

THE BENEFITS OF Youth Horse Camps

By Rachel Robertson

Kids learn more than riding skills at summer horse camps



PHOTO: ERNIE COLANTONIO

“MAYBE I WILL TROT TODAY,” my son said excitedly on the way to horse riding camp one morning, and I noticed he was smiling.

Smiling?

Wow, I finally found the right camp for him, I thought, relieved. It’s been a long road—soccer camp, tennis camp, theater camp—we tried them all with varying degrees of success, but not one brought him joy until horse riding camp.

Horsemanship is not the only thing that my son, Duncan, learned in that week; compassion, responsibility, self-confidence, and pride are among the other benefits of horse camp. And, of course, it’s just plain fun.

“The kids just really enjoy it. They enjoy being around a horse,” said Diane James of Butler Creek Horse Farm. “It’s not like we are a farm country anymore where kids can just hop on a neighbor’s horse and go riding. Kids don’t seem to have that anymore – so they can come here and have a structured learning base.”

What do they learn?

GROOMING AND SADDLING

Grooming is not just about knowing the difference between a curry comb and a soft brush; children learn responsibility when they are charged with keeping track of their horse’s grooming items. As they are brushing manes and cleaning out hooves, they are having a hands-on learning experience about the different parts of a horse. The children take pride in their work and feel good about how their horse looks. They are also learning to care for another being. They are learning compassion.

Bridle, saddle blanket, saddle – by the end of a week-long camp they will know all the tack items and how to take care of them. Depending on their age and experience level, they may also be expected to tack up their horse.

“To brush out a horse and saddle it is a really, really empowering feeling—when they can actually put on the blankets, put on the saddle, learn to tie the cinch correctly, and have a horse that is ready to go!” said Lola Lang of Lang’s Horse and Pony Farm. It is also a time the campers can bond with their horse and become more comfortable and confident when they get on the horse.

LUNGING

Holding the lunge line while the horse circles around them gives the children a chance to see the horse move and get familiar with its personality



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before getting on. They learn the difference between walk, trot or jog, and canter or lope. Children are also taking initial steps in directing the horse's behavior.

RIDING

Many camps offer training with either Western or English styles for a variety of skill levels. For young riders, James stresses starting slowly. "There is so much to do with riding; you have to sit properly, you have to use your reins properly, your hands have to be in the proper position... you have to have a whole frame around the saddle to be in a proper position and it is too much to tell a kid everything all at once. I like to work on a little bit at a time so that they feel confident," she said. She also recommends starting them in a Western saddle so there is more at the front and back to hold them in.

Lessons, trail rides and games all work to improve the children's skills. Props such as barrels, cones and poles are used in the games as reference points for kids to turn their horse, or to switch to a new gait. "[Playing games] teaches them a lot about gaits, about control, about looking ahead, and about guiding the horse even though all they think they are doing is having a great time," said Lang.

Children, of course, love to have a chance to show off what they have learned, so many camps give a show for the parents on the last day. Part of the fun is "dressing up" the horses with bands for their manes and tails. They also demonstrate tricks like "around the world," turning themselves all the way around in a saddle. Performing group drills to music is part of part of the show at Lang's Horse and Pony Farm.

What do they experience?

THE PEACEFUL OUTDOORS

What struck me about the environment of horse camp compared to other camps is that it was calm and peaceful. A horse farm can be a beautiful setting for children to enjoy the outdoors and get some

exercise at a pace that is quiet rather than frenzied. And here in the Northwest, summer is great time to do it.

BONDING

Establishing a relationship with a horse is a unique and wonderful experience. "When you put kids together with horses, that's just a magical relationship," said Lang. Most often the kids that seek out that bonding experience are girls, although the camp Duncan attended had three boys. To encourage more boys, Lang's sometimes hosts a special camp for boys only.

PRIDE

Learning a new skill can be a source of pride for children. "It's kind of like the way how you feel when you win a race or a tournament," Duncan said.

FUN WITH A PURPOSE

"They are getting riding lessons, but they are also playing games on horseback. They are learning about grooming and saddling but it's all based on recreation as opposed to being staunch and stiff about it," said Lang. "They can really have a good time and learn a tremendous amount."

Which horse camp is right for my child?

Visiting the farm before signing up for camp is the best way to know if it is a place you will feel comfortable leaving your child. Having your child take a single lesson can help you to know if he or she will enjoy a day camp. Ask about opportunities to see the staff in action. For example, going on a trail ride with your child or watching the first day of camp might be some options the farm would encourage.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- Clean and healthy horses
- Organized tack rooms
- Tack that is clean and in good shape
- Friendly and positive staff

WHAT QUESTIONS TO ASK

- What is the experience level of the staff?
- What is the student to instructor ratio?
- What will the schedule be for the day?

After you have all the information you can make the assessment about whether it is right for your child. "It's really important that you listen to your feelings," said James. **NWHS**

Benefits of Horse Riding Camp

- New skills & knowledge
- Responsibility
- Compassion
- Pride in a job well-done
- Self-confidence
- Bonding with a horse
- Enjoying the outdoors
- Exercise
- Fun
- Making new friends

Looking for a camp? Here are two great places to start:

Butler Creek Horse Farm
Sedro-Woolley, Washington
360-724-4010
www.butlercreekhorsefarm.com

Lang's Horse and Pony Farm
Mount Vernon, Washington
360-424-7630
www.comeride.com