

Dear parent of a horse lover:

First let me say how glad I am that you are considering this sport for your child. As you'll see in this guide, there are all sorts of reasons that this is a great idea. Studies continue to show that the benefits to riding are numerous.

But starting out can be a bit daunting especially if no one in your immediate circle of friends or family has any experience with horses. You probably have questions about safety, about costs, and about the equipment that will be needed. Maybe you aren't sure which discipline your child should begin with or what kind of time commitment it will require from you.

This guide was written to help you discover some answers.

I've covered some questions you can ask, a few mistakes to avoid, and I've added in a few recent studies that explain the developmental benefits that horses can provide for your child. I wrote this guide to help you have a better understanding of the riding experience. Hopefully, when the time comes, it will help you make an informed decision.

If you still have questions, you can reach us at 905-473-3847. We'd be happy to help you in any way we can.

Best of luck on this journey.
I think you and your child are going to love it!

Best regards,
Pat Gillis

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QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD ASK

1. TYPE OF RIDING

There are many disciplines in riding but the most common are either English or Western. Both disciplines have their fans.



Western

The saddle is the larger one, with a horn that the rider can hold onto.

After learning the basics, the rider can pursue western pleasure (where the rider strives to show off the horse's manners and relaxed steady gaits) or reining (a competitive discipline where the horse is required to perform intricate patterns and spins).



English

The English saddle is smaller and does not have a horn.

If the decision to ride English is made, then there are different branches of that as well, some of which can include jumping.

The basics however should always be stressed in whatever discipline is chosen. The foundation in riding, as in any sport, is arguably the most important part.

(As my experience the last 33 years has been with English riding, I will mostly be referring to that.)

2. WHAT KIND OF EQUIPMENT WILL BE REQUIRED

There are many, many ways to spend a fortune when it comes to riding apparel. I really believe that riding is so good for children and it can be discouraging when it becomes a sport that is difficult to afford. Learning good basics does not require fancy equipment and it is important to keep that in mind

- Helmets should be mandatory regardless of which direction of the sport your child pursues. At some facilities, the helmets can be borrowed. That is fine although I always suggest to our students that before anything else, it is in their best interest to buy a helmet of their own.
- Footwear can be fairly simple in the beginning. Rubber rain boots have started many a child at my barn. As long as the boot has a half inch defined heel and a relatively smooth tread, they are fine.
- Comfortable pants that are not too baggy will do in the beginning.

Certainly, when the young rider gains more experience and wishes to participate in a horse show, the equipment can get a bit more 'official.' But even then, a lot of used equipment can do in a pinch especially when one growth spurt can make those riding boots too tight!

(We have had parents donate riding pants and boots to the school once their child has outgrown them. That gives the young beginners a chance to have proper equipment to participate in a horse show without breaking their parents bank!)

All equipment that the horse requires should be provided by the riding school.



3. WHAT WILL BE EXPECTED FROM YOU.

At a reputable riding school, the staff is in the barn with the child, helping and supervising the preparation of the horse for the lesson. Surprisingly, some establishments have been known to count on the parents for this supervision. This is something you should ask about and frankly, something you should avoid. Unless you have experience yourself, your ability to figure out all the equipment and also keep your child safe is limited. I have even known of riding schools that have asked parents to assist their child in retrieving the horse from the field. This is unacceptable and if that is required of you, I would strongly recommend finding a different barn.

Most barns will expect payment before the first lesson. Lessons can be billed individually or sometimes grouped together for a month at a discounted rate. While prices can vary based on the type of facility or the location, choosing a riding school based entirely on cost is not always wise. There is a difference between value and price. Keeping horses in good condition and equipment in safe repair is not inexpensive and if one facility you check is considerably less than all the others, it could mean that corners are being cut. As we will mention later in this report, getting references before committing can be clarifying.

The rider is generally expected to be there about a half hour before the lesson begins and spend another half hour after the lesson, to ensure the horse is cleaned up and put away. For the parent then, it is pretty much a two-hour affair. Some facilities will prepare the horse for the child but grooming the horse before and after the lesson can be an important part of riding. The child will often gain confidence just by spending that time with the horse and realizing how gentle their new partner really is.

