

Chapter One

So, Your Child Wants to Ride a Horse

*I*t started out with such a familiar ring, you only half paid attention.

“Hey, mom, you know what I want to do?”

“No. What?”

“I want to ride a horse.”

Pause. Long pause. You’d heard that question a thousand times before, but this answer caught you completely by surprise.

And there was such intensity. “Can I, *please?* Can I?”

A jumble of thoughts raced through your mind, if not right out of your mouth. “You want to do *what?* Whatever gave you that idea?” Or maybe, “I don’t know, ask your father.” Or an incredulous, “Ride a *horse?*” No, it wasn’t what you expected. But if you have opened the cover of this book, maybe you are willing to give it some thought.

Of course, there are many variations on this opening scenario. In fact, parents, noticing a child’s interest in horses, will often be the first to think about riding lessons. But there the idea sits, for lack of knowing how to proceed.

Now this book can guide you by answering your questions, helping you avoid the pitfalls, and trying to ensure that you and

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your child will have a positive, enjoyable experience in the world of horseback riding.

The idea for this book came out of my own experience, though I was neither a child rider nor the parent of one. I actually took up riding seriously as an adult, starting as a beginning rider at thirty-eight, to be exact. Because of my age, however, I got to know lots of parents. And, as I progressed, I helped to answer many of their questions.

As you read on, you will notice that I refer to the young rider as “she” and the instructor as “he.” To be sure, there are many young boys beginning to ride and women instructing them, and my choice is obviously not politically correct. It is merely meant to simplify the use of pronouns. You can switch them in your mind’s eye to suit your own situation.

Have you noticed how many children are intrigued by horses from a very early age? Whether they are the polished mounted police horses used in cities, those graceful horses ambling about as they grazed in rural pastures, or the spirited horses seen in Hollywood Westerns, they captivate children. Yet, unless you, another family member, or a close friend was or is involved in the sport, from a distance, riding can seem rather intimidating and inaccessible, not to mention costly. It doesn’t have to be any of those things.

How you react to your child’s insistence on riding a horse probably has a lot to do with your own experience or lack thereof. If you rode horses when you were a youngster and remember it as being fun and exciting, chances are you will be receptive to your child’s wish to do the same. All too often, it is the other memories that surface, however, such as remembering yourself in an unsafe riding situation and how you became frightened or, worse yet, hurt because of it. Now, faced with the prospect of your child riding a horse, all your old fears and negative responses come flooding back. Then again, you may never have ridden a horse or perhaps even been near one. And you are still shaking your head, trying to figure out how your child ever came up with this idea in the first place.

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Try to look at horseback riding as you would any other sport your child wishes to pursue. She needs proper education to ensure her enjoyment and safety. As with many other sports—among them bicycling, swimming, skiing, ice skating, tennis, football, and in-line skating—the risks of injury are high and the pleasure is minimal *unless you learn how to do them properly*.

Given the proper exposure and training, horseback riding can provide your child with a focus, an involvement, a love, and a skill that will bring her many happy hours and may even last a lifetime. And riding, contrary to what you might think if you have a child who has a physical or mental disability, may be an activity that she, too, can participate in. The appendix provides an in-depth look at therapeutic riding, how to find and evaluate a program or center, and the potential benefits for those who participate.

Whether your child is taught English hunt seat or Western stock seat, learns dressage, goes on to ride hunters or jumpers, barrel races, gets involved in eventing (also known as combined training), or finds that the thing she enjoys most is having a good time trail riding, the beginning is essentially the same. You, as a parent, need to find the best possible situation for the both of you, so that your child can begin to experience the fun that is so much a part of horseback riding.

One Sport, Many Choices

Horseback riders tend to fall into one of two major categories: They are mainly “English” (English hunt seat) riders or “Western” (Western stock seat) riders. While the type of horse they all ride is the same animal, the favored breeds are different, as is the training for both horse and rider.

Riders usually become proficient in one discipline or another, a choice that depends largely on where they live and what their friends do and, certainly, what appeals to them. Horses, too, are broke to one style or another, and unless they switch disciplines with some regularity, it will take some retraining for them to do so.

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If people stay in the sport long enough, many of them eventually try a little bit of everything. Even if you are a dedicated English rider, it's fun to sit in a Western saddle and see how well you do riding Western. And what an eye-opener it is for the inexperienced to sit on a reining horse, for instance, and feel firsthand the subtle yet high degree of training involved there!

