



Horse riding it's not only about the medals

Horse-riding is an exceptionally rewarding activity that can equip children with positive skills and a life-long love of horses. If your child is keen to join the many children already riding in the SA, here's everything you need to know to get them started.



The benefits of learning to ride

Childhood is full of stories, songs and role-play games about horses, so learning to ride can add an exciting new dimension to your child's experience of their four legged friends. Aside from the obvious benefits of good physical exercise in the great outdoors, horse riding installs many other intrinsic qualities in our kids, including:-

- A lifelong love of horses that brings different rewards at different stages of childhood
- An inspiring and positive reason to keep active
- Good co-ordination and balance skills
- Improves coordination and fine motor skills
- Improved social skills
- Confidence - learning to ride and care for an animal that's twice their size can really empower children. Managing a "mind" teaches them communication, with confidence
- Responsibility - taking care of horses, feeding them and keeping them healthy teaches children about caring and responsibility.
- Release- being in the great outdoors will enhance your child's sense of happiness; help them to feel less stressed with a general feeling of well-being.

Experienced riders also talk about the freedom the sport provides and that there's nothing more exhilarating or rewarding than riding a horse in the great outdoors.



Hippotherapy

This is a form of physical, occupational and speech therapy in which a therapist uses the characteristic movements of a horse to provide carefully graded motor and sensory input. A foundation is established to improve neurological function and sensory processing, which can be generalized to a wide range of daily activities. Unlike therapeutic horseback riding (where specific riding skills are taught), the movement of the horse is a means to a treatment goal when utilizing as a treatment strategy.



The benefits of include:

- * Postural control and core stability
- * Gait training
- * Decreased muscle tone and spasticity
- * Improved energy expenditure
- * Sensory stimulation, including vestibular, somatosensory, and visual sensation
- * Improved vocalization
- * Better ability to follow directions
- * Enhanced quality of life due to increased function.

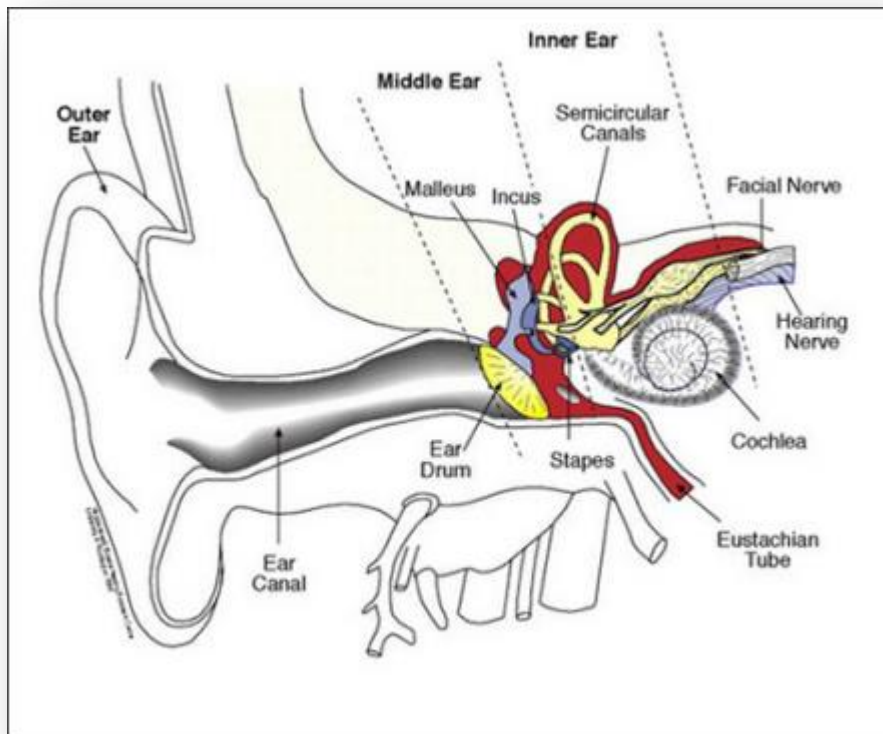
Living our horse to the full

Horse disciplines are many, Vaulting, Jumping, Eventing, Dressage, Endurance, Polo, Racing, Carting, Showing, and the list goes on. A horse is an expensive pet to maintain. And at a professional level, most horses are focused into a discipline and do not get exposed to other disciplines due to fear of injury. However, the horse is a versatile animal, and can be enjoyed across the disciplines.



