

Should you buy your child or grandchild a horse? And what you should know before you do.

*If you like horses,
Your life changes forever
You can't sleep or eat
Or be a very good cowgirl
Without your trusty pal
By your side at all times.*

*Bonnie Timmons
Hold Your Horses*

Many children dream of having a horse. And horses can teach a child responsibility, self confidence, love, and patience. They can be a best friend, they can help a child get through the challenging years of growing up. Unlike many other sports of childhood, the sport of horses can be a lifelong love. One can enjoy horses alone, or in a group, share them with friends and family, or strangers. They are a way to make new friends or cement old friendships. And today there are literally dozens and dozens of different WAYS to enjoy horses.

Horses can be a hobby, or a vocation. We have a book on ***139 Ways to Make Money in the Horse Industry***. According to a study by the American Horse Council, the horse industry contributes \$39 BILLION dollars a year to the American economy. It accounts for 1.4 MILLION jobs. That figure climbs to \$102 billion when indirect and induced spending are included, and does not include the 1.9 billion in taxes that the horse industry pays annually to various levels of government. Unlike the pet industry, horse people are heavily involved with their horses in terms of lifestyle, which opens up an even larger economic segment. Such things as “horsey” home décor, gift items, and clothing are not included in these figures, but they are a profitable part of the horse industry.

The KY horse council has done an independent study that shows the horse industry in KY alone accounts for 100,000 jobs and is a \$4 billion dollar a year industry. Although KY has a large and prosperous horse industry it is not the only state that has a large part of its economy devoted to horses. CA, TX, IL, FL all have horse activity to rival KY. And many other states are close behind. Many major colleges and universities have some type of equine programs, and most states have veterinarian schools.

But horses are also large animals, with their own personalities. No two are alike. There are good equine citizens, just as there are good citizens in any part of the world. And there are ones that are not good citizens, just like people. Whether this is a matter of experiences and hardships, or because of their basic personalities, is just as much a controversy between horsemen as the nature vs. nurture argument psychologist have argued for years. Just like people, horses have different personalities, talents, different ‘intelligent levels, and they like different jobs. Some like involvement with people, some would rather have other equine companionship, some just like to be alone. Some are lazy, some are self-motivated, and some have no work ethic at all. There is no ONE right kid’s horse. **The right horse will depend on your family, your child’s personality,** where the horse will be kept, and what kind of help your child will have.

As a parent, or grandparent, there are many decisions you will have to make when you consider buying your child a horse.

Horses Are Not Something that Can Be Ordered from a Catalog

First, horses are not something you can investigate, read reports on, and decide what is the best “brand” to buy. All horses of any given breed are not alike, though there are usually strong characteristics MANY of the horses in that breed may share. Just because a seller says the horse is safe for children, doesn’t mean it is good for you or your family. Sometimes this is because the seller isn’t honest, but sometimes it is because how the horse interacts with the personalities, patterns and experience of your children and family members.

Training is Just as Important as Attitude

Second, just as education is important for humans, training is important for horses. Age with the right experience may bring insight and wisdom for horses as well as people, but there are dumb and mean OLD horses, just like people. Buying a horse for your child is more like being asked to pick out the right spouse for them than buying a first car or computer. Even trainers can’t always predict which horse will develop a bond with your child, and which ones will not.

There isn’t any single thing that will work. Some young horses (4 and over) can be just as solid as 15 year olds. (If you want an older horse, don’t expect it to pass a vet check with flying colors.) Some breeds are USUALLY better than others for children, but not always. Sometimes a horse with a lot of training is going to know more than your child and will end up bullying the child because the horse KNOWS more than the child.

The Type of Parent You Are Makes a Difference

Third, YOU make a difference. Overprotective parents can instill fears in children, and horses will respond to fear or apprehension. If your child rides, understand that this is an extreme sport. They will fall off, and there is always the possibility of injury. Like other extreme sports like skiing, motorcross, skateboarding, etc., a child cannot become proficient without pushing their ability. And in the end, if the parent is too protective, and focuses on the danger, the child will become fearful and lose interest.

