

Horse&Rider MONTHLY

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BALANCE**

**BEYOND THE
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**WHY KIDS
SHOULD RIDE**

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Horse Life



TRAIN / HEALTH

H

TRAIN

Build
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Bareback Balance

★ Riding bareback can be a great exercise to help with kids' balance.



HR FILE PHOTO

CHILDREN CAN LACK CORE STRENGTH in the saddle, strength that's useful for everything from powering out of turns to staying with a horse crossing a creek or going up a steep embankment.

First Thing's First

Before I let a student ride bareback, I want them to ride in the saddle first without stirrups so they learn to have a good balance and be safe. Some kids think they can just get on bareback, but they don't realize how important balance is. It's an old pastime that so many of us did with our ponies without thinking much of it, but it's ultimately something that needs to be done with caution and correctly to get the most out of it.

Bridle Basics

You have to teach your kid to ride without hanging on your horse's face before you put them on bareback. Kids, left to their own devices, can think balancing off the reins is the right thing to do. But it's so dangerous, and it's incorrect. If they learn to ride in the saddle first, then ride on a loose rein and to balance off their seat, that's the starting point to riding bareback.

No Clinging, Please

Just like it's a bad idea to cling onto the horse's mouth, it's a bad idea to cling onto the horse's body with your legs, too. When riding bareback, kids can

get in trouble if they're squeezing too hard with their legs and not balancing off their seat—especially if they have spurs on.

Balance Trick

When I have a kid that's a bad bouncer, and they're riding bareback or in the saddle, I ask them to snap their fingers with every bounce, and that gets them in rhythm with the horse. If they even take their hand and wave it up and down, that helps them feel the up and down beat. They can forget about what's going on below them if they're trying to snap their fingers or wave their arm. That can help them get confidence and find their balance.

Body Position

If you took a person and stood them on the ground, turned their toes out at a 45-degree angle, bent their knees, then picked them up and put them on the horse, that's the position they should be in while riding. If you get to leaning back and have your feet too far forward, you're going to swing like a pendulum off if he stops hard. If you sit too far back on your pockets, you're throwing your posture out of line and you won't be able to go in the same rhythm as the horse. Bareback or in the saddle, you should still be in a vertical, balanced position. I like my students to ride bareback with their toes to the outside so they can wrap their legs around the horse. ★

H

HEALTH

Be
Prepared

Colic Lessons Learned

★ The more you know about colic, the better prepared you can be when it strikes.



PHOTO BY CAROL HAMILTON/STOCK.ADOBE.COM

I SAW HER WHEN I looked out my office window to the field outside. My beautiful mare was down on the ground, thrashing around with her 4-month-old foal standing by her side. A quick assessment was all it took for me to know that she was colicking—severely. I loaded her up and headed to the nearby surgical referral hospital within minutes. And then she died. Before we could even get her on the table. Just like that.

Did I expect it? No way. She was fine in the morning and dead six hours later. Yet if there's anything I've learned in 20-plus years of treating colics, it's to expect the unexpected. And every time something doesn't quite go as planned, I add another lesson to the list of possibilities.

I'm going to tell you what to expect when your horse colics, and how to handle the unexpected. I'll start by outlining the three most common categories of colic episodes I encounter in my practice. Then I'll share some stories of horses that didn't fit the mold—those lessons that've taught me that when it comes to colic, almost anything is possible.

Colic 101

Colic is defined as “abdominal pain,” and is a common horse emergency. You'll know your horse is colicky if he refuses to eat, starts to paw or roll, kicks at his belly, looks back at his sides, or just generally acts uncomfortable. Although abdominal pain can be caused by a wide variety of different conditions, the following is a rundown of the five most common types of colic.