If the barn you choose has an indoor arena, then the lessons will probably go all year round. Most indoor arenas can be quite cold in the winter. However, dressing your child appropriately for winter riding is something you can discuss with the instructor.

4. ASK TO WATCH A LESSON

This can serve a number of purposes. First of all, you can observe the teaching style of the instructor. If you hear a student being berated or put down, rather than being encouraged, you may want to reconsider. Students sometimes need their coach's encouragement to help them reach the next level but it shouldn't involve bullying or insulting behaviour.

If it is a beginner lesson you are observing, you can get a sense of how they 'start' novices. What is the ratio of rider to assistant? Some places will ensure that each beginner has an assistant at the start. That way they can concentrate on learning to maintain their balance, and correct position etc. without having to worry about controlling the horse.

It also doesn't hurt to ask about the approximate age of the horses. As a general rule, the age of the rider and the age of the horse should add up to at least 20. A complete beginner or novice rider on a four-year-old horse is a terrible combination, no matter how quiet the horse is said to be. A horse of that age has simply not been in training long enough to have the experience needed to help a new rider learn the sport. The young horse is still learning himself and so should only be ridden by knowledgeable, experienced riders that can properly prepare him for his future job.



MISTAKES TO AVOID

1. COMPETITIVE OR NON-COMPETITIVE

All reputable schools should provide a good foundation of basic skills but different riding establishments can have different end goals in mind. If the ultimate objective for your child is the show circuit then you should look for a barn that tailors their program to developing competitive skills in the show ring.

Even if your child wants to be the best rider possible, some kids aren't comfortable being pressured to go to horse shows. In that case, choosing a competitive barn might be a mistake. Some riding schools stress the personal excellence of their riders without the added costs and pressures of going to horse shows. They may have internal shows or small schooling shows that allow the students to get a taste for competition without incurring all the costs and stresses that would be required at a 'show barn'.

This is your choice but an old-fashioned schooling barn, that teaches good horsemanship and good basics, can provide all if not more of the benefits your child can gain from spending time with horses. Starting at a less competitive barn can sometimes give shy, less confident children the chance to shine.



2. LEASING A HORSE OR PONY

Some riding establishments might pressure you to lease a horse or pony for your child. In fact, it can be part of their business model. There is nothing wrong with that as long as you are okay with the added expense and time commitment. If that is not something you want, it is important not to succumb to the pressure. Stories about how your child cannot improve unless they have a horse of their own are not necessarily always true. Sometimes when children lease a horse or pony, they learn to ride THAT horse or pony. But in terms of overall skills, they may find themselves lacking. The more horses a person can ride, the better rider they will ultimately be because each different horse teaches a different lesson. However, if your child has reached a point where leasing a horse or pony is the next step you wish to take, it is important to make sure that you are clear on what is expected from you.

- What will your lease fee cover?
- Who will be responsible for the horses shoeing needs, basic veterinary care and his equipment?
- How many times will your child be allowed or expected to ride the horse?
- Will there be supervision?
- Are you sharing the horse with another rider?
- What happens if the horse hurts himself or cannot be ridden for some other reason?

These are all things to be clear on before you sign on the dotted line so do not be afraid to get clarification.

3. SAFETY ISSUES

Riding can be a very safe sport when undertaken properly. Despite their size and strength horses are remarkably gentle and endlessly forgiving. Having said that, there are warning signs you should be aware of when you make your choice as to the riding school your child will attend. A barn where a lot of people are loud and raucous is not only disrespectful to the sport but also quite stressful to the horses. Stressed horses and novice riders are not a great combination. Yelling and running in the barn should not be permitted. The work areas and riding areas should be free of clutter. Novice riders should be trained in an enclosed area, either a small

fenced paddock or an indoor arena. They should not be riding in a large, unfenced area. The equipment used on the horses need not be fancy but it should be in good repair. The horses themselves should be suitable for the level of rider. While a plodding, slightly lazy horse might frustrate an experienced rider, it can be just what the doctor ordered for a young beginner. Horses with 'more whoa than go' are the ideal type for the novice rider.