We have put a clip together of the many different activities that can be enjoyed, and all of these can be done with novice children and adults that have never learned to ride. Please note, at all times the beginner riders are under supervision with a trainer or handler that knows the horse, or in the care of a horse experienced father or mother.

Engaging the middle ear



Horse riding - three dimensional movements stimulate the vestibular system and Balance

1. Postural and equilibrium responses

2.1 Postural background - These adjustments are especially important when children works at a table or during therapeutic horse-riding

2.2 – the trunk is not usually moved when the head is moved. When the body is moved, the child sometimes falls from the horse, as he feels “heavy and stiff”. These children struggle with tasks such as “hopscotch” or horse-riding.

2. Co-contraction - Children with vestibular problems have poor co-contraction and the muscles on one side of the body do not move in unison with muscles of the other side. This result in poor balance.

3. Protective extension – Children with poor body and gravity sensation make no effort to extend the hand and arms when falling.

4. Muscle tone

If the vestibular system is not effective, a low muscle tone is present and the child tires easily. This can also be the reason that many children with learning problems have difficulty in sitting straight up and holding the head up while writing.



Horse riding is the only sport having a positive effect on low as well as heightened muscle tone. The rhythmic movement of the pelvis will destroy spastic patterns and neck, back and body or trunk control will improve.

5. Eye and neck muscles

Children with learning problems as a result of poor functioning of the vestibular system, often have problems with eye movements.

The vestibular system is also responsible for keeping a stable picture during movement. To make this possible the vestibular system must make continuous adjustments in the neck and eye muscles to compensate for the movement of the



head. Without these adjustments is difficult for the child at school, to copy work from the black board into his notebook.

6. Eye movements / vision

Vision is influenced by the stimulation of the neck muscles. Smooth coordinated eye movements are essential to reading and other academic tasks.

7. Bilateral motor coordination

This refers to the ability of the child to co-ordinate movements of one side of the body as well as both simultaneously. Just by holding the reins and controlling the horse the children needs a lot of bilateral integration.

8. Laterality

An unique program is again develop to work on the horse, stimulating right-left discrimination, body image, concept and scheme. It is also important to work here on crossing of the midline and trunk-rotation.

9. Praxis

This relate to the ability to plan and execute skilled or non-habitual motor tasks.

10. Eye-hand coordination

We need fine muscle control and eye-hand coordination to write in the school. A definite program again is followed on the horse to work on this. It is however important that one first work on shoulder stability on the horse.



11. Hemispheric integration

Good hemisphere integration is of the utmost importance in the learning process. In order to keep balance on the horse, muscles strength of both sides of the body is required, and both hemispheres are involved.



12. Speech, language, auditory perception

One of the three vestibular canals is an auditory receptor. Speech development should therefore be one of the first aspects to be influenced positively in a horse-riding therapy program.

13. Spatial perception

The rhythmic three-dimensional movement of the horse evokes balance reactions through the passive shifting of the rider's gravity and this can influence the development of special perception. Children having problems with spatial perception sometimes reverse letters and number.

14. Overactive/ under-active vestibular system

Because there is close cooperation with the vestibular system, active behavior is caused by an overactive vestibular system and passive behavior by an under-active vestibular system.

15. Academic performance

There is a clear link between horse-riding and its influence on academic performance.

16. Self-image/emotions

A child's mental attitude will also improve with horse-riding therapy. Over and above developing the potential of the individual's feelings of self-confidence, self-esteem, and independence are nurtured as seen in current practice. Horse-riding also teaches self-discipline, daring, control and techniques which are applicable in many other situations.



Therapeutic Horse-riding at your School

Herewith a brief explanation of therapeutic horse riding and the service we provide:

Therapeutic horse riding as extramural activity

Horse Dynamics would like to present to you the wonderful, almost “magical” effect that horse-people-togetherness can have on various aspects of humanity.

