

Character Development – Horse Back Riding

Character Counts! in horseback riding

by Abby Bloxsom, former riding director for Camp Jewell YMCA

Here are some great examples of how a YMCA camp's innovative riding instructors use their horse program to teach the character values of caring, honesty, respect and responsibility.

It's happening everywhere. Radio talk shows promote it, teen musical groups make public service announcements about it, classrooms are full of it, presidential candidates are pumping it up. Let's face it, even in the face of Kid Rock and Temptation Island, character education is all the rage.

Of course, in the YMCA we've been teaching "character building" for ages. One of the threads running through many Y activities is a program called Character Counts! The YMCA version focuses on four "pillars" -- respect, responsibility, honesty and caring -- on which rests the platform of good character.

Horsepeople have long known the many positive effects that horses have on our lives. Ask any trainer, instructor or experienced horseman and they'll tell you what horses have done for them. The business of caring for horses, learning about them, training and competing offers many opportunities for growth, but as an instructor, do you really recognize the potential you have to influence your students' lives? How much energy do you devote to making it happen?

Riding With Character

Camp Jewell YMCA has had a riding program for more than 25 years, but like any good service or program it is and always will be growing and changing with the times.

Directing that change is a clear guiding principle, constructed solidly on the YMCA's four Pillars of Good Character. Every policy, every decision, every action is checked against the tenets of respect, responsibility, honesty and caring. Fellow ARICP Instructor Julia Dignan and I have dedicated our horsemanship program to fostering character development -- and changing lives -- through the influence of horses.

“That’s great,” you might say. “But I teach riding. I run a show barn, and my students need to win to be successful.” Well, “That’s great,” is my reply. We’ve discovered that we can teach some pretty amazing horsemanship skills, not by focusing on the skills themselves, but by motivating the human spirit within the student to learn, to achieve, to succeed--to break through personal barriers and become not just really good horsemen but exceptional human beings as well. The following are just a few examples of how we include character education in our riding program.

Respect

As a riding instructor, you are one of the most important role models in your students’ lives. Your students may continue on as lifelong horsemen, but even if they don’t, the things you do and say will be remembered long after the horses are gone. While a student rarely has a choice in selecting his or her classroom teacher, your students come to you voluntarily to learn about a subject *they* have chosen to study. They will hold your opinions and actions in the highest regard, and you owe it to them to be worthy of that.

A worthy individual will treat both people and horses with respect, considering others’ feelings and needs in equal measure with his or her own. Encourage your students to learn the reasons behind the things you teach, and when a student asks “Why?” give him or her a complete answer. Never say, “Because that’s what the judges are looking for,” but rather answer in terms that reflect the horse’s needs and the ideal of riding with relaxation, balance, coordination and comfort.

You may occasionally find yourself playing therapist to your students. The barn is a place that we all go from time to time to seek refuge, and as you are a leader there, people will look to you for support and guidance. Listening to their troubles and reflecting their feelings back to them may be all that’s needed, but it can sometimes be helpful to remind them that every story has at least two sides. This is true of their relationships with horses as well as with people.

Rather than dismissing a riding problem as caused by a horse’s misbehavior, teach your students to consider the horse’s point of view. For example, a horse may seem stubborn or willful, but he could be uncertain, confused, tired or just opinionated. Working around those issues may resolve the problem or it may not, but the experience will develop problem-resolution skills that will pay off in the real world.

The student is unlikely to see this perspective if your advice shows a lack of respect for the animal's needs. If your teaching conversations model this respect, the student will learn to see the horse's viewpoint and likely take that new perspective home to relationships with peers, family members and coworkers.

Responsibility

As guardian of the horses' welfare, your overriding responsibility is to them. They can't ring up the local Domino's pizza when they're hungry, and they can't drive themselves to the doctor when they hurt. Of course, few instructors need to be reminded that looking after one's horse is a wonderful way for a student to learn responsibility, but modeling that responsibility and all that it implies is sometimes hard to do.

If a horse is a little achy when he starts out, do you have the student warm him up every day before the lesson and continue using him, or do you have the vet out to find out what could be causing the problem? If a shoe is loose, do you use the horse anyway until the farrier gets there, or have you learned how to tighten a shoe yourself so you can make repairs when they're needed? If a saddle doesn't fit quite right, do you throw on an extra pad, or do you have a fitter adjust the saddle so it fits correctly?

