotte Dujardin's mother Jane, who famously spent her family inheritance on the grand prix prospect Fernandez and was instrumental in securing a foot in the door for her daughter at Carl Hester's yard. Or Scott Brash's father Stanley, who fuelled his son's childhood showjumping dreams with a string of talented ponies.

How did these parents get the balance right? "My dad was always there for me, but he was never a pushy parent," says 2012 Olympic team gold medalist Scott. "My sister and I wanted to do this ourselves. We each had a good 12.2hh pony. But Dad never bought us the best. Instead we had youngsters who we had to bring on.



Dressage suprema Charlotte Dujardin's mother Jane helped her get a foot in the door at Carl Hester's yard



"It would have been a lot harder without his help, but the drive had to come from us," adds Scott. "I always felt that I could have given up if I'd wanted to."

Double Paralympic gold medalist Natasha Baker reveals that she never felt the pressure to succeed — or even to ride.

"I was surrounded by horses from day one, but Mum didn't want to be a pushy parent and I only sat on a horse if I asked to," she explains. "I always had loan ponies and had to wait until I was 14 before I got my first horse. Mum didn't want me to get into boys before then and give up."

While they were never overambitious for their potential para dressage star, Natasha acknowledges: "I

Olympian Scott Brash's father Stanley helped his son's childhood showjumping dreams



Eventer Oliver Townend was taught to view his horses and riding as a business from the outset

**“Remortgaging to buy SL Lucci wasn't a big decision. It is a risk — if Lucci breaks, that's it”**

Tracy Peters, mother of teenage dressage ace Phoebe Peters

wouldn't be where I am now without them. My mum is still my full-time groom."

Alan Townend took a novel approach to encouraging his young son, would-be international eventer Oliver.

"Dad put me under pressure, but in a productive way," recalls Oliver, who claims he was always very competitive as a child.

"He would tell me that if I wanted my pony shoeing, I would have to win the money to pay for it. I learned early on that I would have to make a living — it 100% prepared me for reality.

"But Dad was never pushy," he adds. "It had to be me who wanted to do it."



## Success on a plate

OVERFACING an unwilling child or publicly berating them for their lack of success is unlikely to work. But it still happens.

"I knew there was no way I would be one of those 'horsey mothers', getting cross if my children made mistakes," says eventing legend Mary King, referring to the scarier extreme of equestrian parenting.

Her daughter Emily is now racing up the ranks behind her, but Mary admits that raising a prospective champion has its challenges.

"It has been tempting to tell Emily what to do or what not to do, but it's better for her to learn from her own mistakes," she explains. "I've tried to steer her in the right direction while letting her do her own thing."

"Neither of my parents were horsey, but they were a tremendous support and let me follow my dreams," adds Mary. "It's important not to put the dampers on ambition."

Having your own yard of horses can make it easier to allow a child to grow into the sport at their own pace, but it's another matter for non-horsey parents. Do you go all out if you spot the makings of a superstar, equipping your child with the very best at the risk of applying too much pressure?

And how much is it sensible to invest in one family member's ambitions?

For Tracy Peters, there was no question of not helping her daughter Phoebe, Britain's teenage dressage sensation, realise her potential. The Peters family are among the most dedicated of support teams. Remortgaging their house allowed them to go pony shopping with a six-figure sum and, in buying SL Lucci, they secured Phoebe the horse power to win at national and international level.

"Remortgaging to buy wasn't a big decision, because we were told when Phoebe was seven that she had special talent," says Tracy. "It is a risk — if SL Lucci breaks, that's it. But we'd make the same decision any day."

Is there no danger of overpressuring Phoebe?

"She is completely self-driven," says Tracy. "Phoebe is so dedicated and knows what she

## PARENTING DILEMMAS

### Q: WHERE DO YOU STAND ON THE SCHOOL ISSUE?

"Ultimately, the horse is more important than school," said Tracy Peters after her daughter Phoebe (a straight-A pupil) did homework in the lorry on a lengthy term-time trip to Vidauban CDI in France last year.

Oliver Townend counters: "My mum was very education orientated and wouldn't allow days off."

### Q: SHOULD CHILDREN HAVE A PLAN B AS A BACK-UP?

Mary King thinks so. "We made a pact with Emily that she could leave school after GCSEs as long as she gets some other qualifications," she says. "She'd like to take a cordon bleu cookery course and work a ski season — exactly what I did, but it's her idea."

### Q: MUST COMPETITIONS COME FIRST? Not for Pammy Hutton.

"I've tried as hard as I can to maintain family life," she says. "I've even gone home early from a Premier League to cook a Sunday roast."

### Q: WOULD YOU RISK MORE MONEY THAN YOU COULD AFFORD ON A "SUPERMOUNT"?

"We never had the horse power, but that was the best education," claims eventer Francis Whittington, whose family swapped an old horsebox for North Down Nova. The pony went on to win individual gold and team silver with Francis.

needs. We've never ridden but we've put people in the right places to help her.