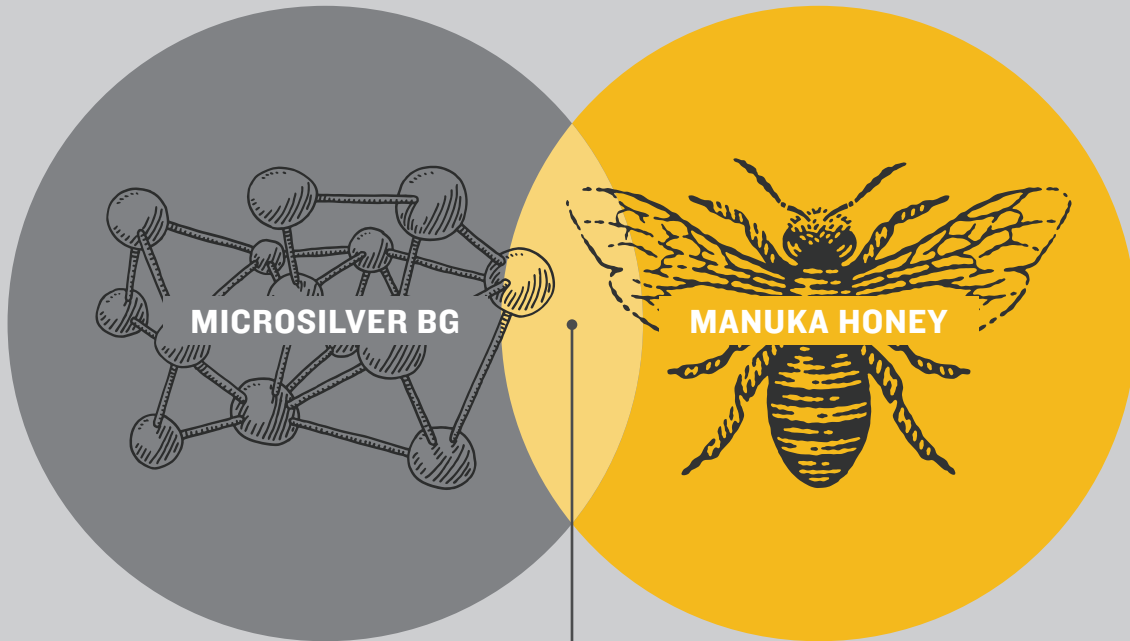
Spasmodic colic: Hypermotility, or spasms of the intestines, cause intense pain. Typically, this type of colic, which can sometimes be caused by a sudden change in diet, has a sudden onset, and the horse is very painful. It can also stop just as quickly as it starts and often requires no more treatment than a dose of pain-relieving medication.

Gas: A bubble of gas, sometimes caused by a diet change or lack of exercise, accumulates in the large intestine, causing the intestinal walls to stretch and become uncomfortable. The majority of gas colics resolve once the gas moves through the intestine. Pain-relieving medications are often the only necessary treatment. Rarely, a gas bubble can cause an intestinal loop to move out of its normal position, resulting in a displacement or torsion colic (see below).

Impaction: An accumulation of feed material, sometimes the result of inadequate water consumption, poor-quality feed, or dental problems that hinder the horse's ability to chew, causes a blockage in the intestine. The pain from this type of colic is typically mild—only becoming more severe if an impaction persists for several days. Impaction colics may require administration of laxatives through a nasogastric tube, or intravenous fluid to help soften the blockage so it can be passed. Rarely, an impaction colic will require surgery to resolve.

Displacement: A loop of intestine moves to an abnormal position within your horse's abdomen; sometimes this results when gas accumulation causes the intestine to move out of place. The abnormally positioned intestine can become blocked, accumulate large amounts of gas, or lose blood supply—all resulting in serious colic symptoms. The majority of displacements require surgery to correct, and the sooner the better to keep the intestines healthy.

Torsion: This is the scariest type of colic of all. For reasons unknown, and sometimes associated with changes in gut movement and/or gas accumulation, your horse's intestine twists around itself, causing a complete blockage. The intestine rapidly loses its blood supply, and your horse's pain will be intense. Immediate surgery is necessary to correct a torsion colic. ★



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BEYOND THE SHOW PEN

Learn how youth can develop valuable life skills, become more self-confident, and gain educational opportunities by getting involved in the horse industry.

PHOTO BY MICHAELA JAYCOX

Horse-crazy kids and parents alike know the challenges, rewards, and opportunities that a youth rider can experience in the show pen. Showing horses teaches young people how to work hard, develop discipline and sportsmanship, perform under pressure, and a host of other important life skills. But riding and showing horses isn't everything. In fact, there's a wealth of educational experiences, skill-building opportunities, and other benefits available in the horse industry for youth who venture beyond competitions. Many of these opportunities can open doors for youth to gain scholarships and internships, and may even lead them into lifelong careers in the horse industry—all because they took the time to invest in more than winning ribbons.

For Christine Gillett of Richland Hills, Texas, who enjoyed showing horses as a youth, investing in life outside the show pen led her to develop a successful career in event planning. Today, she is the public events coordinator for the Will Rogers Memorial Center in Fort Worth, Texas. Before that, she worked for the American Paint Horse Association as director of

APHA events and youth activities. Gillett says that many of the skills she developed by working in the industry started with finding her own voice.

