

## Benefits of Horses with Kids

“Riding and showing teaches youngsters to prepare, and to muster the courage to compete,” notes their mom, Jenny Pluhar. “They learn to take the risks, enjoy the rewards, and deal with the disappointments.”

Riding families have always known horses are good for kids, but now research is proving it. One study, sponsored by the American Youth Horse Council, found that equestrian activities do indeed enhance a range of life skills in children. The study looked at youngsters involved in 4-H, Pony Club, the American Quarter Horse Youth Association, or the National High School Rodeo Association in one eastern and one western state. Results of the study, published in February 2006, found a significant positive relationship between horsemanship skills and life skills.

“If your child likes animals and you’re concerned about that child’s problem solving, goal-setting, or decision-making skills, then definitely get him or her involved with horses,” says Ann Swinker, Ph.D., a professor in Animal Science at Penn State University and one of the study’s co-authors.

An earlier study, conducted by the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, found that 4-H horse shows were much more than just an enjoyable activity for children.

“Clearly,” says Kathy Anderson, PhD, the study’s author, “participating in these shows enhances important skills, including goal-setting, self-reliance, and follow-through.”

### **Better Kids Through Horses**

If you’re an equestrian, you already know how beneficial horses are for children. If you’re not, you may be surprised to learn just how constructive horse involvement can be. Here’s a quick rundown of what “growing up with horses” can mean for your child:

#### **Wholesome fun**

Horses make wonderful childhood companions. Children are naturally attracted to them, and that makes horses a desirable alternative to TV-watching, Internet-surfing, or just “hanging out.” Horseback riding also puts children in touch with nature, and can be enjoyed alone or in groups. When the whole family gets involved, the time spent together with horses can enhance the bond among family members and become the stuff of treasured childhood memories. Moreover, the benefits of horse involvement are enduring, as a child’s “horse habit” can evolve into a rewarding lifelong hobby.

### **Character development**

Handling, riding, and caring for a horse or pony can develop a host of positive traits in a child, including responsibility, accountability, patience, level-headedness, empathy, kindness, and self-discipline.

In Dr. Anderson's survey of youngsters competing in 4-H horse shows, subjects ranked learning to do their best and developing self-respect as among the greatest benefits of their involvement. "The most important thing I've learned," wrote one 17-year-old study participant, "is that hard work and believing in yourself can get you anywhere."

Even equine nature itself can exert a positive influence on a child.

"Horses can't be made to feel guilty, or talked into saying yes when they know they should say no," observes Dr. Janet Sasson Edgette, an equestrian sport and child/adolescent/family psychologist, and author of *Heads Up: Practical Sports Psychology For Riders, Their Families, and Their Trainers* ([www.HorseBooksEtc.com](http://www.HorseBooksEtc.com) or [www.headsupsport.com](http://www.headsupsport.com)). "They simply respond to what their rider does. Riding enables kids to realize how their choices, attitudes, and behaviors affect the other living creatures around them," she adds.

### **Scholastic enhancement**

The perseverance needed to ride well can translate into improved performance in the classroom. "Riding increases a child's focus and intensity," observes California trainer Carol Dal Porto, who prepares youngsters to compete on the Appaloosa circuit. "You can't let your mind wander when you're riding a 1,200-pound animal." This learned concentration later shows up in kids' schoolwork, "to their parents' delight," adds Dal Porto.

### **Leadership training**

Especially if your child becomes involved with a group like Pony Club, 4-H, or the youth group of a breed association, the opportunities for learning management and leadership skills abound. "Holding an office, leading a smaller group of children, working on a project—all of these are ways in which youngsters learn and grow," says Mary Fay, the American Youth Horse Council's 2003 Youth Horse Leader of the Year. "4-H requires children to keep records of their time, activities, and money spent. These are all important life skills."

### **Health benefits**

Riding is terrific exercise. "People who think the horse does all the work have never really ridden," notes Katie Phalen, an instructor at Waredaca Farm in Gaithersburg, Maryland. Apart

from its aerobic benefits, riding also helps a youngster develop balance, coordination, and flexibility, she notes. Moreover, the activities involved in caring for a horse—grooming, hefting buckets and saddles, cleaning stalls—can make for a great upper-body workout.

Then, too, as children learn how important good nutrition, veterinary check-ups, dental work, and regular exercise are to a horse, they begin to appreciate their own health needs.

### **OK, But Aren't Horses Expensive?**

They don't have to be. Besides, as all parents know, expense is a relative term in child rearing.

“One Pony Club dad summed it up this way,” notes national Pony Club past president Melanie Heacock. “I knew that when my daughter turned 13, I was going to be spending a lot of money—at the shopping mall, on behavior counseling, or on horses. I chose horses, and I've never regretted it.”

In the 21st century, when parenting is not a job for the faint at heart, horses provide a way to keep youngsters positively engaged during those “scary” years from pre-teen through young adulthood.