My own background, just as is true for many others, is the product of an early choice. Living in the northeast United States, I began and continued to ride English hunt seat, coupled with many years of dressage. But, as I found out myself, trying whatever else comes along only adds to your know-how, and I encourage other riders to do it. This is a huge and diverse sport and, I promise, you will never tire of watching and learning about other riders' disciplines. As you read this book, I'm sure my "English" point of view will come through, but hopefully so will my enthusiasm for anyone coming into the sport, wherever he or she chooses to be.

While English and Western are the two main styles of riding—riding "camps," if you like—they are just the tip of the iceberg of the myriad disciplines for horse and rider. Nevertheless, in all parts of the sport, common elements and how you, as a parent, will interpret them are a constant. Wherever you live, how you judge happy, healthy horses and well-run stables is the same, as is evaluating instructors and lessons. This is also true about deciding whether your child should go to horse shows and, overall, the importance of your input as you proceed.

Whether your child wears a hunt cap or a cowboy hat, learns to trot or jog, lope or canter, show over fences or traverse bridges and go through gates will not affect your ability to help her enjoy the world of horseback riding.

Introducing the Horse

The biggest dog in your neighborhood, that strapping Great Dane or lumbering Newfoundland all the kids play with, will be dwarfed by a horse.

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A horse's size alone can be rather startling. The animal that your child proposes to ride generally ranges from a 500- to 600-pound pony to a 1,000-pound horse. That's the average. There are even smaller ponies for the littlest riders, and much larger horses, though it's unlikely that a child would learn to ride the likes of a Belgian Draft or a Clydesdale. Stand next to one of these sometime, and you will see what *big* is!

Now that the United States is a thoroughly mechanized nation, horses in the United States are, with few exceptions, used for recreational pursuits. Beautiful, graceful, athletic creatures, they can perform a variety of feats for our enjoyment. They are race-horses, ridden by jockeys around flat tracks and over hedges and other natural hurdles in steeplechase races; they pull their drivers in sulkies in trotting and pacing races; they are pleasure horses, generally ridden outdoors on trails or in other open areas; and they are field hunters or foxhunters, who go cross-country over fences in search of the elusive fox or his scent. They are show horses, who compete in a myriad of disciplines, among them as hunters and jumpers, in dressage, saddle seat, and three-day eventing. They are Western stock, trail, and competition horses; they compete in endurance races and rodeos; and they play polo. Some of them also earn a living as police horses, carriage and parade horses, cattle herders, and in theatrical ventures from television commercials to feature films. And they comprise one last and very special group, remembered fondly by name and deed years after they have completed their job: the school horses who teach our children how to ride.

Though nonhorse people might debate horses' intelligence—and, in truth, on an intelligence scale, other animals surpass them—once you have spent any amount of time with horses, you will likely be persuaded otherwise. They are sensitive and intuitive, each with a definite personality. Not uncommonly, the same horse will take care of a beginning rider with patience and forgiveness, yet make a fool out of an experienced rider who gets “too big for her britches, trying to show a horse what's what.”

Remember, though, that while most horses respond to care and kindness and need not be feared, next to a child even the

smallest pony is a powerful animal who must be respected at all times. Keeping that in mind, part of the pleasure of riding is the love and close association that is possible between horse and rider. For the child beginning to ride, this special friendship is a wonderful part of the whole experience.

First of All, Riding Is Fun

Ask most youngsters why they ride and, chances are, the number one response will be “because it’s fun.” They may also add that it is exciting, even thrilling, although such words are often just mirrored in a child’s happy face and sparkling eyes.

One thing is for sure: If your child likes the first experience well enough to come back—and if it is your child’s wish, not just yours—chances are very good that she will find riding fun. Frankly, if it is not fun, a parent will have little or no success in getting a child to stick with the sport anyway. Or if the child does, it won’t be a very happy experience.

Forcing a child to go on when she seems less than enthusiastic after a lesson or two can be detrimental. All the defense mechanisms go up—the child is unwilling, lacks attention, is easily embarrassed, and is even downright scared—all of which can turn something that should and could be enjoyable into an unpleasant, unproductive, and even dangerous episode. When given a choice, a child who decides she doesn’t want to ride now may decide to try again at some later time.

And let’s face it, other than the parent’s disappointment if a child does not continue a family tradition of riding or some other reason along those lines, riding is far from critical to her well-being. A youngster will survive, no doubt very happily, without ever getting on a horse.

However, learning to ride and being around horses can most certainly enrich a child’s early years and, if she continues riding, the rest of her life. Beyond fun, it can impart a series of solid and long-lasting benefits. The sense of accomplishment, plus the companionship with horses and friendship with other riders, will long be remembered.