"When a kid finds their voice in the horse industry, that voice is going to be heard somewhere else, too," Gillett said. "It's important for kids to develop that voice in a safe space where they're comfortable, like talking about horses or how they want to improve their breed's organization, and then they're going to go on and use that voice in their classroom or in their first job or as they go through life."

If you're a youth, or the parent of a youth, who's interested in getting involved in the horse industry, there are plenty of places to start, from volunteering with local horse groups to helping out in the show office to participating in horse organizations, and much more. But it's important to realize that no matter which way you decide to go, your success is based on the amount of effort you decide to put in. If you're a horse-show kid, you already know that careful preparation, hard work, and commitment are three of the keys to success in the show pen. They're also the keys to success in life

and work—so whatever you decide to do, do it wholeheartedly, and you'll already be well on your way to finding your voice and your place in the horse industry.

Ready to learn more about how to succeed beyond the show pen? The next time you're faced with an opportunity, try these tips for success—and you'll be amazed at the doors that start opening for you!

SAY YES TO EVERY OPPORTUNITY

Just like in school, there are going to be experiences in the horse industry that aren't for you—and that's OK, as long as you try everything at least once. You don't know if something's not for you until you try it, and if you never try, you'll never know what you might be missing. According to Helen Hardy, manager of youth development at the American Quarter Horse Youth Association, accepting opportunities is one of the keys to finding your passion in life.

"My advice to youth, to my peers and colleagues, and to anyone who will listen is to say yes to anything and everything," Hardy said. "It's so important to say yes to every opportunity that anybody is willing



As a college student, Christine Gillett learned how to plan and manage horse shows for her collegiate equestrian team and discovered a passion for event planning. In 2016, while serving as the director of youth and amateur activities and awards for APHA, she planned the AjPHA Youth World Games in Kreuth, Germany.



Maddie Ashburn and her partner, Brandon Bass, competed in the 2018 Southern Regional 4-H Horse Championships Team Demonstration Contest. Their demonstration was all about how to administer injections to horses.

LEFT PHOTO COURTESY OF CHRISTINE GILLETT; RIGHT PHOTO COURTESY OF MADDIE ASHBURN

to offer you. Say yes to any conversation that anyone is willing to have with you. Say yes to meeting people and say yes to getting introductions to people because those things might come back around in ways that you'll never expect. I'm at a point in my career and in my life where I'm seeing many of those 'yeses' come full circle."

Especially for young people who are still learning, there may be opportunities that mean learning on the job. Those can be some of the most valuable opportunities you'll ever accept because you never know what skills and abilities you may pick up, but they can also be intimidating. It's perfectly natural to feel nervous when you're trying something for the first time, just like the first time you started showing at a new level, but don't let it stop you from learning.

"I decided in college that I wanted to try scribing for horse show judges," Gillett said. "I didn't know anything about scribing. Someone I knew offered to teach me, and so I learned, and then I went to my first show and I did it. I was totally terrified, but people will give you the corrections you need to help you get in the lane you need to be in. Sometimes those butterflies in my stomach would make me be a little slower to reach for a goal, but sometimes it was the push I needed."

★ **QUICK START TIP:** If you want to get involved in helping behind-the-scenes at your next horse show, volunteer to work the gate, run errands for the show office, shadow the show secretary, scribe for the judges, or serve as a runner for the announcer. You never know what you'll learn or who you'll meet and that's half the fun!

GET INVOLVED

Getting involved in an organization is one of the easiest ways to get connected with the horse community, no matter your age. Many breed organizations also have youth-centered organizations, such as AQHYA, the American Junior Paint Horse Association, the Pony of the Americas Club, and others. For non-breed specific organizations, consider joining your local United States Pony Club affiliate or your local 4-H horse program. In addition to making friends with people your own age and net-

working with equine professionals serving in leadership positions, joining an equine organization can teach you about many different aspects of the industry. You'll also develop tons of skills that you can carry with you into college or the job market.

For example, many 4-H horse programs offer non-riding horse activities such as horse bowl and hippology, horse judging and horse speech, and demonstration contests. While participating in these contests can help you beef up your knowledge base about all things equine, there are other benefits—such as learning how to work with a team, how to prepare and deliver information to others, and more, says Jennie Ivey, Ph.D., assistant professor and extension equine specialist at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, Tennessee.

"It's really rewarding to me to see students take advantage of all the opportunities, study and have fun learning with their friends and getting ready for these educational contests," Ivey said. "For many kids, participating in these contests means they're better prepared by the end of high school to contribute to the industry in a meaningful way."

