

Summer Camp with the horses can be a great experience for your child. But avoiding these common errors and asking the right questions is the best way to guarantee a fantastic, safe summer.

Dear Parent of a horse lover:

Choosing a Horseback Riding Summer camp isn't always easy. Why? Because you're bombarded with all sorts of choices, starting with whether it will be an overnight or a day camp. Then come the questions about safety, about costs, and about the equipment that will be required. There are so many choices and questions and they are especially difficult if you don't have any experience with horses yourself.

So how can you find a Horseback Riding Summer Camp that fits your child's needs?

You can start by reading this Horseback Riding Summer Camp GUIDE.

In this guide, you'll discover that there are certain things and some situations to avoid. There are also important questions to ask before you commit to sending your child to a riding camp.

I wrote this guide to help you have a better understanding of summer riding camps. Now, with this information, you can make an important decision that is informed and intelligent. And if you have any other questions about Summer Riding Camps, you're invited to reach me at 905-473-3847.

As you will discover, it is a great sport for children to take up and I'll be happy to help you in any way that I can.

Cordially,
Pat Gillis

How to avoid 4 summer camp disasters

1. Not discussing the type of summer experience with your child.

It might seem obvious but if a child is really into computers and you unexpectedly send him to a riding camp, there may be a certain tension and not as much enjoyment as you'd hoped for. If a child is on board with the choice, the fun and satisfaction level is apt to rise. In fact, the more they know about what they are getting in to, the more easily they will settle into the camp experience. I recommend asking the potential camp if you can come for a visit before you make your decision. Ideally, ask if your child can have a short little ride or at least groom the horses and see if they enjoy the process. I once had a child come to our farm for a visit and his parents discovered that he hated the smell of horses. I am not sure if he was allergic or just very sensitive but needless to say the parents were relieved that they had taken the time to investigate the camp experience they were proposing for their son. (Interestingly, their daughter ended up attending our camp and she loved it!)

2. Does your child prefer to share their experience at camp with a friend?

Some kids don't like to attend camp without a friend. Even though many friendships are made during summer camp, (which is one of the great things about the experience) some kids, especially if they haven't been away too often, really feel better having a friend they know along for the fun. If that's the case, it is really important to coordinate with the parents of your child's friend to make sure that their availability for camp matches yours. There was a 55% increase in camp enrollment last year* so dates and availability get less flexible the closer to the summer you get.

*BBB.org

3. Not ensuring that the safety standards, and philosophy of the camp meet your expectations

I once had a lady from overseas contact me via email. She planned to be in my area for the summer and had found my camp online. We corresponded a number of times over the months leading up to her child's attendance. She and her daughter arrived on the first Monday of the session. She leaned through the door into our lounge, (not actually even stepping inside) and announced that this was her daughter and she would pick her up at 4:00. Then she turned and left! We were all quite taken aback by this as you can imagine. She didn't ask to meet the staff, see the facilities, or even ask about where lunch would be served. That is the only time in 33 years that has happened to me thankfully.

I always suggest that you visit the camp if at all possible or at least make it a point to talk to the owner to get a sense of their priorities and philosophies. Ask what kind of first aid training the staff has and inquire about the length of time the camp has been in operation. Make inquiries about their insurance as well. Riding Camp is a specialty camp and you want to make sure you ask about the expertise of the counsellors who will be teaching your child. Because it can be a safety issue, this is a great time to let the camp director know if your child has any learning disabilities that they should know about. If the camp includes lunch in their program, find out if they can accommodate food allergies/intolerances.

4. Learn about their cancellation policies

A lot of camps have pretty complicated refund policies. In fact, the Better Business Bureau in 2017 said: "Of the complaints received by the B.B.B. most allege refund issues, including camps' failures to

respond to notices of cancellation. This resulted in unauthorized credit card charges. Other complaints allege cancellation of camp programs due to low registration.”

This type of problem can really put a damper on the experience for both you and your child so don't be afraid to ask about the cancellation policies and if you should expect any other charges for equipment rentals, food, etc.

5 mistakes to avoid when choosing a summer camp

1. Not Inquiring about the length of time they have been operating their camp.

While it is not an absolute guarantee, the length of time a camp has been operating can at least be a signal that they have a decent program. If they have been in business for years, it is difficult to imagine that they aren't doing most things right. Longevity in business will also give you the opportunity to request references and you can ask about their return rate as well. I have had people tell me horror stories about signing their child up for an entire summer at a camp only to find out in July that the camp they chose was no longer in business. Longevity is at least a bit of an offset to this kind of risk.

2. Not visiting the site where the camp will operate

What I am looking for when I go to a new barn is whether or not people seem to generally be taking care. Are the aisles kept clear, are the tools, wheelbarrows and brooms safely stored? In my experience, if standards are lax in terms of general maintenance of the facilities, this is often the case in the riding program as well.

