

The Human and Horse Connection Ð Why Kids and Horses = Magic

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Most of you have heard the axiom that "The outside of a horse is good for the inside of a man." Although there is much truth in this statement, it has too little meaning for those bewildered parents lacking experience with, nor inclination toward horses, as their eight to ten year old child rails on his or her "need" for a pony (or a horse). There are many factors to consider when looking at the possibility of horse ownership, but for those that do not have their own experience or passion for horses to draw upon, there is a growing body of scientific evidence that demonstrates what those horse crazy kids know instinctively. There is a powerful and beneficial connection between horses and humans, a connection that goes beyond the obvious and creates links for the human body, mind, and heart.

Body:

Perhaps the most obvious benefits of horseback riding can be summed up in the physical realm. The rider must coordinate cues from hands, seat, and feet in response to movements of his or her equine partner. Horseback riding is a complex and demanding physical sport. Aspects of physical fitness that horseback riding develops include coordination, balance, muscular strength, muscular endurance, flexibility, posture, and to a more limited degree, cardiovascular endurance. The daily chores required of horse owners involved in cleaning, feeding, and in the general care of their animals further develop physical fitness, especially for horses that are housed in stables and other confined feeding operations. In an increasingly sedentary society, epidemic levels of obesity are occurring in our children. Horse ownership can become an important source for regular physical activity in a child's life.

Research^{1, 2} shows other direct health benefits associated with animal ownership including a reduced incidence of heart disease and high blood pressure. These ailments are not typically associated with childhood, although early exposure to and positive experiences with animal ownership are indicators for continued ownership as an adult.

Just as with other physical pursuits, in horseback riding a base must be established before moving into higher levels. Advanced riding skills require significant coordination of fine motor movements. When considering a horse's suitability for children, it is important to assess the child's motor skill development and coordination, and then mount that child on a horse that has sufficient training and a disposition that is compatible with the child's physical abilities. Suitable mounts and competent guidance are critical in creating a successful horse and youth rider team. Happily, both good horses and good teachers are available. You can recognize them through the consistency and frequency of their performances.

Mind:

Horses can be much more for a child than just a recreational partner in an exciting activity. Horses are also wonderful teachers, offering lessons that apply well beyond the barn. The partnership develops skills that will serve the student for life. The teamwork nature of horseback riding, two independent beings, with their own minds working out the communication channels to achieve a purpose is unique. The rider has the leadership role for the horse and must learn a physical language of body position and touch to communicate with the equine partner. The horse must learn trust and compliance for his role in the partnership. Further, because the basic nature of horses as herd animals and prey animals is very different from our own basic predatory nature, learning to communicate with this type of nature requires the human to adapt and regard the world through another view.

Development of this complex communication system requires the rider to remain attentive to the needs of his or her mount. This process is credited to lengthening attention span and concentration in children. The rider is also required to rapidly process visual, tactile, and auditory input and translate this information into understandable, precise cues to the horse. This is theorized to improve sensory integration skills. Poresky *et al.*³ associated improved cognitive development with the bond between children and animals. Additional research suggests that pet ownership might facilitate language acquisition and enhance verbal skills in children.^{4, 5}

Another mental aspect of this communication process is the size differential between humans and horses. When a 100 (plus or minus) pound human is dealing with a 1000 (plus) pound animal, the concepts of spatial respect and cooperation take on a very real and immediate significance. The child dealing successfully with his horse learns about giving respect to get it and controlling behavior through indirect pressure, lessons that are equally important for social success with people. Understanding the herd analogy is useful in teaching humans how they can find cooperation in a group while still being able to stand their individual ground.

Cognitive development, communication, cooperation, confidence building, and boundary setting are by-products of the discipline of horse back riding and the responsibility of horse ownership.

Heart:

Horses often come to be viewed by their owners as a dear friend. The daily routine of horse care builds a bond through time for children to experience the interdependency of another life. The friendly nicker that greets the child on her way to the barn is a powerful reinforcement. Her stories of triumphs and defeats whispered into the fuzzy ears of that faithful steed are received with out criticism. The horse offers unconditional love and acceptance. The animal may provide a form of social support for their young owner, offering non-judgmental affection and emotional support. Of course this support is not a substitute for human support. Animals can give emotional support, but they cannot give instrumental support, such as advice, or help with homework. However, more than one clever parent has used the reinforcement of "You can ride after you finish

your homework:Óto get that job done pronto!

Horses allow young owners to practice their nurturing skills, through the responsibility of daily care. Studies by G.F. Melson⁶ credit attachment to animals and responsibility for their care as important to developing empathy and compassion, two aspects of socio-emotional development that are crucial for starting and maintaining close relationships with others. In other research, coping skills of children in war-torn Croatia were compared between those that had pets and those who did not.⁷ The work revealed that the post traumatic stress reactions were less intense for those that owned animals than for those that did not. The animal owning children were more able to express emotions, seek social support, and problem solve.

Horses by virtue of their unique combination of bold and timid, strong and fragile, offer children the opportunity to be both powerful and gentle, to find the difference between leading and forcing. Horses require the child to set boundaries in dealing with them. The horse allows the child to succeed through directing the efforts of another being. Image the self-esteem impact for a child to successfully control the movements of this huge powerful animal just because the child wanted it to go there. It is a unique relationship of accomplishment and companionship.

In Conclusion:

As in any activity, applying good principles is part of achieving a good result. Sound principles of riding are essentially the same regardless of the discipline under which they are applied. A horse executing a canter departure is performing the same basic mechanics whether in the sport of dressage, jumping, barrel racing, or reining. Finer points may vary but the basics remain. The underlying principles used to teach children to ride and care for their horses are also essentially the same. They include correct examples, followed by student repetition, with supervision and adjustments that lead progressively to a degree of proficiency and independence that are consistent with the student's goals. The rewards of any activity are usually directly linked to the quality of work that went in to that activity. With proper preparation, careful selection of a suitable horse for your child, and appropriate guidance in the ongoing care and management of the animal, a horse is can offer an extremely rewarding relationship to your child.

Endnotes

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About the Author:

Jill Montgomery is the Executive Director of the American Youth Horse Council, a 501C3 member based organization engaged in developing quality educational tools for those who influence youth in the horse industry. The American Youth Horse Council (AYHC) was founded in 1969 by state extension specialists and breed association representatives to address youth development using horses as a tool to help the youth. It has grown into an organization that provides educational resources, grants and scholarships, conducts research on the impact of equine interaction with youth, and conducts the annual National Youth Horse Leaders Symposium. As a council, AYHC members are the leaders of over 500,000 youth registered in their respective equine programs. In 1999 the AYHC identified the core objective to collect and analyze data illustrating the impact of equine activities on youth participants. The 2003 National Youth Horse Leaders Symposium (St. Louis Jan 31 to Feb 2) will unveil additional research findings in this area. To learn more about AYHC, visit their web site online at www.AYHC.com or contact Jill Montgomery at ayhc@mindspring.com The American Youth Horse Council relocated its offices to Colorado in the fall of 2001 from Lexington, Kentucky.

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