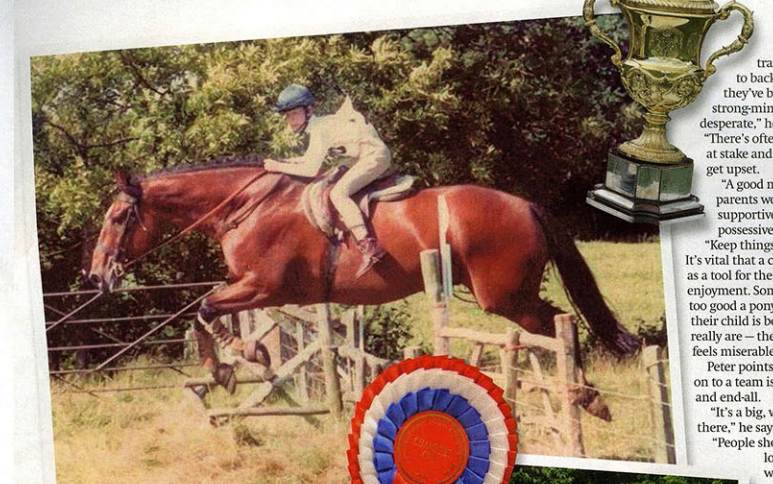
"If you can help and support your child, then do it. But it's important to listen to them. Don't push — and know when to back off if you need to."

Australian eventer Paul Tapner also saw his non-horsey family make sacrifices for his competition career.

"My parents were hugely influential," he explains. "Because they couldn't teach me themselves, they realised they'd have to pay for instruction. It was expensive but I got the best."

"They rented my first pony, leased the second and bought the third for \$400 [£218]. Lots came cheap off the racetrack. The most they ever paid was \$5,000 [£2,725] — and that felt like we were remortgaging the house."

"In England it seems the norm for every rider to have family support, yet a huge amount of riders here never seem to get out of that," adds Paul. "I was told there was a definite time period during which my



Riders like William Fox-Pitt have their incredibly supportive parents to thank for helping them get to the top of their sport

parents were willing to finance my horses."

This view is shared by Oliver Townend, who was taught from the outset to see riding as a business.

"It's unnecessary to spend fortunes," he says. "Life is completely on a plate for many young riders — they lack the hunger to win. If they had their bank accounts emptied and their ponies taken away, I think Britain would be winning more."

## Parents under pressure

If your child is selected for a national team — pony, junior or young rider — a whole new world of parenting challenges awaits.

"The role of a parent in a team situation is ultimately to be there to celebrate success and pick up the pieces when there's a disappointment," says Islay Auty, chief selector for the junior and young rider dressage teams.

"Parents must realise that there are times when they will have to abdicate responsibility and let the team trainer, chef d'equipe or other officials take over. If they've always done everything — and often too much — this can be problematic."

**“There have been times when I've had to take parents aside to encourage them to back off and understand that their child is not as stressed as they are”**

British junior and young rider team selector Islay Auty



Phoebe Peters' family remortgaged the house to allow them to go pony shopping

But it's important, she emphasises, that parents do not feel ostracised.

"We do a lot in team preparation, educating parents at an early stage," adds Islay. "I want parents to feel that I'm on their side, but they must allow their child to enjoy the experience of being on a GBR team. There have been times when I've had to take parents aside to encourage them to back off and understand that their child is not as stressed as they are."

"Parenting a team member can take some handling, especially with pony and junior riders. Girls, especially, are at a very vulnerable, hormonal stage and are starting to assert their role within the family. They can be ghoulish."

Whatever the results, Islay urges parents to make the most of the brief journey.

"Enjoy every step of what the child is doing and savour the opportunities they're having along the way," she says.

As dressage pony team trainer, Peter Storr has seen the best — and worst — of parents.

"We've had to train several parents to back down because they've become strappy, strong-minded and even desperate," he admits. "There's often a lot of money at stake and people can get upset."

"A good mantra for parents would be to remain supportive but not possessive," he adds.

"Keep things in perspective. It's vital that a child is not used as a tool for the parents' enjoyment. Some parents buy too good a pony thinking that their child is better than they really are — the child then fails, feels miserable and gives up."

Peter points out that getting on to a team is not the be-all and end-all.

"It's a big, wide world out there," he says.

"People should be thinking longer-term if they want to become professional."

## A hug and a hankie

ACCORDING to under-18s eventing chairman Jane Peters, parents of team members need to be just two things.

"A taxi and a bank," she laughs, no doubt echoing the thoughts of put-upon parents across the country.

Jane stresses that the team situation is a learning process for the whole family and recommends taking a quietly supporting role.

"I understand that parents want the best for their children, but some put a lot of pressure on them to compete at a higher level than they're ready for," she says.

Establishing the right amount and type of involvement in your child's competitive career will never be easy, but then few aspects of parenting are.

If you can remember that your children should be riding for their own joy, not yours, and be ready with a hug and a hankie when things go wrong, you'll be doing well.

Dressage legend Pammy Hutton, who has guided her children Charlie and Pippa through the team system with success, perhaps sums up the role most accurately.

"Like most parents, we never get it right," she says. "We just try the best we can to get it as right as we can — both emotionally and financially." H&H