Sir Winston Churchill said many years ago: **“There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man.”**

Wounded soldiers were put on horseback centuries ago and Hippocrates wrote about the “healing value” of the rhythmic movement of the horse. Why specifically the horse? I think the Lord created all those wonderful features in a horse. The greatness, pride, strength, love, playfulness, loyalty – a friend until death do us part. All those features which lend a horse so wonderful to the healing of the human body, soul and spirit. Therapeutic horse riding uses the horse and its environment to facilitate and master sensory motor activities. It is great fun and stimulating at the same time!

Equi therapy

Equi therapy is based on the movement of the fluid in the inner ear. To be able to learn, our body has to observe and our brain has to organise and digest these observations. It has been proved years ago already that learning problems like low muscle tone, trunk rotation, spatial orientation, mid-line crossing, eye movements, attention deficit disorder and others arise from a dysfunction of the sensory integration system; the organising of observations therefore does not develop correctly. The pony's three-dimensional, rhythmic movement activates the vestibular movement of the fluid in the inner ear, which opens up the communication channels between our observatory system and the two hemispheres of the brain. With toddlers more susceptible to the learning process, problems experienced by the child can be addressed through various motor development games being played on horseback. (Please Google: Therapeutic horse riding.)



Horse riding holds tremendous advantages for toddlers with or without problems....



We specifically concentrate on pre-school children between a proposed age of 2 years and 6 years. It has already been proved as the critical period of opportunities for the overall development of children. Be assured that your toddler's safety will always be our first priority and that we only use child-friendly ponies and capable staff.

Read more...

What does equi therapy offer the rider?

Therapeutic horse riding is a unique opportunity for any toddler:

- where therapy is fun;
- where contact is made with an animal and self-image is built;
- where horse riding and caring skills are developed.



What can you expect from a therapeutic session?

A therapist brings the ponies and grooms to the school's playground during school hours on a weekly basis.

During a therapeutic session the therapist, grooms and ponies form a team. Each one plays a unique role to ensure an effective therapeutic session. The *toddlers* participate in a group session which is divided into a walk, a pre-planned activity for the week and a nice slow trot respectively. The *therapist* assists with climbing on and off the pony, determines the pony's pace and explains the activity to the child. The *grooms* are well trained in handling the ponies and provide stability to the toddler as well as assist with the activities. The pony provides the constant three-dimensional movement pattern which attributes to the toddler's success!

<http://www.backyardhorseman.com/how-young-is-too-young-for-my-child-to-start-riding-lessons.html>

HOW YOUNG IS TOO YOUNG FOR MY CHILD TO START RIDING LESSONS?

Five questions a Parent should ask before booking that first lesson! With the love of horses striking some children at an early age, a parent often asks how soon they should get started with their child's equestrian education. I've listed below some ideas to consider that may help you decide when it's right for you and your child to start.



1. How great is their desire? Although it's advantageous to a parent's budget to hold off for as long as possible when giving their child formal training in riding horses, some children just can't wait. I have seen children from as young as age three completely obsessed with being around horses and there is an advantage to starting them very young before the world has convinced them large animals are something to fear.

2. How important is it to you for your child to ride? Horseback riding lessons are not only expensive but very time consuming. I suggest a parent doesn't even consider lessons unless they can commit to the child's training becoming part of their typical routine. It just isn't fair for a parent to get a kid that loves horses started only to decide their budget of time or money can no longer tolerate the burden.



3. What are your expectations? Let's be reasonable, obviously a three year old will not progress as quickly as a seven year old, but I have to admit there are exceptions. Of course the earlier a child is started, the farther along they will be at a younger age and the more natural riding a horse will become. (There are medical studies involving the effects of motion to the development of the inner ear in young children and the benefits to a child's overall development.)

4. Can you find a Trainer? Many riding schools will not take a child under the age of seven and for good reason. If the school involves group lessons then the personal supervision needed for a younger child to stay safe is not available. You will have to look long and hard to find a suitable trainer for a much younger child. Such trainers are few and far between, but they are out there. To find one I suggest you frequent some local shows and watch for who's in charge of the youngest riders. You will also want to assess their personality and rapport with the children and whether or not they foster confidence in the rider through positive re-enforcement.