It really isn't about appearances per se. Rustic old barns can have a great charm and wonderful programs. And new fancy facilities don't automatically guarantee great experiences either. What you are really looking for is a sense that there is respect for the sport and the animals involved in it. Keeping the horses' living and working area clean, their equipment organized and in good repair are all important elements to a successful program.

An added bonus is if the people at the barn seem friendly...☺

3. Not inquiring about the horses used in the program

You don't have to be an expert on horses to recognize a general sense of well-being in a horse. Do they look well fed or are their ribs and hip bones sticking out? Is their coat shiny? (If they've just rolled in the mud of course, take that into account!) Are their eyes and nostrils free of any discharge? Do they seem alert and happy or sullen and sour?

Some summer camps bring in rental horses just for the summer. You should ask about this and also inquire as to who is responsible for ensuring that these horses are suitable for the summer camp riders. Most of these riders will generally be beginners and that takes a special kind of horse.

Safe, experienced school horses are at the heart of any good riding program and the camp should be able to answer any questions you have about their training.

The age of the horses is also a consideration. There is an old maxim in the riding school industry that suggests that the age of the horse and the age of the rider should add up to twenty. This is an excellent rule to follow. An eight-year-old beginner on a four-year-old horse is an accident waiting to happen. But

that same eight-year-old on an experienced twelve-year-old horse offers a much better opportunity for the young rider to have a great summer riding experience.

If you talk to the camp director, you should be able to get a pretty good sense of the direction and the values of the camp you are inquiring about. Ensure that they match your values and that what is important to you is also important to the camp staff.

4. Not considering the location if you have to drive there every day.

This is a tough one as most Riding Camps are outside the city. Some camps offer transportation which is fantastic but if they don't, make sure that you can car pool or have the time yourself to get your child back and forth to camp each day.

5. Choosing a camp based only on price.

Always remember that price is what you pay but value is what you get. If you have investigated the camp of your choice and it meets your standards and is within your budget, it is probably best not to be side tracked by camps that offer exceptionally low rates. Remember if something goes badly, not only will your child's summer be unpleasant but you will be left scrambling for an alternative arrangement at the last minute.

4 questions to ask before committing to sending your child to camp

1. Are any other charges, rental equipment, lunch etc. besides the registration costs?

Riding requires a certain amount of equipment. A helmet is a must and boots with a half inch defined heel are essential as well. Some camps provide this equipment free of charge, others expect you to provide them for your own child and some will rent this equipment to you on a weekly basis.

It is also good to know whether lunch or snacks are provided. If lunch is not provided, is there a place where the lunch you send can be refrigerated? Knowing this will help you choose what to send with your child. It's also important to inquire about access to fresh drinking water. Riding horses can be a good workout and replenishing fluids is vital.

2. Is there after hours care available and what is the cost?

If you are driving your child back and forth to camp, having after hours care may very well be essential for you. You will want to know first of all if this is available and what is the cost. Usually the cost is anywhere from \$10.00 to \$20.00 per hour. You will want to ask if there is a morning and afternoon service available.

3. Has the staff received first aid training?

Any physical activities can have risks and the same is the case for horseback riding. For beginner riders, the risks should be very low as the new rider will be working at a much slower pace than an experienced rider. But regardless, the camp staff should have current first aid training. Outdoor activities can create

the risk for insect bites, overheating, and general cuts and scrapes. Knowing the staff is trained to handle these possible events is important to your peace of mind.

4. What is the experience of the counsellors and the ratio of counsellors to campers?

Handling horses and teaching children to ride can be a labour intensive activity. While camp ratios at a general camp might be 1 to 12 or even 1 to 14, in a riding camp it is safer if there is more supervision. There should never be more than 6 children in a lesson and the instructor should have a number of assistants with her in the training area to ensure the safety of the beginner riders.

I am most comfortable with one assistant with each horse/rider and one instructor but you should ask what their policy is and decide if you are comfortable with that.

If this is a business that runs year-round, ask to watch a lesson, again to get a sense of how things are done.

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 behavior. Remember summer camp is supposed to be a fun experience. While you want your child to learn new things, it shouldn't feel like boot camp. Safety rules of course must be followed but after that, having fun is important too.

Conclusion

Recent studies have shown that Horseback Riding can improve cognitive ability in children. * Instructors can point to balance, core strength and stability being improved with riding but a recent study in Germany**confirmed that riding horses has benefits beyond the physical development of the participant. The study suggested that riding also helps young people develop leadership skills, become more assertive and develop greater resilience. In my experience, the kids who learn to ride also show great improvements in problem solving and confidence. A good riding program helps children reach their developmental goals all while having a wonderful time. These are all great reasons to choose a summer riding camp for your child and it is my hope that this guide will help you make an informed decision.

*Frontiers in Public Health

**European study commissioned by German Equestrian Federation