

The Making of a Horse Kid By Lynn Acton

“No no no!” screamed my grandson as his dad tried to lift him onto Bronzz’s back. “No want! No want!”

No problem, I assured my son-in-law. It’s *sensible* for children to be afraid of an animal who is, from their perspective, huge and unpredictable. Colin at age 2 ½ hadn’t even seen a horse close up since his last visit nearly a year ago. “He’ll ride when he’s ready,” I said.

The fastest way to turn fearful children of any age into happy horse kids is to give them the power to say no. Don’t push, coax, or reassure. Stay neutral. “OK. Tell me if you change your mind.” If opportunities are lost, so be it. Pressuring a frightened child doesn’t prove the horse can’t hurt him. It proves that his fears were not taken seriously, a bad message. Mind you, the same child might run right behind a horse, blithely unaware. Careful supervision is essential until danger and safety rules are understood.

Some children decide to ride as soon as their refusal is accepted. If not, find a horse related activity in the child’s comfort zone. Colin declined to pet or brush the horse, give him a treat, or sit in a saddle on a rack in the tack room. He wanted to watch *me* brush Bronzz. Observing gives our little person a chance to check out the behavior of this big, strange beast from a safe distance while the horse handler models how to behave around a horse. I gave Bronzz’s coat a lick and a promise, quitting before we overshot Colin’s two-year-old attention span. Our barn visit was a success.

Next the child needs a horse-related job. Even those who don’t want to ride can take pride in caring for horses, and nothing builds confidence like learning useful skills. Feeding is a popular job. Colin happily scooped feed into buckets, and stirred in the supplements I measured. Then he proudly hauled Bronzz’s bucket to the stall, where I helped him lift it onto the bucket hook. If the horses were in their stalls, I did a casual body block to keep Bronzz from looming over Colin. If the horses were outside, Colin sat on a designated chair at the far end of the aisle while I brought the horses in. A specific place to wait (a chair, tack room doorway, or behind a stall guard in an empty stall) works better than general instructions like, “Stay away from the horses.” When the horses were in their stalls, Colin was allowed to shut and latch Bronzz’s door. I chose Bronzz as “his” horse because Bronzz is very careful of personal space and adores small children. Consider each horse’s reliability carefully when planning activities with children.

Colin helped carry hay out to the paddock, solemnly held the hose as we filled the water tank, and scooped poopoo with his own small basket-

style pitchfork. He even managed to get a few manure muffins into the wheelbarrow. Always praise the accomplishment. “Look at all the poop you put in the wheelbarrow!” Don’t mention the mountains of it left. Yes, some clean bedding went to the manure pile, and yes, chores took 50% longer, but they had turned into quality time with my grandson.

When the horses had finished eating and been turned out, Colin went around and collected feed buckets, jiggling them till they fell off the bucket hooks. I don’t offer unasked for help. A wise nursery school teacher advised me long ago, “Never do for a child anything he can safely do for himself.” It robs the child of opportunities for accomplishment, and the self-esteem that builds.

Feeding led to giving treats, Colin’s hand *under* mine to protect his tiny fingers. Next came petting a horse. The weekend his two older cousins visited, he watched them ride, and we all did chores together. They are as proud to care for the horses as to ride them. Contrary to the common myth, animals do not teach children responsibility. We do, by modeling responsible animal care, with a positive attitude.

Nearing the end of his 3 week stay, Colin got up from nap one day and looked out his window to see me riding. “I ride B’onzz,” he announced. His mother bundled him into his barn clothes and brought him to the arena, quite prepared for him to change his mind. He didn’t. He sat on Bronzz, smiling and clutching the fistful of mane I put in his hand.

“Do you want Bronzz to walk?” we asked after a few minutes. “Yes.” I led Bronzz as Sarah held Colin aboard. You cannot let go of a child until he can wear a properly fitted safety helmet (NOT a bike helmet), hold on, balance himself, AND understand that he cannot get off by himself. Until then you need a dedicated side walker ready to pluck the little rider to safety should his mount trip or spook, or the child decide to bail out. Even when the child meets those criteria, he should have an adult at his side with a reassuring hand on his leg until he decides for himself he doesn’t need help. Confidence is built on security, and we provide security by letting the child decide when he’s ready for each new level of independence.

After two laps around the arena, Colin announced, “Gamma’s turn,” and leaned into his mother’s arms. When the child is ready to dismount, get him right off while he’s still happy. Sarah held him up to pet Bronzz’s neck and say, “T’ank oo, B’onzz.” As Colin marched back to the barn he announced loudly, “I ride Chiloh.” He’s officially a Horse Kid.

Resource: “Tiny Riders: Start Simple, Stay Safe” (Perfect Horse 9/05, p.34) offers excellent guidelines for safely introducing young children to riding.