5. Consider abbreviated instruction. Some trainers will allow a

young sibling to tag onto the end of a family member's lesson. Even a supervised walk around to cool out the horse can be enough of a positive experience to foster confidence and the ability to move with the horse prepares the child for what's to come into their future.

The bottom line is, if you're willing to give your child whatever time is required, let them move at a speed that is suitable for their development, can find a qualified and cautious instructor with trustworthy equine partners, you are willing to pay for their valuable time and expertise and your child has a strong desire at such an early age to have an equine experience, then by all means find the opportunity to foster that love of horses in them. I can promise you no regrets and only the satisfaction, you as a parent will discover, from giving your child something that can affect them positively for the rest of their lives!



Benefits of Horses for Children

10 Ways Horses Build Character in Children

1. **Learn responsibility** – When caring for a horse your child will very quickly learn that they need to take responsibility for them. The best way to really bring about this responsibility is to make sure they take care of all the work involved in caring for the horse such as feeding it, grooming it, cleaning, and saddling and riding it. As with any child, they may feel that they should get to ride and play with the horse but they may not want to have to take care of it and want to leave that to you. One thing that results from a child taking care of their own horse is that they seem to have a deeper love for the horse when they put the effort into taking care of it. Once they understand that the horse needs them in order to survive and that they cannot ride without taking care of it, they will quickly learn that the work pays off.
2. **Learn Trust** – Horses don't work well with trainers if they can't trust them. Likewise an owner or rider must trust their horse if they plan on having a good time. If you can't trust your horse then your horse probably won't trust you which will make the horse more likely to disobey you.
3. **Learn to be Open minded** – When dealing with horses one will realize that horses don't all act the same way. One will continually learn from their horse and your child will continually learn from their horse which may carry on into other areas of life.
4. **Build Confidence** – Horses can look big and be intimidating to any child. Once your child has the chance to handle their horse on their own they will receive a huge boost in confidence. This may allow them to build confidence in the areas of their life





such as relationships or school. This may all end up as a huge boost for a child's self-esteem.

5. **Learn patience** – Horses won't immediately do what you tell them to do. Sometimes it takes a little while to get everything to work just right. So if your child has to deal with a horse that won't just give in to its wishes right away they may develop patience learn to apply this to other things as well.
6. **Self-Discipline** – Horses aren't easy to take care of. Many children lack dedication and decide to give up on something as soon as it gets difficult and they can't master it right away. Since horses need to be tended to early, your child may learn to get up early in the morning and get to work outside and take care of their horse which eventually can teach them many other aspects of discipline.
7. **Teaches Sensitivity** – Horses may become disturbed if their handler doesn't handle them in the right way. Having a horse will teach a child that they can't just assume a horse will follow directions or calm down if they talk in any voice. A handler has to learn to speak reassuringly to a horse and understand its behaviour. Also a handler must learn why a horse is misbehaving whether out of fear, anger, or any other reason.
8. **How to learn from our mistakes** – Most kids aren't able to just take on a task and perform it perfectly. This rule definitely applies to horses as well because a rider also has to deal with how the horse is acting. A child will quickly learn not to make the same mistake again after they learn the consequences of it. The important thing is to learn from your mistakes and not dwell on them though.
9. **Learn Respect** – Horses can be dangerous when not dealt with in the correct manner. Having a horse will quickly teach a child that they cannot disrespect a horse without consequences. After learning that they have to respect a horse a child will learn to respect other things as well.
10. **To have Fun** - The most important rule of anything is to have fun. If a child's not having fun with their horse then they are less likely to want to take care of the chores that come along with it which may lead to disinterest. Be sure not to push your child too hard to do just chores and make sure they get to have a good time while riding the horse.



Finding a school

Many schools will take children as young as three but some prefer them to be at least five or six. They usually teach in small groups to ensure each pupil receives a good level of attention, but if you're happy to pay more you may be able to book individual lessons too.