The instructors should be patient and knowledgeable and have sufficient help on hand to ensure that the horses in the lesson are under control at all times. While riders need to be challenged to improve, asking riders to perform tasks, either in the barn or on the horse, that they are not yet capable of is not a good recipe for safe enjoyment. This balance however can be hard for the parent of a young rider to discern if they themselves have no experience. This is why it is often wise to ask for references when choosing a school. Getting feedback from parents who are a few steps ahead of you in this sport can help you in making your decision.

WHAT AGE SHOULD THE CHILD START?

HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE TO LEARN TO RIDE?



While every barn has their own policies regarding age, an important requirement should be that the child is mature enough to take direction. As a parent you will probably have a good sense of this. Watching your child interact with the horses can help you decide if this is the right year for your child to begin. Some riding schools will offer a free trial ride and that is a great benefit. You can watch and see if your child can pay attention when it matters. It should be everyone's goal to make the riding experience a safe and happy one right from the start.

Parents new to the sport might assume that the learning curve in riding can somehow be standardized. If all you want to do is get on a horse, hold on to the saddle and have a walk on a trail ride, then that skill can be acquired pretty quickly. However, if you want to learn to move at a faster pace than walk, and you want to do it without interfering with the horse's balance too much, the learning curve is a bit steeper. Perhaps your child's goal includes jumping. Again, that is an ability that can take a bit of time to develop. Taking on the training of a young horse requires skills even more difficult to acquire. And every rider will progress at their own individual pace.

I think everyone who loves horses and begins riding, at some point has a moment where this wonderful, kind animal understands what we ask of him and does it willingly. Being able to communicate in this new language can be quite exhilarating for the rider. We have found that once a rider experiences this, they will probably want to continue to seek that communication in tasks that get more complicated. Done well, riding is a classical discipline that can be studied for a life time.

WHY CHOOSE RIDING AS AN ACTIVITY FOR YOUR CHILD?

A very small percentage of children who take up the sport of riding will ever compete at the highest levels. Similarly, not very many children will make a career out of riding or working with horses. And yet, even children who only spend a few summers at a horseback riding camp or a year or two taking weekly lessons can gain many benefits from their involvement with horses.

The horse rewards behaviours that we want children to develop. Riding horses teaches self-regulation, resiliency, and empathy. The horse does not respond well to bullying or rough treatment but rather he seeks a compassionate leader in all his interactions with us. The transformations we have seen in young riders over the years is astonishing and happily, many studies are currently being undertaken that support our anecdotal evidence. (See links below.)

The studies suggest that young people particularly, when spending time with horses, develop greater problem-solving skills, improve their memory, hone their social skills, and experience a reduction in stress hormones. And during the time

that they gain these benefits, they are also participating in a sport that promotes fitness and encourages a connection to nature.

In our experience, riding horses is an especially beneficial sport for the kids who may find team sports at school a little intimidating. With riding, it is still a team sport but your partner in the team is the horse. And the horse is the most non-judgemental partner that a child could wish for. Also, many children find that spending time with peers who share their passion can be a great confidence builder. We have had many children, who felt socially awkward at school, blossom into self-assured young people due to their experiences 'at the barn'.

I hope this guide will help you to make an informed choice about riding lessons for your child.

If you would like to visit our barn and meet our horses and staff, we would love to have the chance to show you around. If you'd like to find out if riding is something your child wishes to pursue, we offer free trial rides on Saturdays 10:15 and 1:30. Give us a call and we'll set it up for you. (905-473-3847)



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<https://www.countryliving.com/life/kids-pets/a42087/horse-riding-may-improve-child-intelligence/>

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-2613211/Spending-time-horses-make-teenagers-stressed-study-reveals.html>

<https://www.paulickreport.com/horse-care-category/horseback-riding-social-development/>

<https://www.horsetalk.co.nz/2016/03/03/horse-riders-right-stuff-german-study/#axzz42Bgj5XMc>