All these are questions we face in our program, just as you do. We ask them of ourselves (and each other) over and over again--aloud, in front of our students--so they become aware that responsibility is more than feeding twice a day. It's more than making sure the water bucket is full and the stall is clean. It's about going out of one's way to meet the animal's needs first, even if that means inconvenience, hard work or expense.

As an instructor, your second responsibility is to the student. An adult student who wants only to learn the mechanics of riding is certainly entitled to do so, but if you take a little time to discuss his or her goals, you will may find the therapeutic side of riding that is often really at the heart of someone's desire to ride. In any case, the adult should be encouraged to figure out why he or she rides, and your teaching should address his or her motivations, not your own dreams of glory as a winning trainer.

The child student is a little different. The parent (who's probably paying the bill) is entitled to having a child who learns, grows and matures through his or her exposure to horses. That's natural for the horse, but the instructor needs to be the facilitator of that growth, and many instructors lose sight of this objective in the effort to "teach riding."

They focus so intently on the perfect ride, the judge's opinion or the development of a specific skill, that they fail to see the growth and learning that are the real results of their lessons and will persist long after the horses are gone. The riding skills are just gravy, and the ribbons are the garnish.

As a businessperson, honor your responsibility to excellent customer service. This benefits the client, but since good customer service helps your business, you are helping yourself as well. Be on time, return your phone calls, be thoughtful, plan ahead and be a good teacher. If you're intent on modeling good character, remembering what to do for people follows naturally.

Honesty

It isn't easy to be really honest. Now I'm not talking about the don't-tell-a-lie kind of honesty. I'm talking about the deep-down, be-true-to-the-truth kind of honesty. Some people would have you believe that speaking one's mind and to heck with the consequences is the same as being honest. Well, it is important to be frank and straightforward with students and their families, but this must always be tempered with a measure of respect (oh there it is again). Hurt feelings and misunderstandings among clients, friends and others can pop up without a second's notice if you don't give careful consideration to what you're about to say before you open your mouth.

Horses are inherently honest: They don't lie about their experiences; they don't lie about pain. The horse is a perfect mirror in which to view our behavior and attitudes, and a clever riding teacher can make wonderful use of it. When a student becomes frustrated, have him look to the horse. Is the horse frustrated? Is the horse confused? When a student becomes angry, show her the effect that this has on the horse. If she's unable to gain control, have her step down and settle her feelings while looking into the horse's eyes, and then remount and try again. Seeing one's own behavior reflected in the horse's experience is a great eye-opener.

Caring

Who can help but care about horses? They're beautiful, powerful, generous animals with a seemingly inborn desire to partner with humans. The best school horses take that one step further and seem to take pleasure in helping a student learn the technical aspects of riding. Students seem to recognize this too and respond to it automatically. That's one of

the magnificent things about horseback riding. When it goes well, both horse and human seem to really enjoy and benefit from it. The mutual caring follows naturally from that relationship.

In fact, for many people that's the reason they continue with riding in the face of limited time and finances, and a good instructor capitalizes on this motivation. When a horse takes care of a rider, point it out ("Whoops, he really saved your skin on that one, didn't he?") and encourage a fair trade ("He looked after you today, why don't you give him an extra few minutes of rub-down before dinner tonight?"). The currency of caring is a valuable one indeed.

In our program, the instructors and staff trade in that currency as well. Each student is faced with a set of challenges as they enter the barn on any given day. Life challenges and physical challenges change little from one day to the next, but small, personal, individual challenges crop up from time to time, and they are at least as hard to handle. Just taking hold of the reins and walking to the ring can seem an insurmountable obstacle for some riders. Fear, concern and anxiety are as real as any other difficulty and require just as much caring and support to overcome. It's the instructor's job to make that happen. Your students can't manage it just by being tough or by "sucking up" their troubles. They need advice and encouragement. But most of all--and this is the most rewarding thing for the teachers in our program--they need a cheerleader.

When that student takes those reins and starts walking out of the stall, it's the triumph of the ages! Humans can conquer demons, and there goes the proof! When someone pulls off a feat like that, everyone should let up a cheer--students, parents, other instructors, everyone--and you have to lead them.

We cheer every day. Sometimes it's for the student who musters the nerve to walk into the stall. Sometimes it's for swinging that leg over the horse's back. It could be for getting a lazy horse to canter or finally managing some semblance of a sloppy leg yield. Everyone I teach believes wholeheartedly that I am their personal cheerleader, and I wear that role like a big funny hat; I love it.

We take riding lessons to learn, to accomplish, to achieve. When that happens, it's pure magic. Giving away that magic costs nothing, but it pays me back over and over again in excitement, in renewed energy and in love.

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