Schools also operate different lesson styles and activities so it's often wise to 'shop around' until you find a good equestrian school that your child feels comfortable with, complete with lessons and activities that are most suited to their nature. Many schools will advise a one to one session to start with so that your child gets a good grip of the basics before joining a group and you shouldn't be expected to commit to a series of lessons until you're fully confident they will enjoy it.

Starting out

First lessons usually involve getting to know the horses and will teach basic riding skills such as:

- getting on and off the horse
- how to sit correctly
- how to walk and trot
- holding the reins correctly
- signals to guide, steer and (most importantly!) stop the horse.



Children are always paired with horses and ponies of a suitable size for their height and level of ability so they feel happy, confident and in control of their actions. And if you're worried about them galloping off into the sunset, fear not! The first lesson will usually take place in an enclosed sand school or barn specifically for beginners and your child will only leave the barn once the instructor feels they have reached a suitable standard.

You will probably pay more for lessons in an establishment that has an indoor barn or riding school, however it does mean that your children will still be able to enjoy their riding in the middle of winter.

If your child is fairly small it is likely to be some time before they are strong enough to be able to achieve the basics, so you might find that they benefit from lessons in the school and hacking out so that it keeps their interest going.

Horse care is just as important as riding as is one of the essentials that your child needs to know about. Part of the lesson will probably be taken up with leading the pony, grooming and tacking up so don't feel that this is a waste. In a half hour lesson your child may only spend 20 minutes actually riding so its worthwhile finding out if stable care is included in the lesson or not.



Overall, lessons should be fun, progressive and constructive with lots of individual/team exercises, games and activities. The teacher is likely to utilize different lesson plans to introduce a wide range of activities that will boost confidence, help your child to get to know the horses and build up trust.

Julia comments " My children share my love of horses, I think its not just the riding bit, its the fact that it is a living animal that needs a lot of care that it is important as well. You can't jump off a horse and leave the wheels spinning, like you can a bike - however tired and cold you are you always have to put your horse or pony first and I think that that is a good lesson to learn"

Getting kitted out

The riding school should be able to provide hats for hire (or as part of your fee) and for small children body protectors should also be available for hire. A hat protector is essential if you plan more than a couple of lessons and you should be able to get these for about R250-R500. As you wouldn't put your child in a car without a car seat, you shouldn't consider putting your child on a horse without a hat protector. A cycle helmet is perfect for small children, they light and offer the correct protection.

You'll be advised to dress your child in comfortable clothing that doesn't restrict movement - though it's best to avoid baggy clothing as it can flap around and cause alarm to the horse or pony. Boots or shoes with a small heel and smooth sole are best as they'll have a better grip on the stirrups and help them to feel secure.

Don't be tempted to splash out on a full riding kit after the first session! Your child may be impressed by their more experienced peers in jodhpurs and riding jackets but that can all come later, when you know they're in it for the long run....

Safety considerations

As with many sports, accidents can happen with horse riding so learning the right safety techniques and precautions is absolutely essential. It's wise to check how the school approaches safety and enquire how much of the course is dedicated to teaching safety



techniques. Most schools will take it very seriously and teaching children how to treat horses, prepare them for riding and what to do if a fall occurs should form an integral part of the teaching structure.

You can find out more about the [safety aspects](#) of riding from the British Horse Society



How much can I expect to pay?

Horse riding can be a more expensive activity than ball sports but the benefits and level of enjoyment it offers do make it worth the expense. You'll probably find lesson prices vary depending on the school, area and type/length of the lesson so if budget is essential to you, look around until you found a school that offers more cost-effective options. A half hour lessons costs between R100 and R500 depending on location and the standard of the instructor.

If your child wants to do a course, check on how payment works and what happens if you miss out on a lesson - especially if you have lots of planned weekends away and can't guarantee your child will be there for each and every lesson.

Horses and children's books

Your child's love of horses and riding can be indulged further with books and stories on the subject. From old classics like Black Beauty to modern guide books on riding techniques, they'll love the variety different books provide and will be able to pick up new techniques, advice and lots of inspiration. Here are some of our favorites:

[The Usborne Little Book of Riding & Pony Care](#)

[Riding for Kids](#)

[Black Beauty](#)

[The Black Stallion](#)

[Born to Trot](#)

