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Team performance and gendered parenthood in horse-riding activities for young children

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ABSTRACT
To improve the experiences of children and parents and prepare those who arrange the activities for parental needs the aim of this article is to describe and analyse parental roles in a horse-riding activities for younger children in Sweden and Norway. Horse-riding for younger children is an individual sport but conducted in interplay with others such as parents and horses. To understand these interactions, Goffman’s dramaturgical approach and insights from research on sport and gender have been used. The main result is that during the activity, the child and the parent interact and perform as a team. In addition, the team performance is influenced by gender constructions. The gender construction is, however, different from what former has been shown in research on sport and gender.

Introduction
In Western societies, parents’ involvement in organised children and youth sport has changed and expanded since the 1960s and 70s, and today parental involvement in sports is seen as the norm (Stefansen, Smette, and Strandbu 2018; Strandbu, Bakken, and Stefansen 2020). Furthermore, parents’ social position is an important determinant for leisure time activities for children (Garcia 2015). Parenting in sports is formed at different levels and with varying degrees of intensity regarding, for example, time, finances, and emotional commitment. Moreover, parents are expected to have different roles, functions, and responsibilities, depending on the context and the sport activity. In soccer, for example, parents are frequently involved as coaches for younger teams (Kilger 2020). However, parental involvement can also have negative aspects. Augustsson (2007) shows how children may perceive parental pressure as demanding, and parental involvement can also be problematic for parents (cf. Kilger 2020). Thus far, studies on parental roles in sport have mainly focused on parents of children from the age of seven and older, despite an increasing number of younger children participating in organised sport (Hedenborg and Fransson 2011; Calero, Beesley, and Fraser-Thomas 2018; Fraser-Thomas and Safai 2018; Harlow et al., 2020). One reason for this is that the involvement of younger children in organised sport is a relatively new phenomenon (Lindroth 1991;
Hedenborg et al. 2020; Jesper 2022). Another reason is likely connected to concepts related to organised sports for this age group – a sport concept delimited to competitive activities in which young children are seldom involved (Fraser-Thomas and Safai 2018). Moreover, it is probable that the involvement of younger children in organised sports has increased parental involvement. Whether this is the case, and in what way and how is unknown. In addition, it is plausible that parental involvement differs depending on the sport specific context. To improve the experiences of children and parents and prepare those who arrange the activities for parental needs the aim of this article is to describe and analyse parental roles in a specific sporting activity, that is, horse-riding activities for younger children in Sweden and Norway, where horse riding is one of the largest sports for children and youth. Even though an increasing number of studies on equestrian sports have been published, research on the parental role, how they should act and perform in these activities is scant. The theoretical framework is inspired by sociologist Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical approach (Goffman 2020), and the social construction of gender in sport (Butler 1998; Hargreaves 1994; Hargreaves 2000; Hedenborg & Pfister 2012:1; Hedenborg & Pfister 2012, 2; Pfister 2010; Tolvhed 2008; Tolvhed 2015).

**Horse-riding activities**

A hundred years ago, equestrian sport was primarily an activity for military men, or the men and women of the upper classes. After the Second World War, the number of riding schools in Sweden increased, as did the number of women and girls riding (Hedenborg, Torell Palmquist, and Rosén 2021). Today horse riding is a common leisure activity for both adults and children in Sweden and Norway, with most riders being girls and women. Some people own their horses, while others attend riding schools weekly for lesson usually lasting one hour (Hedenborg, Torell Palmquist, and Rosén 2021).

Riding schools compete with other sports in attracting children and young people to their activities (Rosén, Thorell, and Hedenborg 2022). This, combined with a demand for opportunities to let young children ride and spend time with horses, has led to riding schools offering activities for young children (Thorell 2017). Indeed, over half of all riding schools within the Swedish Equestrian Association offer activities for children aged zero to six years, with the establishment of an activity called ‘tiny tots riding’ (Hedenborg et al. 2020). Previous research has shown that even though riding schools are no longer part of a military environment, their activities remain strongly inspired by a traditional military discourse (Thorell et al. 2018; Forsberg 2007; Forsberg and Tebelius 2011; Nikku 2005; Thorell and Hedenborg 2015). The norms have been summarised with the concept ‘stable culture’ (Hedenborg 2008; Thorell 2017), which is related to the following perceptions: appropriate horse management, social hierarchies, authoritarianism, status, concentration of power to a minority, language of command, continuous feedback, the importance of orderliness, smart appearance and punctuality.

The role of the riding instructor and teaching practices are guided by the military discourse, and instructors relate positively to the existing norms and strive to preserve them. The discourse is also upheld using traditional military riding manuals used in the teaching of new instructors (Thorell 2017). Riding skills are emphasised through curricula and grades, and informally by encouraging students to compete and by using competitions as a form of examinations (Thorell et al. 2018). However, there have been several changes. Research has shown that the prevailing stable culture has been challenged by new forms of
learning when communication and knowledge acquisition take place in the digital environment (Broms et al. 2021). Furthermore, economic challenges have pushed riding schools to change their way of teaching (Thorell et al. 2018). Whether the old prevailing stable culture continues to characterise horse riding activities for young children will be discussed below.