Benefits of Riding

At a time when health authorities are bemoaning the overweight, “couch potato” existence of many of our nation’s children, riding is a good, physical, outdoor-indoor activity that can help to promote fitness. As a matter of fact, jockeys are considered the second fittest athletes, right behind marathon runners. Like learning to swim, ride a bicycle, or play tennis, riding takes hard work, and it also requires concentration, comprehension, and the development of skill to do it properly. When done properly, it is exhilarating, never drudgery.

Aside from swimming, which experts agree is the best all-around exercise there is, riding can give more to a person, in a myriad of ways, than any other activity available.

George Steinbrenner, the New York Yankees owner and a familiar face in horse racing circles, was quoted years ago as saying, “With all the things going on in the world, there is nothing better for a kid than to be raised around horses. Show me a kid who’s been raised around horses and I’ll show you a kid that turns out to be a fine person in almost every case” (Editorial, *Eastern Horse World*, March 1, 1987).

Horse people everywhere will second Steinbrenner’s sentiment wholeheartedly, and many will tell you story after story of youngsters who survived negative influences and stayed on track because (and in some cases *only* because) of their involvement with horses. Others, with physical and mental challenges, have also benefited greatly. Obviously, if your youngster catches you off guard by popping the question, you know she is ready to ride. But even if it is your idea, try to finesse it so that it winds up being your child who says, “I want to do it.” With that commitment, in all probability, she will succeed.

Children who take to riding are seldom lukewarm about it. Quite the opposite: They are quickly enamored with the sport and its surroundings and look forward to coming to the stable as often as they can, even daily if they can persuade their parents. The involvement provides a productive channel for energies, both mental and physical, that can, quite bluntly, help keep

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youngsters off the streets and away from drugs, alcohol, and other destructive pursuits.

Riding teaches responsibility, patience, coordination, concentration, fitness, application, accomplishment, achievement, sportsmanship, humility, lifelong skills, balance, industriousness, kindness, and good manners. If you and your child get involved in the sport, no doubt you will find things to add to this list!

Any Drawbacks?

Even though horse people sing the praises of riding most of the time, I would be remiss not to point out some potential drawbacks to the sport.

Like any activity that requires the development of skill to actually perform the activity to any extent, such as playing the piano, playing tennis, or skiing, learning how to ride takes time. Unless there is a horse stabled in a nearby backyard and a willing owner to help your child, the sport takes a certain commitment of not only time but money as well.

While it is certainly fun and recreational for you and your child to go to a hack barn where you can rent horses to ride on a trail from time to time, taking an occasional ride is about as instructive as taking an occasional piano lesson. No one will argue that such periodic exposure to one or the other doesn't have some merit, albeit mostly pleasure, but it would be a hard way to build up any skill. So, if your child wants to ride, offer to give her some lessons and plan to do it on a consistent basis. Once a week is a good way to start.

The sport has a reputation for being a rich person's sport. And it definitely *can* be. But put the emphasis on the word *can* because it does *not* have to be that way. There is plenty of opportunity for your child to ride on a modest budget, as long as you keep control and don't get pushed into anything beyond your means or good judgment.

Except for those lucky children who live next door to a stable, being able to ride is not as easy as opening the door and going out

First Considerations

For most families, the cost of riding—especially for recreational activities—is an important consideration. You want to know, even in general terms, what the price tag for horseback riding is going to be. Bearing in mind that costs can vary from area to area, and even within the same area (for lessons, for instance), and that there is definitely a price spread for apparel and equipment as well, I do my best to direct you to the information you need, with lists of tack dealers and other guides. In this sport, like anywhere else, it's a good idea to comparison shop, ask questions about what you're getting, look for deals (shopping online and through catalogs and by trying tactics such as paying for multiple lessons), and, when appropriate and to your liking, buy previously owned items.

to play ball in the yard or nearby playground. You or someone else has to chauffeur your child to and from the stable.

Yes, in all likelihood your youngster is going to get bumped and bruised somewhere along the way. Believe me, it happens to anyone who rides! This is, after all, a very physical sport. And there's no use denying the fact, either, that if your child takes a bad fall, she can get hurt. Even the smallest pony is a living creature weighing several times more than any child, and accidents do happen.

That said, most times mishaps are minor and far between. As parents find out very early on, children are amazingly resilient and break-proof. Just as they fall off bicycles, skis, and skateboards, most of them tumble off horses and get back on before you have time to say, "Are you all right?"

When to Begin?

Because *learning* how to ride takes some degree of concentration and coordination, between ages six and seven is usually a good

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time to begin the process. Children younger than this generally cannot control the situation either mentally or physically, and to expect them to do otherwise could lead to trouble.

