

# Why Kids Should Ride

In today's world, horses may be one of the best tools ever for fostering healthy, well-adjusted children.

JENNIFER FORSBERG MEYER

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When my sisters and I were small, our mom got us involved with horses. I was a shy, awkward youngster with glasses and braces, unsure of myself among my four beautiful sisters. Horses were the great equalizer. They helped all of

us—but especially me—navigate that tricky passage from girlhood to womanhood. My father used to joke about it.

“Just get ’em horses,” he’d tell other parents, especially of girls.

“Get ’em horses and the horses will do the rest.”

As a mother, I saw to it that my own daughter grew up with horses, and in my role as an equine journalist I’ve had countless opportunities to observe the effect horse involvement has on children and families.

And how exactly do horses benefit young people? It’s a substantial list. Here are just a few of the most important rewards.

### **Wholesome Fun, Companionship**

Horses are the perfect antidote to today’s digital mania. Children are naturally attracted to horses, making them a welcome alternative to TV-watching, video-game-playing, social-media-obsessing, or just hanging out.

“I received my own horse at the age of 7,” reports Karissa Dishon, a member of the American Youth Horse Council’s board of directors and a professor at Oregon State University. “From then on, my spare time was spent outside, at the barn, or obsessively studying horse-knowledge resources. There simply wasn’t time for sitting around. I was inspired to grow as a horseman, so I took every opportunity to do just that.”

Horseback riding does indeed get kids off the couch and out into nature, and it can be enjoyed alone or in groups. And, when the whole family gets involved, the time spent together with horses can enhance the bond among family members.

“Horseback riding served as a way for our family to wind down and reconnect on the weekends,” says college student Madeline McEachin, the AYHC’s 2016 Student Leader of the Year. She says the equine industry also introduced her to what she calls “my horse family”—people she was close to growing up.

“We spent each weekend in our horse trailer, sharing laughs and making memories I’ll have the rest of my life,” she says.

Her horse-show experience isn’t unique; youngsters who compete often make friends with like-minded kids from all over the country.

“My daughter is the fourth generation to be involved in horses on my husband’s side,” says Holly Spooner, PhD, an AYHC board member and professor at Middle Tennessee State University. “At 6 she’s showing POAs [Pony of the Americas] nationally, and our POA group is like family. Grace looks forward to competing with her friends from Texas, Indiana, and everywhere in between.”

The benefits of horse involvement are enduring, too, as a child’s riding habit can evolve into a rewarding lifelong hobby—or even a career.

“The horse industry is full of jobs across all sectors,” notes Spooner, whose own horse-crazy childhood led to her vocation. “I’m certain my parents thought I’d outgrow horses. Instead, I made a career of teaching others about them. It’s a dream job to do what you love every day.”

Plus—horses can be part of your weekly workout.



Horses are fun and kids adore them. Learning horsemanship promotes important life skills, and the right horse can be a wonderful confidence-booster for a child.

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## **Great Exercise**

According to the American Heart Association, about one in three American kids and teens is overweight or obese. Childhood obesity more than tripled from 1971 to 2011, with too many sedentary pursuits (hello, iPhone) a contributing cause. Obesity now tops drug abuse and smoking as the No. 1 health concern of parents.

Do horses help here? You bet! Riding is terrific exercise.

“People who think the horse does all the work have never really ridden,” observes Katie Phalen, a Central Maryland riding coach and former instructor at Waredaca Farm in Gaithersburg.

It’s true. A 2011 study of the British Horse Society reported that general riding—if done for at least 30 minutes at a time, three times per week—falls within the scientific limits for moderate-intensity exercise (<http://bit.ly/ridingexercise>).

Apart from its aerobic benefits, riding also helps a youngster develop balance, coordination, and flexibility. Moreover, the activities involved in caring for a horse—grooming, hefting equipment, cleaning stalls—are great muscle builders.

“Horses were my strength-training regime,” laughs Dishon. “As I stacked hay bales, pushed wheelbarrows, and carried water buckets, my strength and coordination grew right along with my horsemanship skills.”

McEachin’s experience was the same. “I had ‘six-pack abs’ throughout high school, and it certainly wasn’t because I was hitting the gym,” she teases.

Bottom line? When kids and teens come home from school and head out to the barn instead of plopping in front of a screen, it’s healthier for them physically—and psychologically, too.