Maddie Ashburn of Whitwell, Tennessee, is a freshman at the University of Tennessee on the pre-veterinary track. She's a lifelong 4-H member who participated in the 4-H horse judging, hippology, horse bowl, and horse speech and communication contests.

"Learning how to give reasons for horse judging taught me how to communicate better," Ashburn said. "In all of the contests, being a member of a team taught me how to work together with everyone's different strengths and weaknesses."

Ashburn's participation in her local 4-H program also helped her earn scholarships for college and connected her with Ivey. Although she's only a freshman, Ashburn is already participating in equine research projects in college because of the skills she developed participating in 4-H.

Joining 4-H at a young age led to a whole lifetime of opportunities for Justin Crowe, director and 4-H state program leader for Tennessee 4-H.

"I tell kids to stick with it because there are so many opportunities through 4-H,"

Crowe said. "I've taken 4-H'ers all over the world. There are so many opportunities to learn and grow. I owe pretty much everything I have in life to 4-H. I met my wife through it and got to go to college because of it. Anyone can excel in it."

Joining a breed organization, like AQHYA, can also open tons of doors for youth. AQHYA hosts a youth conference every year, provides leadership opportunities for kids to campaign and run for office, and offers a host of e-learning opportunities. AQHYA members are also eligible for scholarship opportunities through the American Quarter Horse Foundation. →



PHOTOS COURTESY OF AQHA



TOP: The AQHA Ranching Heritage Young Horse Development Program showcases the stock being bred and raised by AQHA ranching heritage breeders by matching donated weanlings with AQHYA members. Youth in this program are engaged in the horse industry at a fundamental level that is both fun and educational. BOTTOM: The Bank of America Youth Excellence Seminar welcomes AQHYA members and non-members, ages 10 to 18, to experience this face-to-face event that offers valuable leadership skills, inspiring speakers, and workshops.

"The American Quarter Horse Foundation has a really long legacy of supporting youth," said Katie Reynolds, director of youth development and AQHYA. "They've given more than \$7.6 million in scholarships to youth to date. There are so many scholarship opportunities for kids through the Foundation, and all they have to do is fill out a single application and submit it online every December. And then through AQHA, we offer a number of scholarships and awards through our different educational contests for high achieving youth."

★ **QUICK START TIP:** Depending on your age and interests, find a local horse organization or contact a local affiliate and research what non-riding activities they offer in your area. Evaluate your own knowledge base to figure out where your knowledge gaps are and then set out on a mission to fill them!

CONNECT AND NETWORK

A huge part of getting involved in the horse industry means meeting people. While the idea of "networking" might seem scary, think about the last time you went to a horse show and noticed there were new people in your class. In the presence of horses and

amid all the excitement of show day, it was probably easy for you to go introduce yourself and make new friends. Channel that energy the next time you're in a strange place or volunteering with a new organization.

"In the horse industry, horses are a commonality among us. But ultimately, this is a business built on people," Reynolds said. "The connections you make with people in this industry are critical."

When Helen Hardy was in college, she made a point of volunteering as often as possible and meeting people—a habit that she credits with the wide network of contacts she still has today in her job at AQHA.

"When I was in school, I said yes to all my professors and instructors whenever they had an opportunity for me," Hardy said. "These days, I'm meeting people in the industry, working with them, and hosting horse judging contests. When I call trainers and people, they often say, 'I remember you from this one event or this one show.' Because I always said yes, that helped me make connections, become involved, and become a more well-rounded part of the industry. I love to show and ride for fun, but that's far from what I do professionally. If you want to work in the industry, I think it's important to make connections, go outside your comfort zone, and meet new people."

★ **QUICK START TIP:** Next time you're at a new event or realize you're in a place where you don't know anyone, make it a goal to introduce yourself to five new people. During each meeting, make it a point to concentrate on remembering their names, interests, and where they're from. You never know: the people you meet today might be the trainers, owners, or equine professionals you'd like to intern with or work for tomorrow.

IT'S A SMALL (BIG) WORLD

The horse industry is filled with people and organizations who have formed connections with each other because of a mutual love for the horse. Many people say, "The horse industry is a small world!" because they realize how interconnected it really is—but it's also a big world, and one that's full of opportunities for youth like you. By making connections, getting involved, and saying yes to every opportunity, you can make the most of it—all without ever leaving your love for horses behind. ★

The American Quarter Horse Foundation awarded the first youth activities scholarship at the 2020 Built Ford Tough AQHYA World Championship Show. Through this scholarship and many others, the Foundation is committed to helping the dreams of our youth come true by making higher education more affordable and accessible through scholarships.



