

How to Choose a Quality Riding Program

By Marina Genn and Amy Bevins

“My daughter was shy and unsure of herself. Now, she’s enthusiastic and willing to try new things. She’s having fun and is proud of her accomplishments. I was looking for something to help Annie achieve her personal best and teach her a lifelong sport. I’ve found it - riding!”

Holli Durkin, mom of 9 year old riding student, Annie Durkin

Your child has dreamt for years of galloping across the green, grassy fields atop her very own horse. Time and again she has asked you for riding lessons, and makes you stop the car on every rural road where horses can be seen in the pastures.

Ok, so you’ve gotten the hint that your child loves horses and you’re ready to give her a shot at riding lessons. But how do you pick the right program?

With many riding programs available, it’s best to look closely at the fundamentals: program philosophy, quality instruction, and a safe environment.

According to world renowned rider and instructor Marina Genn, you should look for a program that “gives students the building blocks to help them succeed in life and the motivation to reach their dreams. A quality program teaches children more than just riding - it teaches them life skills and how to set and reach goals.”

Program

An essential cornerstone of any good riding program is its philosophy. Riding involves both the mind and body, and you’ll want to look for a program that teaches more than just how to stay on a horse. Find one that provides a healthy, disciplined, safe and fun environment where kids and staff apply common-sense skills to riding and to life. The best programs incorporate and encourage the development of respect for self and others, communication skills, personal and horse health, and an understanding of horse physiology and psychology. Find out if the program provides opportunities for additional learning such as theory classes, exercise and strength training (including balance and core strength classes), kids clubs and summer camps.

Instructors

As with any educational learning program, a riding program is only as good as the instructors who work with the students. Instructors need to have not only a thorough understanding of horses - including horse motion, action/reaction, training and management – but also the ability to positively teach and motivate their students. An instructor must be able to adapt his or her teaching style to the personality, talent and learning style of each student. When evaluating different programs, sit in on one or two of your child’s lessons and watch the interaction between him/her and the instructor. Take the time to talk with the instructor and find out about his/her training and how he/she can adapt the lessons to fit your child’s preferred learning style so that your child can maximize his/her understanding of the subject at hand.

Horses

Leasing and/or buying a horse can be quite expensive, but fortunately most riding programs have school horses that may be used by your child for lessons. When evaluating a program, look at the horses. Do they appear to be healthy, well-cared for and well-groomed? Investigate how students are paired up with horses - is it random,

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does it change weekly, or does the instructor match students with horses based on size, skill level, and personality of both horse and rider? Are the school horses well prepared, trained, and balanced?

Safety

Every parent considering riding lessons for their child worries about safety – after all, you’re putting your “baby” on the back on a 1200 pound animal! A strong commitment to the safety of both the riders and the horses should be a central element in the riding program you choose. Students should be required to wear helmets and shoes/boots with a heel. Other essential safety features should include: a fully enclosed indoor or outdoor riding arena, safety straps on beginners’ saddles, a structured orderly environment, monitored transitions from riding ring to barn, immaculate tack and a program which stresses mastery of skills before advancement.

Facility

Part of a well-structured riding program is learning to care for the horse’s living environment. The entire facility - riding arena, barn, stalls and pastures - should be in good condition. Students should be expected to keep their tack clean, horses well groomed, and working areas clean and organized. Your child will spend a great deal of time at the barn where he/she rides, and should learn to treat the horses’ home with respect. He/she should also be afforded space to store gear and personal items, get cleaned up, attend classes/seminars, and spend time with the other students and their friends in the program.

A deep love of horses and the desire to learn, coupled with the ability to focus on goals and the willingness to do whatever it takes to achieve them...that’s how you’ll know your child has the motivation and possesses the mental readiness to embark on his/her equestrian adventures. Becoming a successful horse-person involves much more than simply learning the mechanics of horse management – at its heart is the development of selflessness, empathy, open-minded communication skills, and genuine concern for another living being.

Marina Genn, founder of The American Academy of Equestrian Sciences (AAES), is an internationally renowned Grand Prix rider, instructor and horse trainer. To learn more about AAES, schedule lessons or register for summer camp, call 703-779-8082 or visit www.aaesva.com. Amy Carney Bevins is a freelance writer, assistant magazine editor and educator. Contact her at amycarneybevins@yahoo.com.