**Theoretical framework**

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach is based on the idea that interactions between people can be equated with performances on a theatre stage (Goffman 2020). People, like actors, play the role that is best adapted to a particular social context to control their audience's impression of them in a convincing way. The performance takes place on what Goffman calls the *front stage*, which is where the actor must convince the audience that he or she is a natural part of the context. For the impression management to be successful, preparations are required in a private room (backstage), where the actor can learn about the expectations during a particular performance without the audience. The actor must perform in a certain way and be prepared; otherwise, there is a risk of being exposed and losing one's mask. People use different masks depending on the social situation. If the appearance fails, the consequences can be great, for example one can be excluded, ostracised or unaccepted. In this study, the dramaturgical approach is used as a tool to identify roles performed during the riding lessons for younger children through focusing on the accompanying adults.

As Goffman's framework does not provide a tool for a gender analysis, it will thus be combined with a gender perspective. In line with Connell and Robert (1995) and others, gender is here seen as a social construction that is intertwined with social structures, embedded in identities and presented in interactions. Research on sport and gender shows that the social construction of gender has been of importance to understand how men and women produce and reproduce roles and behaviors as well as norms, ideals, beliefs about how men and women shall act and react in sports. In addition, gender shapes the understanding, interpretations, and evaluations of sporting activities and events. Connell use the concept 'hegemonic masculinity' to point out the most culturally privileged form of doing maleness. According to her, femininity cannot be hegemonic, as all femininities are subject to male domination. It is, however, important to remember that even though gender constructions constitute frames these have been questioned and violated – not the least in sports. In this article, a gender perspective is used to understand how gender shapes how adults – mothers and fathers – perform (and are respected) during horse riding activities for their children.

**Method**

A qualitative method has been used, where the research data come from semi-structured interviews and observations. The researchers in the project have conducted interviews and observations at riding schools in southern and central Sweden and in southern and central Norway. The riding schools were selected on the basis that their websites showed that they offered activities for younger children and that they were geographically close to the researchers. In the research group there are six researchers from Sweden and Norway, the
group has been studying preschool children at riding schools in Sweden and Norway from different perspectives. Riding school structure and how activities are organised are similar in the two countries. The empirical material consists of 21 interviews and 10 participant observations conducted at 6 riding schools: 5 in Sweden and 1 in Norway (see Table 1). The project was conducted partly during the pandemic. In Norway the riding schools closed which they did not in Sweden. This forced the research group to conduct the main part of the interviews and observations in Sweden. Two Swedish researchers made observations and interviews in Sweden and one researcher in Norway did the interviews in Norway. The research group read and analysed the interviews and observations together.

We commenced the research project by emailing riding instructors and operational managers to inform them about the study and to ask for participation. Thereafter, interviews were booked. In connection with the riding instructor interviews and during the observations, parents received information about the research project and were asked to participate in interviews, which were conducted both by phone, on site at the riding school and in some cases in the club room at the riding school. Contacting and receiving consent from both instructors and managers was unproblematic; however, this was not the case with parents. Consequently, more phone calls, social media advertising and a snowball method were used for parent recruitment as we particularly wanted to interview both men/fathers and women/mothers.

The interviews, conducted both on site and by phone, lasted between 30 and 60 min. An interview guide was used, with the interviews structured in four sections: background and expectations, content of the horse riding, safety and horses. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. During the interviews, the riding instructors were asked if the researchers could make participant observations during the horse-riding sessions.

The observations were guided by an observation matrix and were mainly carried out on two occasions at each riding school, with the same group observed both times. The observations lasted between one and three hours, depending on the activities. The observations began before children and parents arrived at the riding school. Field notes were taken during the observations. In sum 57 parents/relatives where present during the observations, 39 women and 18 men. The researchers were passive observers, but some participation proved to be necessary as the participants addressed and asked the researchers about matters to do with riding. The researchers were, for example, asked to hold a horse or to help demonstrate or perform something. On one occasion, the researcher caught a child falling off the horse.

We conducted a theoretically driven thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). The transcribed interviews and field notes were read and re-read by all researchers in the project, and recurring information and stories in interviews and observations were identified and coded. Our theoretical understanding helped us to compare and contrast topics, ideas and

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Sweden</th>
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<td>Riding instructors or managers</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
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*Number of men in brackets.
patterns of meaning in relation to our theoretical frames. The themes were organized and named in three subthemes capturing the gendered role of parents ('Horse girl Mothers and Pushy Mothers', 'Chicken Mothers' and 'Not a Horseman') and an overarching theme related to how parents, children and horses are related ('Team performance'). Finally, we selected extracts relating to the research questions and literature (Braun and Clarke 2006). The themes are represented in quotes from interviews and as fictitious narratives (cf., Linghede, Larsson, and Redelius 2016; Tracy 2019). We start the analysis of the overarching theme and the subthemes with a narrative to illustrate the activities. The narratives were created to show the complicity of the horse-riding activities for young children as well as reflecting how our understanding of these activities influenced the analysis. The narratives include a fictitious 'I' even though three different researchers conducted observations and interviews. In addition, interviews are presented using quotes.