PHOTO COURTESY OF AQHA

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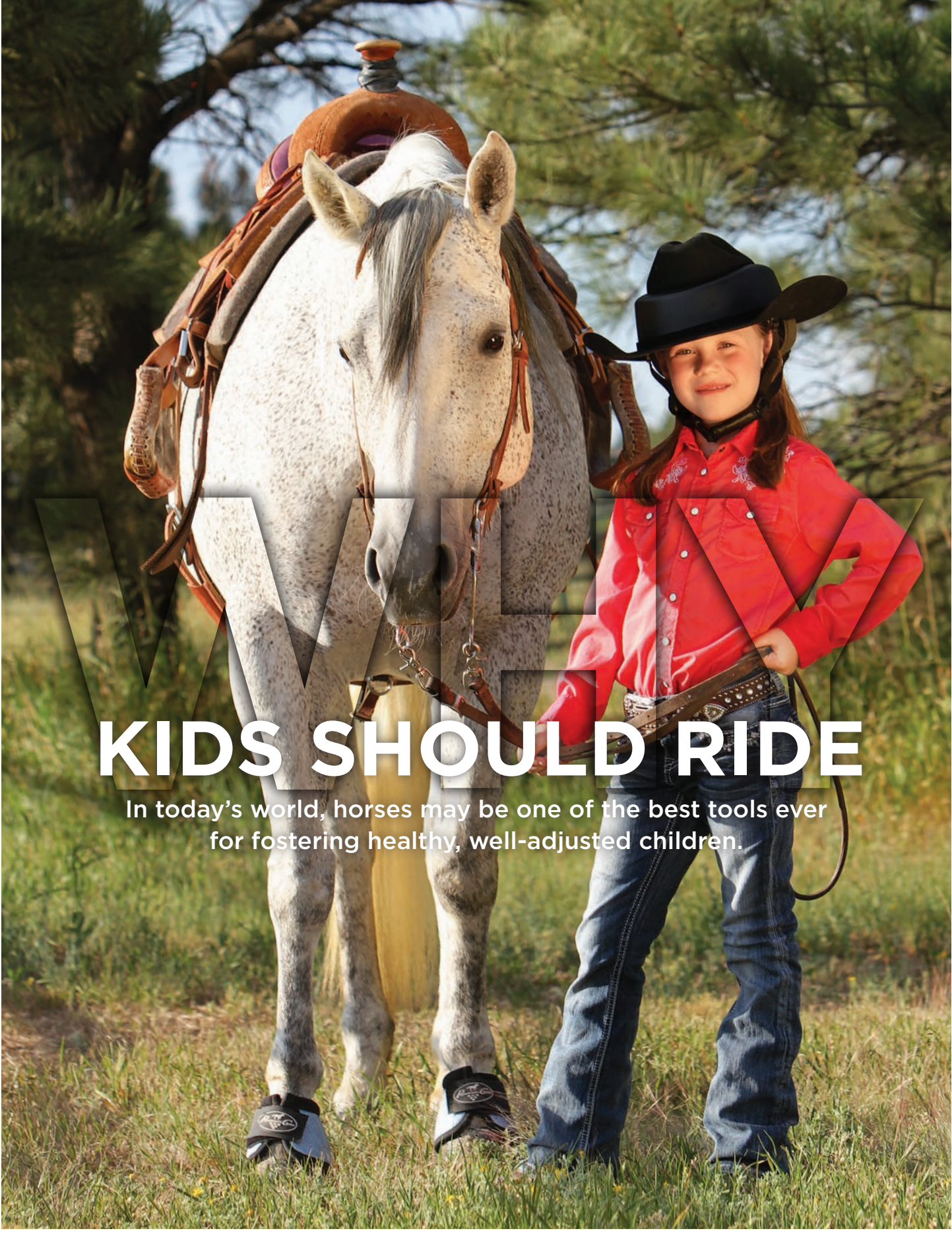
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A young girl with long brown hair, wearing a black cowboy hat, a red long-sleeved shirt with white embroidery, blue jeans, and a brown leather belt, stands next to a white horse. The horse is wearing a brown leather saddle and has black protective boots on its lower legs. The background is a grassy field with trees.

WHY KIDS SHOULD RIDE

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

PHOTO BY JENNIFER PAULSON



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.

PHOTO BY JENNIFER PAULSON

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.”

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. →



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.

PHOTO BY JENNIFER PAULSON

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.

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. →

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.



PHOTO BY MALLORY BEINBORN

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.

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

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.”

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.

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. 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.

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. 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. ★



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.

- **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.

- **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.

- **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.

- **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.