We had a child come to camp last summer. She had ridden ten years and her mother told us she was very good, and had experience in dressage. We were excited to have her come and looked forward to her riding some of our better horses. The girl was TERRIBLE. She had ridden the same schoolmaster horse. She had never fallen off. When she rode, she was so stiff and scared she couldn’t ride even the quietest horse. When one of our other riders fell off, she called her mother and went home. We had another mother who took her daughter to the emergency room and had her on crutches and in physical therapy because she fell off and had a bruise on her thigh. Riding horses is a mindframe of interacting with an animal which is sometimes going to have a mind or feelings of it’s own. There is ALWAYS a chance of the horse behaving on it’s own.

I get a couple of calls a week from someone who wants a “bombproof” horse for their kids. Don’t count on the horse taking over all the responsibility, you and your child have to take some responsibility for learning how to ride and handle the horse.

Some parents push their children or overestimate their abilities. I talk to parents on the phone who tell me how well their kids ride and how they can handle anything. I’ve never met one that really could. Sometimes parents DON’T KNOW what they are looking at. The child has ridden school horses, who do the job without any input in the student, so the child LOOKS much accomplished than they are. Sometimes the child has ridden the same horse so long that they understand and have confidence in that horse, but they don’t have the experience or confidence to ride anything else. And sometimes there is an element of parental pride that overestimates the child’s ability.

Last year a woman came to look at a horse to buy for her daughter. We usually have several horses for sale, and the woman wanted to see everything. That’s usually my first clue that a person has NO idea what they want or what they are doing. We clearly try to indicate on the website and over the phone that some horses have some good traits, and others are not suited for the same purposes. It’s not hard to narrow it down to one or two horses, three at the outside!! On the phone, the woman had said her daughter rode, could walk, trot and canter a horse, and was looking for something she could take on and show and jump.

We saddled a nice hunter pony, but when we showed the mare, the girl refused to try it. We saddled a quiet horse we give lessons on all the time. The girl could barely post and couldn’t get the horse into a canter in spite of the fact that he is easy to canter and we have taught several people to canter on him. In fact, she couldn’t control him at all! When I told her to go into the center of the ring and back him a few steps before taking him out of the ring (we do that with all of our horses so they don’t get into the habit of just walking out of the ring) the girl burst into tears because she couldn’t get him to move.

I started giving the girl a lesson on steering a horse and she finally stopped crying and started riding a little. The mother seemed annoyed that we were taking up time when it was plain to her that the horse wouldn’t do, but the girl looked like someone had just given her a Christmas present!

Before they left, the mother said she had been spending hours and hours a week going to see horses. She drove three hours each way to see our horses, and had driven four hours to look at a horse the day before. I couldn’t help thinking that she should have been spending the time and gas money getting her daughter lessons so she enjoyed riding, and put the money for a horse in the bank until her daughter could ride one. Within two years no one will be able to DRIVE this poor girl onto a horse and the mother will wonder why she lost interest. The fact is, anyone is going to lose interest if they are afraid and when you are out of control on a horse, you are going to be afraid. A horse is a big animal to sit on and PRAY that he wants to do what you want him to do!!!!

Personality Makes a Difference

Fourth, your child’s personality makes a difference. Not everyone gets along with every horse, even if they are good riders. Riders with a lot of confidence can ride horses

that riders with the same experience and no confidence, cannot ride. Attitude and confidence make a big difference.