The researchers’ background in equestrian sports and the riding school environment in general played an important role in the interviews, observations and analysis. We recognised and could quickly contextualise what happened during interviews and observations. Prior knowledge of horse concepts and how horses can react influenced how we interpreted situations where parents were involved in the activities. However, we have constantly reflected on our background and our preconceptions so as not to inhibit the data analysis.

Against the background of the Swedish ethics legislation, ethical approval has not been obtained as no sensitive personal data have been handled, no filming has been carried out, nor have interviews or other conversations been held with children. In accordance with accepted research ethical principles and GDPR, consent has been obtained and information has been provided to the informants. Field notes, transcriptions, audio recordings and consent forms are stored on the University’s server and in filing cabinets and will be archived after the end of the research project.

Findings

Tiny tots riding is a riding lesson where children of pre-school age, in general from 3-4 years old, participate with accompanying adults. The activity takes place once a week at the weekend or early weekday afternoon/evening. The riding group consists of between four and ten equipages and one riding instructor. The riding instructor communicates with her voice and body language with the child, the parent, and the horse. The riding instructor is usually assisted by one or more stable hosts – teenage girls who ride at the riding school themselves and know the horses, the environment, and the riding instructor. These girls are not paid, but often receive some other form of compensation, for example an extra riding lesson. The stable hosts function as the riding instructors’ assistant when communicating with the child and the accompanying adult.

Parents or other accompanying adults are active during the entire time in the stable. They participate with the children and are responsible for preparing the horse for the lesson, for example brushing and saddling the horse; lifting the child onto the horse; holding the bridle and running with and side walking the horse throughout the riding lesson. They are also responsible for the safety equipment, such as helmet and vest. After the riding lesson, they must take care of the horse and the equipment by brushing the horse and put saddle and bridle in the storage room. We have identified ‘Team Performance’ as an overarching theme – even though horse-riding can be seen an individual sport it is, for this age group,
conducted in interplay with others. Both mothers and fathers participate, but there is a predominance of mothers and girls in the business.

The team performance

It is an early Tuesday afternoon. I arrive at the riding school well in advance of the tiny tots’ activities. Horses are standing outside the stable in paddocks. Riding instructors and teenage girls sit together in the club room/office and talk about what is going to happen this afternoon. Soon adults and children arrive in their own cars. They are told which horses they will handle this afternoon and are sent out to the paddock to collect them. The horses are brought into their boxes, and adults groom and clean the horse with the children. Then they saddle and bridle the horses. The riding instructor walks around the stable with the stable hosts, over-seeing the activities. She talks to the children and adults, helps and instructs them on how to prepare the horse and use the equipment, but the accompanying adults have the main responsibility. When horses are prepared, the adults sidewalk them into the riding barn and help the children to mount the horses. Some of the parents seem to have done this before. Others look insecure. I observe that some parents are holding on to the horses in a way that makes it possible for the horses to run away should something scare them. This makes me worried. When parents help their children onto the horses, most of them struggle a bit with lifting the child and holding the horse at the same time. One of them lets go of the horse. Is this really a safe activity for the young children, I ask myself? During the riding lesson, the accompanying adults participate actively. They sidewalk the horses and listen to the instructions and transmit these in a low voice to the child. The accompanying adults interact closely with the children and chat with them, cheer them up and help all the time. The instructor interacts with the parents so that they understand what needs to be done. Communication to the children goes via the parents, even if the instructor speaks to the children (by, for example, using their names). In addition, the instructors interact with horses and ‘read’ the horses continuously. Neither the children nor the parents clearly interact with the horses.

During the tiny tots riding, parents and children form a team, unlike what has been shown in other sport activities where the child is put in the centre of the activity (Knoester and Fields 2020; Kilger 2020). This becomes particularly clear in the observations. From the moment a parent with a child sets foot in the area where the riding lesson is to take place, responsibility and expectations are placed on the parent. In addition, the parents are also expected to be able to interpret and understand the riding instructors’ instructions to pass them on to their child. The instructors provide not only the children but also the parents with the information required to be able to perform the upcoming task. With the help of Goffman’s (2020) dramaturgical approach, the situation can be understood as the instructor helping the parents to successfully appear in their (horse parent) roles on this specific stage. When the horse parents get the opportunity to appear as a role model and as authoritarian persons who possess the knowledge required at the time, the relationship between child and parent can be strengthened in the specific situation, but also in a wider sense. According to Goffman, an individual tries to control the environment’s impression of him by convincingly acting according to the norms and rules that exist in a certain social context. Whispers can, for example, be perceived as the actor, in this case the parent, withholding something of importance, and thus not being convincing in their role in front of the audience. However, if two people on stage are aware of and agree that they are
co-operating with each other, withholding information from the rest of the audience, something Goffman calls team performance, occurs. Team performance involves a secret communication between two actors that does not destroy the illusion on stage. Despite this interaction, the audience is still just as convinced of the actors’ roles (Goffman 2014). The parents ‘secretly’ help the child to complete the tasks to control the audience’s impression of the team and its abilities. The riding instructor gives instructions seemingly to the children, but there is an implicit agreement that it is the parent who will pass on the instructions. In this way, the illusion remains that it is the children who receive the instructions and carry out the tasks.