However, by age four, and even sometimes at younger ages, if a child seems interested, she can be carefully introduced to the sport. Young children love to see and pet animals. Introducing them to a horse, just as you would to a dog or cat, can help them to develop sensitivity and understanding. At that age, you would not expect your youngster to actually begin learning any skills, but if she is put up on a pony and walked around on a lead line, with an instructor right beside her, it can be a safe, positive experience. And naturally, there are children who will surprise everyone by picking up the reins and the basics of the sport before you would ever expect them to do so.

Every instructor has an opinion about when a child is the right age to start riding. Some will agree to work with very young children, as long as the parent understands that, for the most part, the child will spend less time learning and more time having fun and becoming comfortable with a horse. Other instructors will simply not teach very young children. So, your child's age may be a factor in choosing your stable.

Before, or even a little after, age seven, the idea to ride is frequently the parent's idea. Perhaps you rode as a child, or wanted to, and now you would like to give that opportunity to your child. That's fine, as long as you remember that what can and cannot be accomplished depends on when your child starts.

By age eight or nine, children usually come up with the idea to ride by themselves, with no prompting from their parents. Telltale signs of an interest in riding can include turning over lawn furniture to make a jumping course, galloping around the living room, eating lots of carrots, or taping horse pictures to bedroom walls.

Age eight or nine is a good age to start. At this age, children have been in school for several years and have learned how to pay attention and absorb information. Their bodies have become stronger and more agile, and there is increasing mind-body coordination. In all, they are now better prepared both mentally and

physically and most likely will take to riding more quickly and easily than younger children.

Getting Acquainted with Riding

Even if your child is the right age and is excited to begin riding, signing her up for a series of riding lessons may still seem like a big undertaking. You know she wants to ride, but you continue to drag your feet. After all, you see a mountain of problems. The stable is some distance from home. You will have to drive there, then wait around until the lesson is over. You don't know for sure, but she will probably need some special clothing or equipment. And then, what if she doesn't like it all that much? Not unreasonable concerns, to be sure.

So, before you take the big step, you might consider some alternate ways of getting acquainted with the sport. All are various "package deals" that can give you and your child a taste of horseback riding and what is involved, as well as a look at a particular stable, in a short-term, less committed way.

A number of youth organizations and programs for young people offer riding programs on a regular or periodic basis. Among them are the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts (or Cub Scouts and Brownies, depending on your child's age), Police Athletic League, YMCA and YWCA, YMHA and YWHA, Boys and Girls Clubs, 4H, local church groups and other religious organizations, and schools. Also, in the summer, both day and sleepover camps often include riding as an available activity.

Such arrangements usually offer an organized group of children a lesson or two a week for a set number of weeks. The lesson will run anywhere from half an hour to an hour. If the group is larger than the number of horses available, half the children will ride at a time. Meanwhile, those waiting may go off to another part of the stable and get a lesson in horse and equipment care.

Since this would be a group of absolute beginners who have never ridden before, there should be several assistants besides the main instructor, perhaps even one for every horse and rider. And while a situation like this cannot provide your youngster with the

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same intensity of instruction she would get from a private lesson, these short programs can be a fun, relaxed way for her to get a sense of what riding is like and perhaps whet her appetite for more.

A series of group lessons like this can also benefit you, the parent, by helping to convince you that riding will be a good activity for your child. You will have company among the others watching from the rail of the riding ring. You probably won't have to do all the chauffeuring, either, since that detail can get split up among several parents or maybe handled completely by others. However, if horses and your child don't mix, you will find this out, too, without a big investment of time and money

Another possibility that can help acquaint your child with riding is a program, usually held in the summer, offered by a stable itself. Children of different riding abilities, including first-time riders, can take a week or two of daylong instruction in riding and other facets of the sport. Such programs will probably include a couple hours of riding, one in the morning and another in the afternoon, plus hands-on experience in learning to take care of horses and equipment. Sometimes at the end of the session there is even a little competition, during which the children can show off how much they have learned and win ribbons to happily hang up at home.

What's Next?

If this first sampling of horseback riding leaves a nice afterglow, if your child keeps reminding you of this funny incident or that exciting day during her brief riding experience, you can be fairly sure that, at least from her standpoint, the light is green. And if you are at all inclined—and certainly, if she is pestering you—it is a good bet that it is worth taking the next step.

That next step is finding a stable where your child can continue taking lessons. Your journey into how and where to find that stable, how to judge what you're looking at—in terms of the facility, its horses, and its instructors—and how to put all the pieces together and set up your child's first lesson begins on the next page.