We had a nice horse in here a few years ago. He was solid and well trained. I rode him for two days as crowd control for a Civil War Reenactment and he stood by with cannon going off and guns blasting. But when he had a timid rider on him, he would stop at the gate, and come into the middle. It didn't matter how GOOD the rider was, as long as they were confident. One day I had a woman come out. Her sister was one of our adult riders. She had never been on a horse, except perhaps at a pony ride as a child. We put her on this gelding. He started to drift off the rail and into the center with her. I told her she needed to be authoritative. This lady had raised five boys and she KNEW how to be authoritative. She moved him back out on the rail with confidence and growled at him and he flattened himself against the rail and never took a wrong step for the rest of the lesson! Leadership skills are something important a child learns from a horse, but if the rider isn't going to be the leader, the horse is going to be.

Don't Count on Having One Horse to Take You from Beginner to Competition.

When people are first learning to ride, they have poor balance, their hands move around, their legs creep up a horses sides in the Happy Frog position. It takes a VERY tolerant, quiet, and somewhat numb horse to put up with that. This ISN'T the kind of horse that will go out and jump a hunter course next year when the rider has learned more!!! I HATE it when someone calls and says, "I want a nice quiet horse for my daughter to learn to ride on, she has never ridden but really wants to learn. And, oh, her dream is to jump, so we want it to be able to jump too!" Think about it. If a horse is going to jump a course, it has to have a lot of steering. It has to have a good, soft mouth, so the rider can rate it to fences. You have to be able to move a horse from side to side with your legs so you can get into the fence at the right place. It has to have the impulse to get over the fence. Does that sound like a horse that is going to safely have a beginner bouncing all over it, trying to find balance????

Learn First

If you don't ride, and your family doesn't ride, take the time to give your child lessons. Someone has to know something.

Learn to ride first. Save the money you would spend on a horse, put it in the bank and spend the money you would pay to board or feed and use it to take lessons. If you know how to ride, you will understand what horse to ride, you will know what will suit you and what purpose you want it to serve.

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So, go to a place and learn to ride. When you or you child KNOWS how to ride, THEN buy something that will take them the next step. A beginner horse is just that ~ for beginners. A good rider will outgrow that horse. Accept that and don't try to make the horse into something it doesn't want to be!

Be Prepared to Spend Some Money

A horse for your child s NOT something you should try to skimp on. It costs just as much to feed and care for a BAD horse as it does for a GOOD one. But a good horse will teach your child wonderful things and be a good investment. A bad one will scare them off and leave them in fear. No parent says to himself or herself, "Let me spend money to give my child bad and frightening memories. But that is EXACTLY what you are doing if you try to save money.

The horse industry has split dramatically in the last few years. Good horses are going UP in price. I am paying more for horses now than I did a few years ago. But the bottom has fallen out of the market for bad horses. I don't even get near the bad ones, I value my daughter too much and I don't want to get her hurt for no reason. I have college riders who keep the horses legged up, I don't want one of them hurt. And I know if I buy horses for \$2,000 or under, that is EXACTLY what I am going to get, and I'm going to be responsible for someone getting hurt. I sell my horses with a guarantee and I can't sell horses that are going to be unpredictable because they haven't had good riding from the beginning of their working life.

Growing Up With Horses is a publication put out yearly by Primedia, a National Equine Media company which also publishes some of the top national horse magazines. This year their article on Choosing a Horse/Pony read:

How much SHOULD you pay for a good first horse for your child? If you're not looking for something of show quality, you ought to be able to find something suitable for about \$3,500-\$5,000 at the low end. You'll see "bargain-priced" horses advertised for sale, and occasionally circumstances allow a truly good beginner's horse to be available for under \$3500.

But the odds that something is wrong with a less expensive animal – either temperamentally or health-wise – are high. Approach all "bargains" with a jaundiced eye.....(And those \$500 ponies and "free to good home" horses in your local newspaper's classifieds? Don't go there.)

When people call and want a "bombproof" horse, but it doesn't have to be registered, or pretty, just something for the kids, I know they are leading up to saying they want a bargain priced horse. Good horses bring good money. A good horse is a

good equine citizen, and works well with people. EVERYONE wants one of those. That caller is asking for the MOST SOUGHT AFTER TYPE OF HORSE IN THE MARKETPLACE TODAY. These horses are in limited supply ~ these kinds of horses are difficult to find. They need to have a good mind, and they need enough GOOD training so they have trust in their riders, they like people, and have a willingness to cooperate. Horses that have been broken badly by people who really don't know what they are doing often harbor resentment and cannot be trusted, or have bad habits that can be dangerous.