The active participation of accompanying adults is a prerequisite for the tiny tots’ activity. Most parents seem to accept this, and they underline the importance of sharing an interest with the child. This is especially true for the mothers who have ridden at riding schools as children and who have owned horses. They express that they want the child to have positive experiences of being in the stables with the horses and riding. Rut, one of the mothers, explains:

First, I wanted her to get use to horses as early as possible, because I’m horse riding. I thought it was important that they [the children] are physically active and spend time outside. It would be great fun if I could get her to share my interest. It was probably the first thing that I wanted her to spend time with horses. (Rut)

Rut’s desires are not unique. As already mentioned, children's sports have become an increasingly important part of family life. The constructed stable parenthood is possibly also connected to ideas that it is important for children to have relationships with animals for broader reasons. Relationships with individual animals are often seen as a ‘bridge’ to caring about the broader environment (people, animals and ecosystems). Research shows that children who live on farms or have horses are required to take responsibility and that they display far more knowledge about looking after their animals than other children (Muldoon, Williams, and Alistair 2015). However, beyond the socialisation aspects, mothers and fathers present tiny tots riding as a joint activity and as an opportunity to strengthen their relationship and ‘bond’ with the child. That parents are required to be active for the tiny tots riding to be carried out is regarded as positive, but also as a sacrifice that parents are happy to make. Boel, one of the mothers, explains:

I’m looking forward to Tuesdays. I think it’s great fun. So as a parent, you’re involved in the riding, you’re involved in holding the horse; it’s an activity for me too… it strengthens my relationship with my daughter…. (Boel)

Parents relate that they think that participation in the riding session leads to an understanding of what the child does and is able to do during a riding lesson. Per, one of the fathers, reveals his strong desire to learn and to be there for his child:

Me as a father…. I really want to learn, both for my own sake but also for my daughter’s sake. And I really want to be there for her. (Per)

The parental engagement is also recognised by the riding instructors. When they receive feedback from various parents, they thus attain an idea of how the parents understand and use the time at the riding school with their child. Ella, one of the riding instructors, conveys:
We have some fathers who have come afterwards and said it’s so much fun because now ‘I understand what my daughter is talking about when she comes home and says that she has practised this, and stuff like that.’ So, there will be some bonding time for them as well. (Riding instructor Ella)

The ‘parent and child team’ is also part of a larger team involving instructors and horses. As demonstrated by Lundesjö-Kvart (2013), riding lessons are characterised by the riding instructor trying to communicate ‘feeling’ to the rider. Instead of using short instructions, corrections, repetitive exercises, body, voice, gaze, touch and position can be used to convey a feeling. Lundesjö-Kvart (2020) further underlines that feeling is communicated at the riding school within the horse-riding instructor-student triad when the riding instructor times the instructions in the mobile course and, among other things, uses his voice in a direct discourse addressed to the horse, often for calming purposes. In the tiny tots riding activity, instructors also communicate and interact with the horses, despite the illusion that it is the children and parents who have the closest contact with the horse. This communication is essential for the lesson to be carried out smoothly and to be considered successful.

Another aspect underlying team performance occurs when the instructor and the horse communicate surreptitiously with each other to make the lesson go as smoothly as possible. There are multiple teams within this situation that act based on each other in order to maintain an understanding of how this lesson would be interpreted from an outsider perspective. The silent communication between instructor and horse enables the young rider, and maybe even the parent, to believe that the horse is reacting to the instructions from the child when it is the instructor who oversees the horse's actions. Similarly, there is a team performance with silent communication between the instructor and the parent. Though it may appear that the instructor is directing instructions to the child, it is a way of giving the instructions to the parents. This is visible through how the instructor delivers these instructions based on how she talks rather than on the words themselves, how she moves towards the horse or where she looks while giving instructions. By interpreting this interplay though the dramatical perspective, the instructions are most likely directed to the parents to help them take charge of the exercise without the children realising. There is also likely a team performance within the same category put on from the child and the parent to impress the instructor. There might even be another silent team performance by the child and instructor to make the parent believe they are doing everything correctly. These silent team performances that occur during the lessons are all tools used to maintain an illusion of how every actor involved is supposed to act, rather than openly admitting a lack of knowledge or control. Through their actions, the actors within this play try to save each other’s performances and help all involved to keep their mask on (Goffman 2020).