### **Mental-Health Booster**

Kids are under a lot of pressure these days. The stress of “keeping up” on social media, surviving school testing, and managing overbooked lives can strain their mental resources. Horses provide a welcome respite from these stressors, offering the unconditional friendship of a living, breathing creature plus serving as a stabilizing presence in youngsters’ lives.

In fact, research from Washington State University shows that children who work with horses have lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol, as indicated by saliva samples, than do those in a control group.

“We know from other research that healthy stress hormone patterns may protect against the development of physical and mental health problems,” reports Patricia Pendry, the WSU psychologist who led the study (<http://bit.ly/horsesreducestress>).

So we’re not imagining the blissed-out feeling we get being around our horses—it’s a real outcome and it can work wonders for a young person’s outlook.

Moreover, the right horse for a child can become a wonderful confidence booster in all aspects of life.

“To take control of a 1,000-pound horse or pony, work through challenging tasks with that equine partner, overcome defeat in the show pen...all require skills that promote a child’s self-assurance and sense of competence,” notes Spooner.

Sounding pretty good? We’re not done yet. Horses can contribute to the development of many other positive traits, as well.

### **Parsing—and Minimizing—the Cost**

Horse ownership involves certain expenses, but you needn’t own a horse to involve your child with one. Here are some options.

- **Lessons.** This is the best way to introduce your child to riding anyway. He or she is safest learning the basics on well-schooled lesson mounts under the guidance of an experienced instructor.
- **Sharing.** If your child is eager to develop a relationship with one horse, consider sharing one. Your lesson barn may allow sponsoring, which conveys some benefits, or you may find another parent who would welcome help in riding and caring for the horse his or her child owns. Such arrangements can be informal (your child rides in return for friendship and help with barn chores) or contractual. In the latter case, a “part-lease”—in which you pay a set portion of a horse’s monthly board, shoeing, and routine veterinary expenses in return for a set number of days’ riding privileges—works well.
- **Leasing.** A full lease will provide your child with most of the benefits of horse ownership without the initial expense of buying. You’ll be responsible for the cost of the horse’s care and boarding, and sometimes an additional fee in the case of highly desirable animals. Leasing is an excellent way to fully test the waters—financially and in terms of time and commitment—before you buy. For best success, make sure all terms of the lease (responsibilities, privileges) are worked out carefully in advance.

In the end, horse involvement comes with at least some cost but, as all parents know, expense is a relative term in child rearing. In the 21st century, when parenting is not a

job for the faint of heart, horses provide a way to keep youngsters positively engaged during those pivotal years from pre-teen through young adulthood.

In light of all that, as McEachin puts it, the cost of horseback riding “is worth every cent.”



I can do it! Kids learn responsibility caring for a horse, and the activities involved—including hefting saddles—build muscles and boost balance, coordination, and flexibility. Horseback riding itself offers proven aerobic-exercise benefits, getting kids off the couch and away from screens.

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## Character Builder

Negative influences on children abound these days—in mass media, pop culture, and politics, especially. Handling, riding, and caring for a horse can help counteract these effects, promoting such positive character traits as responsibility, accountability, patience, self-discipline, empathy, and kindness.

Riding families have always known this. And, as Dishon points out, even non-horsey parents come to appreciate how horses build better kids.

“One mother of a horse-crazed youngster had serious doubts about getting her daughter involved in the beginning. Then, nine years later, she told me, ‘I finally understand. It’s not about how polished a rider she’s become. It’s about giving her the tools she’ll need to succeed in life, in a way that’s engaging and fun.’”

And that’s the key, says Dishon.

“Lessons learned on the back of a horse are just more engaging and powerful to youth, yet they’re the same fundamentals we aspire to teach all youngsters,” she explains. “The difference is that, with horses, the kids are excited to see and learn these lessons—as opposed to receiving them as a command from parents or authority figures.”

Research now confirms the beneficial effects of horse involvement. One study, sponsored in part by the AYHC, looked at youngsters participating in 4-H, Pony Club, or American Quarter Horse Youth Association or National High School Rodeo Association activities in one eastern and one western state. Results 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, definitely get him or her

involved with horses,” advises Ann Swinker, PhD, a professor in Animal Science at Penn State University and one of the study’s co-authors (<http://bit.ly/lifeskillsresearch>).

Another study, conducted by the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, found that 4-H horse shows were more than just an enjoyable activity for children (<http://bit.ly/4-hlifeskills>). Subjects ranked discovering how to do their best and developing self-respect as among the greatest benefits of their involvement.