One reason why you WANT a registered horse is predictability. There is nothing mystical about horse registries. They are corporations who operate record keeping systems. They record the pedigrees of different types of horses. Like dog registries, the reason WHY people have long registered animals is predictability. Horses, like all animals, carry genes for looks, gates, even temperament. Breeders study these traits, and breed for the qualities they want in the offspring. So buying a registered horse gives you a better chance of predicting what qualities, even what they will like and dislike, what kind of talent they will have. If you want a horse with a good mind for your child, a registered horse increases your odds. Second, because registered horses have the potential to be worth more money, owners will spend time and money to have registered horses trained. It costs just as much to feed and raise a nice, registered foal that will have a good sale price, as it does to raise an ugly "mutt." So big working ranches with good horsemen, raise good foals. The idea that there is an over abundance of good, ugly, unregistered backyard horses that will willingly and safely bond with your child, is a myth. You get what you pay for, and when your child is involved, it is not the place to try to save money.

The Quarter Horse

I've spent over 50 years riding, training, showing horses. I've ridden most of the major breeds (There so many new breeds these days that it would be a career move to try to ride them all.) and all four "seats." But I have always come back to Quarter Horses because they are good honest horses and the breeders have done a good job over the years of focusing on breeding good temperaments in their working lines. Today, the Quarter Horse has been a recognized breed for only a little over a half a century and it is the most popular breed in the world. There are active Quarter Horse Associations in almost every country in the world. And Quarter Horse Registrations go up every year. In contrast, many registries are actually declining. Growing Up With Horses has only one article about a specific horse breed, and it is about Quarter Horses. They are versatile, willing, and have solid reliable temperaments. They can show and win in hunters and over fences. We show a successful Jumper who is a registered Quarter Horse.

Horses or Ponies?

Ponies are often very quick with children, and we find that students who ride ponies for any length of time may have difficulty transferring to full size horses. However, ponies don't have the bulk and size and if your child isn't going to really

LEARN how to ride a horse, a pony might be better. Ponies don't have enough size and length of body to learn leg and flexion, so they can't be goosy or sensitive. They aren't as hard to stop as a horse because they don't have the length of neck to block and fall over their shoulders or straighten a neck. If you have to you can almost PULL their heads down. If they run off, they can't run that fast. Ponies aren't as far to fall if the child falls off, which can reduce the fear factor for both parents and children.

On the other, ponies aren't as well broke. In fact, they are often not well broke. They are too small for most trainers to ride, and they don't respond to leg and flexion. So, most ponies are just broke by putting a child on them. In fact, many small ponies aren't broke to ride with a saddle and bridle, because children have been put on them bareback and the child has been led around with a halter. Getting a small, well broke pony that will carry a child independently, without being led, can be a challenge.

Ponies can be nasty buckers, and there isn't much length of body or neck, there is nothing in front of a rider to keep them on. Bigger ponies can have a motor, be quick movers, and they don't just relax and walk off like a horse. If you are concerned about price, generally speaking, the smaller the pony, the cheaper. If you can't afford a lot of money, or you have a very young child, or you don't intent to have the child take riding lessons and really LEARN how to ride, a small pony might be an option.

Some of the best working lines in AQHA are short, solid minded working horses will often measure large ponies. It is fairly common to find 14h AQHA or quarterXpony.

Mares VS Geldings

Many people who work with children and horses like mares rather than geldings. Mares often seem more protective and gentle with children, and I've had a lot of mares that were completely different with adult riders than with children. They bond with children and are frequently less likely to try to take advantage than geldings, so don't discount a nice mare because of something you've read on the internet or been told by a friend.