Horse girl mothers and pushy mothers. This Tuesday it is time for a jumping lesson for the young children. I note that most of the accompanying adults are women; ‘probably mothers’, I write in my field notes. This does not surprise me. During my adult years in the stable, most adults have been women. And when I have been observing the activities with the young children, it has been the same. It was, however, different when I was growing up – in two ways. First, most instructors were men. Second, there were few accompanying adults. Now, the mothers that arrive with their children seem to be competent, and they know what is expected of them. They collect the right equipment and walk out to the paddock to bring in
the horses. They take care of the horses without assistance from the instructor. This Tuesday the smallest pony doesn't want to be bridled, the pony protests and shies away. The mother tells her child to back off so that she can bridle the horse without the interference of the child. During the riding lesson, another mother, in a family with two children, runs between the children to help them, even though the father has come to the activity, too. A third mother's daughter, wearing a pink helmet and boots, rides the tallest horse. The mother seems extra happy about the content of the riding lesson – jumping. When she and her daughter enter the riding hall, the mother hangs the rope that the adults are supposed to hold on to when they sidewalk the horse around the neck of the horse to let her daughter ride by herself. A fourth mother seems irritated with her daughter and wants to push her child, who does not want to jump with her horse. The riding instructor tries to stop her from being too pushy. Maybe she doesn't want the child to fall off? A fifth mother seems scared of horses.

Many of the accompanying mothers have horse riding experience. They have knowledge of what happens in the stable, in the riding barn, and of what is expected of them as accompanying adults. Because they are competent in this context, they are an essential resource in the activities with the young children. Furthermore, they enjoy being there. Two of the mothers disclose:

It's probably because I've been active [in the stable] myself for most of my life. (Stina)

…it's lovely to be in the stable, and I think it's, it's a great environment for a horse-girl…. (Boel)

The horse girl characterisation is interesting as it connects the mothers to the norms of the stable culture. In accordance with Goffman, the horse girl mothers perform a role that includes being knowledgeable and happy to help others. If we see the stable as a stage – a front stage, where every action the mother performs is watched and noticed by those around her – the mother has a position where she must convince other parents, riding instructors and the children that she possesses the knowledge within the role she assumes. She has to perform as knowledgeable in any situation in the stable or during the riding activities. She must show leadership, responsibility and firmness. If she succeeds in convincing those around her that she can perform, she has made a successful appearance, thereby she receives respect, praise or is regarded as independent and a source of inspiration for the others.

Preparations for the performance happen backstage. Backstage, mothers can practise, study and prepare mentally without an audience. A private home can be considered as a backstage; here, the mother can prepare by dressing in suitable clothes, procuring the right equipment for herself and her child, and reading about what needs to be prepared before the lesson on the riding school's website. A home can also serve as a place where she can recover after the performance, reflect on and evaluate everything that happened in the lesson, and prepare for the coming lesson by developing or adjusting something that can strengthen her role in the eyes of the audience (cf. Goffman 2020).

The roles accompanying adults perform in the stable are gendered. Horse girl mothers enjoy attaining respect for their actions in the same way as the old-time horsemen in the stables did (cf. Thorell et al. 2017). The performance during the jumping lesson described above is especially interesting. The mother and the child with the tallest horse become respected: partly through their equipment in appropriate colours for a young girl and partly by playing the game at the riding school when the child jumps the obstacle by
herself. In difference from what has been shown in research on sport and gender where hegemonic masculinity plays an important role, a certain kind of femininity ‘the horse girl’ is the norm in the horse-riding activities. However, the performance balances on a fine line. Mothers can fail to perform their role successfully – if they push too much. One instructor asserts:

Especially those who have ridden… have quite a lot of… opinions. They may want to hurry it up, so that they [the children] can ride as much as possible… it’s also important that you don’t force them, and they’re not allowed to fall off. Although some parents find it difficult, that must not happen. (Riding instructor Karin)

According to the riding instructors, mothers who have experience of horse riding tend to push their children. They add that these mothers walk beside their children and give lots of instructions, such as ‘down with the heels’ and ‘shorten the reins’. As shown above, parents are supposed to help their children. Although the instructors acknowledge that the mothers want to help, they underline that children are unable to take in too much information. If children are overloaded with information, they stop listening to the instructor, thus missing parts of the content of the riding lesson. The instructors communicate that at times they must remind the parent not to use their own instructions with the children. In addition, the instructors complain that the pushy mothers not only overly instruct their children but also pressure the riding school into advancing them to more experienced groups, where they can have longer riding sessions. Several of the riding instructors reveal that fathers tend to interfere less, thus making it easier for the children. However, mothers must present a horse girl persona based on the knowledge they have gathered regarding expectations of a mother in this position. There is a fine line between presenting herself as credible or being exposed as a fraud.