“I’ve learned that hard work and believing in yourself can get you anywhere,” wrote one 17-year-old study participant.

As to developing kindness and empathy, Dishon notes that having a horse counteracts a child’s natural self-centeredness.

“When youth are responsible for the care of a horse, they learn how to put others’ needs before their own and grasp the bigger picture of life,” she says.

Spooner, who teaches college students to make educated decisions about equine welfare, says she’s already seeing her own young daughter make positive choices that reflect genuine caring.

“She’ll give her pony a break between classes, and make sure he’s watered before getting a drink herself. I truly believe kindness to our equine partner translates to kindness in all aspects of our lives,” Spooner adds.

Horses also help youngsters learn to lead—in all senses of the word.

### **Groups to Get You Started**

- **4-H.** A 4-H horse program is the time-honored place to begin a child’s involvement with horses, and ownership isn’t required. To learn about 4-H horse groups in your area (or to start one), check with your local county extension agent ([4-h.org/find](http://4-h.org/find)).

- **Certified Horsemanship Association.** CHA promotes excellence in safety and education by certifying riding instructors; it also accredits equine facilities and produces educational conferences and materials. Find a certified instructor in your area at [chainstructors.com](http://chainstructors.com).
- **Time to Ride.** Partnering with such groups as the American Quarter Horse Association, Time to Ride connects American families to local equestrian resources, including lessons, camps, and clubs. Check out its interactive Web site at [timetoride.com](http://timetoride.com).
- **Interscholastic Equestrian Association.** Serving middle and secondary school students across the United States, the IEA provides the horses and tack for every aspiring rider. “Because we’re the low-cost entry into equestrian sport, we’re exposing young riders to competition who might otherwise not have the financial ability or accessibility to participate,” says Roxane Durant, IEA co-founder and executive director ([rideiea.org](http://rideiea.org)).
- **Breed and sport groups.** If your child has an interest in a particular breed or equestrian sport, check the appropriate organization for special programs or offerings for beginners. For examples of innovative ways such groups are attracting new enthusiasts, see “Sounding the Call: Hey, Kids!” at [HorseandRider.com](http://HorseandRider.com).



Horse involvement can be expensive, but there are ways to minimize costs depending on the activities you choose for your child. Plus, you can even “do the horse thing” without owning one.

Mallory Beinborn

## **Leadership Guide**

Today’s colleges and employers are looking for young recruits with leadership skills, of course. But they also want young people to possess the ability to work as part of a team. Horse involvement fosters both competencies.

“Just working with a horse requires the rider to take on a leadership role every time they work together,” observes McEachin, referring to the need for a rider

or handler to “be the leader” in order to earn a horse’s respect. Children also learn that relating to their horse as a partner—rather than treating him as a servant—brings the best results.

“There’s something about your sport’s involving living beings with brains of their own that forces you to analyze *yourself* when working with them, and brings out your best traits,” reflects McEachin, noting that equine organizations give youngsters additional opportunities to hone leadership skills.

“As an 8-year-old, I was barely willing to share my name and age with my 4-H group,” she recalls. “Later on, I was leading meetings and participating on the statewide council. 4-H enabled me not only to learn leadership skills, but to practice using them on a regular basis.

“I spent the past year at Penn State,” continues the accounting major, “and as soon as I stepped on campus, I could see a difference between me and my peers. Of all of the valuable things I gained from 4-H and horse involvement, leadership training is what I’ve used most in the real world.”

Dishon found her equestrian background aided her in the academic setting, as well.

“With horses, the key attributes needed for success—consistency, patience, dedication—are also essential in school (and in life in general). When college is tough and you’re being pulled in a thousand different directions,” she adds, “the lessons you learned about prioritizing your time at the barn will suddenly take on new meaning and great benefits.”

And what about the earlier grades? Horse involvement is a boon there, as well. Spooner says she sees positive effects in her young daughter. “Grace is

already becoming a leader in the classroom and in other activities such as dance, and I'm certain it's the result of the skills she gains with her pony."

From every angle, horses benefit the youngsters involved with them. Horses can be expensive, true, but they needn't be prohibitively so (see "Parsing—and Minimizing—the Cost," page 68). Plus there are many organizations out there eager to help connect kids to horses (see "Groups to Get You Started," at right).

So, get your kid into the saddle, and encourage other parents to do the same with their youngsters. The world will be a better place for it.