

# Tips for Horseback Riding Campers and their Parents

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By Dr. Stephen Fine, Published City Parent Magazine, January 2007

## Our Riding Camp

My interest in horses begins at camp 50 years ago. I had my first pony rides when I was five at a "Y" day camp. That got me hooked and from that point on I progressively honed my riding skills at residential camps each summer. Seeing my interest, my father decided to buy a couple of horses for our farm and my interest soon became his. Those two mares in the poleshed evolved into 40 thoroughbreds, three barns and an indoor arena. So it goes with humans and horses. Twenty-five years ago my wife and I turned the thoroughbred farm into a traditional summer camp with an equestrian specialty. At our camp we own the majority of horses and ponies and operate a riding school during the spring and autumn months.

Here are some important considerations for riding programs at camp:

### I Want to Ride all Day

One of the most frequently asked questions is, "My kid wants to ride all day. How much time do they spend on a horse?" It is perfectly normal for a beginner rider to think that being in a saddle all day is exciting and fun. The reality for all but the most dedicated and disciplined athlete is that such an experience is painful, boring, and often hot and dusty as well. A quality riding program that accurately assesses a rider's confidence and ability levels and then challenges them to build beyond these can not be measured in consecutive hours on horseback over the short term. Campers, including those that are horse-crazed, learn best and achieve the most while engaging and socializing through a variety of activities. It is precisely because camp offers a diverse activity program that successful equestrian programs and enthusiastic horse-loving kids thrive within summer camp settings.

### Where do Camp Horses and Ponies Come From?

Dependability in a horse or pony means well-mannered, healthy, and well-schooled. It all adds up to safety in and around the



stables, in the ring and on the trail. If the camp does not maintain its own stock year round then it should obtain horses and ponies from breeders or dealers with well-known reputations for quality. Both breeders and dealers will often lend animals to camps specifically to have them well-schooled for the fall sales or show season. This being said, it is important that camps have a four to six week period prior to the season for riding staff to work ponies and horses so that they will be familiar with daily routine and ready for the campers. Temperament and maturity are also important factors to consider in choosing appropriate mounts for young riders.

### A Horse is a Horse, of Course, of Course

There is a general confusion about horses and ponies. "My daughter's been riding for two years now and we think it's time for her to ride a horse." This is a typical statement. But if the daughter is 11 years old, 85 lbs. and 4 1/2 feet tall she should be riding a medium or large pony. Ever hear of the Pony Express? What do you think those guys rode - ponies or horses? The difference between a horse and a pony is determined by height. Any equine over "14.2 hands" (approximately 5 feet) at their withers (that's the protruding bone at the centre of the shoulders) is considered a horse – anything less than that and it is a pony.

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Horses come in big, medium and small sizes, like the difference between a Clydesdale and a Quarter-horse, and the same goes for ponies. An equine's ability, agility, and disposition are dependant on breeding, training and handling and are not a matter of it being either a pony or a horse.

## Saddle Me Up

Just as horses, ponies and human beings come in different sizes, so do saddles. If our 11 year old girl goes out for her lesson on a saddle built for a 160 lb. man she will not be able to make leg contact with her pony. She will simply flop around in a big leather chair. This is unsafe and she will not be able to learn anything about control. Always make certain that the saddle fits the rider for both safety and efficiency.

## Helmets or Cowboy Hats?

Although cowboy hats may look authentic and protect you from the sun and the rain they won't protect you from a head laceration, concussion or potential catastrophic injury. Many jurisdictions require that approved riding helmets be worn by law. Common sense, risk management and liability issues clearly mandate helmets be worn when riding. Always look for SEI or ASTM approval labels on riding helmets. And while we're on the topic of safety and proper apparel, footwear must have a low heel that will prevent the foot from slipping through the stirrup and protective vest are now becoming popular for cross-country and jumping.

## Who's Teaching the Lesson?

When it comes to certifications we can often become blinded by credentials alone. The person with a recognized teaching or coaching level is not necessarily the best person to teach and encourage a first time camper how to ride and care for a horse. Additionally, in the equine sport the process of obtaining instructor and coaching levels has become lengthy, expensive and increasingly bureaucratized. The university

or college student looking to instruct riding is generally not someone who intends to pursue a career in the horse industry. They



are rather dedicated young people who have had the benefit of years on the local show

circuit, involvement in pony club, or owning and caring for their own horse. There are many equestrian organizations that bestow accreditations. A personal interview and a demonstration of practical skills is still the best indicator of a candidate's abilities and suitability for a camp setting.

## Riding the Trails

Going out on a hack or high country trail is a wonderful way for the intermediate or advanced rider to bond with their horse while enjoying the sights and sounds of nature. Trails in and around camp should be designated for equestrian traffic only so as not to conflict with other usage such as mountain biking or hiking. This can be done by scheduling if trail space is limited. Preparation and routine inspection of all trails around camp is paramount. Use signage to show steep grades, intersections and abrupt turns. Fallen branches, holes, ruts and roots can be hazardous and should be attended to prior to the season. All trails should be inspected immediately after any rain storms or heavy winds. On horse trails overhead clearance is especially critical in wooded areas so regularly check for hanging branches and vines. In open meadows ground-hog or gopher holes can literally appear overnight. These spell danger to horse and rider. Mark trails to indicate a safe route – use fluorescent

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contractor's flags. These are inexpensive, easy to place and highly visible.

## Horses and Socialization

Stables are a social gathering place where children, adolescents and young adults can all interact with each other through their common interest in horses. Talking to your horse or pony while feeding, tacking-up, grooming or riding is a common practice and invariably leads to extended and animated conversation with peers. As well, young riders learn to care collectively for the needs of the animals and as a result can often develop a personal attitude of openness towards the needs of others. In this way social learning that takes place through the care and respect of horses can benefit broader social relationships throughout life.



## Therapeutic Aspects

Horses have been acknowledged as agents of therapy since the times of the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates. Interaction with horses has been shown to moderate the behaviour of aggressive, nonverbal and withdrawn children so as to allow them to socialize more successfully with both peers and adults. Research into children with ADD and ADHD has yielded results showing an improvement in focusing on specific tasks which can be often be transferred to other task oriented situations.

## Types of Conditions Served by Therapeutic Horseback Riding

- Traumatic brain or spinal cord injury
- Stroke, Multiple sclerosis and Muscular dystrophy
- Cognitive deficits, Autism, Mental retardation
- Amputations, Cerebral palsy, Spina bifida
- Behavioral problems (including ADD and substance abuse)
- Learning disabilities, Emotional problems
- Hearing, speech, and visual impairments
- Orthopedic conditions