The role of the horse girl mother is paradoxical. She is supposed to help others and to display her knowledge frontstage. She receives respect for this performance and is interpreted as competent (cf Rosén, Thorell, and Hedenborg 2022). However, she must balance between being perceived as knowledgeable and as pushy. When the horse girl mother becomes a pushy mother, she has failed in her performance, in accordance with Goffman’s (2020) dramaturgical perspective. She fails when she is overselling her abilities disproportionately, or when she is caught not being able to pull off an act she is expected to be able to do. The failure implies that she loses her mask and is put in an embarrassing situation that may be difficult to recover from. It is then that she loses respect.

Chicken mothers. In my field notes, I write that not all mothers are used to horses and not all are competent in the stable. In one of my observations, I see a mother who is very unfamiliar with and afraid of horses. I talk to her, and she tells me that she thinks that the instructor does a fantastic job, not only reading and listening to the child, who is learning how to ride, but also reading the parent, who is afraid of and knows nothing about horses. She says that she feels stupid as everyone else knows more than her and that she must learn many new things and must overcome her fears. In addition, she complains a bit as she thinks the active parental role, including taking care of the horse before and after the riding lesson, was not made clear when she signed up for the activity.
In addition to the performances of the horse girl mother and the pushy mother, another role is apparent for mothers: chicken mothers. The chicken mother is characterised by not knowing anything about horses and by being scared. Bea, one of the mothers, conveys:

I was completely opposed to her [her daughter] starting to ride, but she kept nagging me for two years. And in the end, it was no longer possible to resist, and she began. I’m completely ignorant about horses, I don’t understand anything about how they work. I was absolutely terrified of horses and have never ridden. At the beginning, I didn’t understand anything, I was completely lost. I don’t know which way a saddle should sit or how to do it. (Bea)

In an interview, another mother admits she does not know what is the forefront and rear of a horse or how to sidewalk it. She continues that she receives help from others at the riding school and that the stable hosts are fantastic and essential. These mothers perform a role different from that of the horse girl mother and the pushy mother. The chicken mother presents herself as stupid and ignorant. Moreover, she rejects the expectations of herself as an accompanying parent. And by pointing out she was given insufficient information, she underlines that she was not provided with the tools necessary for her to prepare in advance, backstage (see Goffman 2020). The chicken mother role can be understood in two ways. First, the chicken mother, in contrast to the horse girl mother and the pushy mother, performs in a way that is not expected by women in the stable context. Thus, her performance can be interpreted as a failure. However, she is not trying to hide her ignorance. By presenting herself as ignorant and incompetent in this context, she aspires to another role, a role that is often accepted in other contexts – a woman in need of other people’s helping hands. The chicken mother’s performance includes trying to change the stage (or the play) to restore her mask. Fia, one of the mothers, underlines that she takes responsibility for the activity by not participating because she is so afraid that it would transmit to both the child and the horse:

If her father hadn't dared, she probably wouldn't have been able to ride. I had some email contact with the stable manager before she began, and I was a little upset about this. I think that sometimes, if you are very used to horses, you forget about this fear you may have – the animals sense it. If I’m scared when I come to a horse, it’ll notice it. And because I’ve ridden myself and been thrown off and kicked and stuff like that – so my gut reaction is that if a horse starts to run away from me… I don’t know if I would have been able to hold the horse if it started to get anxious. And it’s really important that when the child is on the horse that you are firm and that you don’t think it’s dangerous, but I can’t handle it… the father is fearless, so he probably thinks it’s okay. But he has absolutely no experience with horses. (Fia)

The stable stage, however, has little room for an ignorant and inexperienced mother. Therefore, the chicken mother is not respected. Mothers are expected to possess the knowledge required in the stable, and riding instructors complain about having to adapt the activities to cater for scared mothers. In addition, they underline that parents are expected to help their children, despite previous experiences. One of the riding instructors expresses:

The tiny tots must have side walkers. Often the parents are involved, and it is required. Only if a parent is sick, injured or allergic, the stable host can step in and take over the responsibility. But all parents are required to try if they can – being afraid or ignorant is no excuse… (Riding instructor Anna)
The riding instructor's perception can be understood against the background of the prevailing stable culture (Thorell and Hedenborg 2015). At this stage, a successful performance includes horse knowledge, leadership, responsibility and authority in the stable context – qualities that are characteristic of the horse girl. A woman experienced in this culture knows in advance what is expected and has had the time to alternate and perfect her performance. A woman who has never been part of this culture – where women are expected to possess characteristics that the rest of society categorises as masculine traits – might not be able to adapt so easily. Within the stable culture, the gender norms are reversed compared to the traditional gender norms in society, which means that the definition of presenting yourself as a respected woman in this situation is the opposite to that which the seemingly 'chicken mother' has trained herself to do her entire life. This can be a scary discovery for some women, who thus find excuses to avoid situations where they cannot control their environment's impression of them.

**Not a horse man.** One of the accompanying fathers of the youngest children sidewalks on the wrong side of the horse. In addition, he drops the rope (instead of holding on to it) and accidentally steps on it. I get worried about the safety of the child. ‘Does this father know what he is doing’, I ask myself. What happens to the horse – is the horse’s mouth injured when he steps on the rope? What happens if the horse gets scared or walks way, and what happens if he falls over the rope? The father does not seem to acknowledge the dangers. He looks happy and encourages his daughter to focus on the activity.

In contrast to mothers, fathers are not expected to be competent in the stable. They are seen as neither conflicted nor disinterested, but just ignorant and unprepared for the tasks they face in the riding school environment. This line of reasoning can be discerned not only in my own field notes, but also in interviews with other parents and riding instructors. That said, fathers do manage to play a role unlike that of the mothers and without losing their mask; this is in line with Goffman. Even though fathers have not acquired the necessary knowledge backstage, they do not fail. Instead, they fulfil the expectations (acknowledged in the stable culture) of fathers as being clumsy and ignorant. During the observations, the fathers were not expected to perform as competent horse people. One riding instructor reveals that sometimes they are forewarned by mothers in text messages that fathers will come, thereby allowing the instructors to be prepared:

Tomorrow the father will accompany the child, and we have no idea how this will end up…. (Riding instructors My and Tea)

The text message expresses a concern about how the father will handle the situation and is based on the preconceived belief that the fathers are not as capable as the mothers. In some cases, the father is even portrayed as potentially dangerous. One mother discloses:

I also think a lot about the horse’s welfare. [It is important that] there won’t be a big strong man who tightens the girth so that the horse…[can’t breathe]…it’s not easy to know how hard to tighten it. (Boel)

In this quote, the father is seen as an insensitive man who risks hurting the little horse, while the mother is signified as understanding how the horse should be handled. Stereotypical notions of men’s performance in the stable leave little room for a (horse) competent father. The incompetent father is helped when he makes mistakes. In my field notes, I have noted
that: A father is side walking a pony into the riding barn, and a riding instructor notices that the saddle is back to front. She hurries up to the pony and puts the saddle right.

It is unclear above whether the father was unaware of his error or just did not ask for help. Nevertheless, his incompetence is revealed by the instructor, which can be interpreted as the father losing his mask in front of the audience because he has not prepared enough backstage. Yet, fathers do not seem to lose their masks as they are not expected to perform as ‘horse men’. It may seem that the fathers are, in accordance with Goffman (2020), failing to put on a successful performance due to their lack of experience and preparations. However, this is questionable since the way fathers are portrayed as ignorant, and sometimes even dangerous, is a reflection of the culture of the stable and the predetermined roles of fathers versus mothers. Consequently, instead of viewing the incompetence or ignorance as a way to fail in their performance, one can argue that these acts are a way to help put on a successful show by living up to the expectations. One mother confirms:

My husband came to the stable in flip flops for a jumping lesson. [He said], 'I was thinking of wearing sneakers but that there will be too much sand.' [I said], 'but how did you think that you could perform in flip flops in a jumping lesson?' (Elsa)

The father is portrayed as not being prepared for the riding activity. For example, he has not prepared by attaining knowledge about horse equipment or about suitable clothing. His preparation was merely related to his experiences of sand, but he did not prepare accurately for a horse activity. The mother points out that flip flops are impractical and dangerous for the activities he is expected to perform at the riding school. Moreover, the riding instructor dashes to the pony and corrects the position of the saddle. Just like the chicken mothers, the incompetent fathers present a different interpretation of the situation – they set another stage. Unlike the chicken mothers, these fathers do not present themselves as scared or as incompetent. The explanation is simple – they are not horse men. One of them concedes:

You probably recognise that I’m not an equestrian guy, and therefore I should get more guidance. (Per)

Although fathers are expected to help their children at the riding school, they do not conform to the stable culture rules. They accompany the children, and they help them, but position themselves in the stable and in the riding barn in different ways from the mothers. Fathers wait outside the horse box when mothers, stable hosts or instructors help them. Yet, they do not seem to try to learn how to perform as the horse mothers perform. In contrast to the mothers, the fathers do not present themselves as competent, pushy or chicken. In this play, fathers can be passive without losing their masks, whereas mothers are active and can risk losing theirs.

Concluding remarks

Horse-riding activities for young children require the participation of accompanying adults. The activities are relatively new for the horse-riding schools and open up for new patterns of social interaction between adults and children, horse-riding instructors and parents and children, and humans and horses. To understand these interactions, we have used Goffman’s dramaturgical approach and insights from research on sport and gender. During tiny tots riding, the child and the accompanying adult (often a parent) interact and perform as a
team and we have identified the Team Performance as an overarching theme for the activities. The parent supports the child; and through this support, the parent controls it's impression management. The performance is successful if the parent and child team is perceived as knowledgeable in having the right abilities to participate in horse riding. The parents surreptitiously help the children to cope with the tasks in order to control the environment's impression of the child and its abilities. In addition, the riding activity is seen by the parents as an opportunity to develop and to strengthen the relationship between child and parent. Riding a horse is not just a leisure activity for the child 40 min a week. It is an activity for the parents: an activity that is carried out together. That the parents should be involved and active before, during and after the riding session cannot only be explained by the fact that the riding school and the parents want to strengthen the bonds between parents and children. The organisation of the activity is also determined by financial frameworks. As there is no financial possibility to have more than one, or maybe two, riding instructors in a tiny tots riding group with children who are two to six years old, the activity assumes that the parent can perform what is expected. The interactions found in the tiny tots’ activities in the riding school seem to be different from interactions shown for other sports (cf., Knoester and Fields 2020; Kilger 2020). The prevailing stable culture continues to characterize the horse-riding activities for young children. Even though this stable culture (Hedenborg 2008; Thorell 2017) has been challenged and partly changed in the activities for young children there is a strong discourse of military tradition where the activities mainly are adopted to be safe and fit the horses as well as the instructors. It is, however, possible that we overestimate the differences between horse riding activities and other sport activities and that our theoretical lens together with the fact that we study sport activities for young children, has helped us to identify social interactions that can be found in other activities for children. Young children’s participation in sport activities and parent’s involvement has increased (Hedenborg and Fransson 2011; Calero, Beesley, and Fraser-Thomas 2018; Fraser-Thomas and Safai 2018; Harlow et al., 2020; Lindroth 1991; Hedenborg et al. 2020; Jesper 2022; Stefansen, Smette, and Strandbu 2018; Strandbu, Bakken, and Stefansen 2020). It is therefore of uttermost importance to study these interactions to guide sport clubs on how they can form activities that are fun and safe for these groups. It is, for example, plausible that parental presence in baby swim and in gymnastics for toddlers are circumstances that create team performance. The content of this performance, and which attitudes and norms affect how respectability is assessed, is, however, related to context.

In addition, the team performance is influenced by gender constructions. Parenthood and expectations of mothers and fathers, respectively, are gendered. The gender construction is, however, different from what has been shown in research on sport and gender. Connell’s hegemonic masculinity does not seem to be the cultural ideal. In the stable, mothers are supposed to be knowledgeable and competent in their interactions with horses and other parents. If the mother behaves in this way, she receives respect and is characterised as a horse girl. The mothers enjoy respect for their behaviour in the same way as old-time horse men in the stable did. The horse girl mothers perform a role as being knowledgeable and orderly and as someone who likes to help others. They have authority and can take on responsibility as leaders and give feedback to others. Through their own experience in the stable, these mothers have often created a solid knowledge platform that enables them to perform at the riding school as on a stage and within the framework of stable culture, in front of their children and other adults. The horse girl ideal seems to constitute a hegemonic femininity in
the stable that seems far from what has been a feminine ideal. But in the stable context the horse girl is in power. The mothers strive for a respected position for themselves and their daughters. In this endeavour, however, they risk pushing their daughters too much in order to make them successful in the stable. By being overassertive, these mothers sometimes challenge the riding instructor, thereby upsetting the balance of power. When the balance is threatened, these mothers overstep their roles and lose their mask, which is in line with Goffman. The pushy mother does not receive respect and she does not constitute an ideal.

In addition to the horse girl mother and the pushy mother, the role of chicken mother is also performed at tiny tots riding. These mothers present themselves as ignorant of horses and riding, and as scared of horses. They pose a problem for the riding instructors and other parents who expect mothers to be knowledgeable. Mothers who do not fulfil the horse girl role are not respected. Nevertheless, as parents they still have to help with the horses, as underlined by the riding instructors. Thus, the chicken mothers try to relate to another context outside of the stable, one where they may receive respect regardless of being ignorant and scared. The chicken mother seems closer to an accepted femininity as presented for society at large – a femininity that positions women as complementary and inferior to men. However, in the stable the chicken mothers do not perform in a way that is respected. The ignorant father seems to be easier to negotiate for both riding instructors and parents. He does what is expected of him, acting ignorant in the stable. Fathers are seen as not having the same skills set as mothers; consequently, they play the role of the ignorant father convincingly, in accordance with their own expectations upon arrival at the stable. The fathers are neither conflicted nor disinterested, just incompetent and unprepared for the tasks in the riding school environment. Why fathers are not questioned is interesting. In some cases, the father can, however, be portrayed as potentially dangerous – he may be too strong or too clumsy. In contrast to the chicken mothers, who blame themselves for not having prepared backstage, the father justifies his role by referring to him not being a horse man. By doing this, he questions contextual power relations. He does not adhere to the construction of a hegemonic femininity in the stable. Instead, he (this does not include all fathers in practice but explains why ignorant fathers are accepted and seem to be a norm) he maintains the societal ideals of hegemonic masculinity, showing that the knowledge carried by the horse girl mother is nothing to strive for. Hegemonic masculinity is therefore maintained. It is, however, complex. The hegemonic masculinity is questioned and even though riding instructors and other parents help fathers there are jokes about how fathers perform their role (and some fathers underline that they really want to learn about their daughters’ activities)

In this study, we have mainly concentrated on the parental roles in the interactions. Future studies could include children’s perceptions of parental roles, children’s roles and interactions between humans and horses in tiny tots riding and these interactions and roles in other sport activities.

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