

Creating a Beneficial Horse-Showing Project for Youth, Part 1

February 26, 2014

Make your kids' horse-showing experience positive with these five tips.



Both kids and parents should set goals for the horse-showing project and determine how involved they want to be. *Journal* photo.

By AQHA Professional Horseman Douglas Householder in The American Quarter Horse Journal

Once a kid is involved in a horse project, there are a few things will help ensure that **blue ribbons** aren't the project's only benefit. Utilizing **horses as a developmental tool** is far from an exact science. The following philosophy was gleaned from more than 20 years of work with moms and dads, 4-H volunteer leaders, youth-oriented **horse trainers** and, most importantly, kids.

1. Be aware of the development stage of youth.

There are three developmental stages for **youth with horses**: beginners, intermediate and advanced. Remember that age does not always determine the experience level of the child.

Beginners should develop basic riding skills, **learn to ride safely**, gain confidence and like horses. Intermediate youth start developing **basic training skills**, and as their competitive nature surfaces, they will listen to details and practice longer because they want to improve.

Advanced youth have developed into functionally correct horsemen and can incorporate more advanced training skills into their **riding sessions**. They want to know why things are done a certain way. Advanced youth start displaying individual personality traits that will be unique to them for life. Some become extremely competitive and compete a lot throughout their high school years. Others, once they've demonstrated a certain degree of achievement to themselves and their peers, back away from competition. These youths usually become more involved in school and other activities, and feel very good about themselves as **accomplished riders**.

2. **Purchase horses to fit developmental stages of youth.**

Beginner horses should be gentle, functional and safe. Often called "packers," beginner horses should walk, trot and **lope on the correct lead**. They also should stop and back easily. Beginner horses should be easy to saddle, bridle, trim and load. **Hunter or timed-event horses** should be solid and dependable in their event.

Riding horses is even more fun with friends. Join the American Quarter Horse Youth Association, and connect with other horse-loving youth all over the country!

Intermediate horses should have the same characteristics as the beginner horse, but should perform at a higher level. **Young horses** or **older horses** with minor training challenges are acceptable for intermediate youth who have developed solid **horsemanship skills** and are ready to learn **horse-training skills**. Advanced horses are often older, well-trained and therefore low maintenance, to allow the youth time to work on other activities and projects. Young horses or special event horses like reiners, **cutters** or jumpers are challenging options for advanced youth.

3. **Commit yourself to your child's project.**

Horse projects aren't free. Without a parent's help, it can be tough for a kid to get involved. Often, other adults are willing to help a child get started in a **horse project** by trading out stall cleaning on the kid's part for **riding lessons** on their horse. Just as kids are encouraged to set goals for their horse project, it's also important for adults to decide how involved they want to be.

Parents in the low-commitment category spend little time supporting the **youth's horse interest**. Their child is generally involved in **recreational-type riding** with little emphasis on education and skills development.

Intermediate involvement from parents usually means the child participates in competitive events. Parents at this level of commitment are often frustrated due to their partially organized program and subsequent level of achievements.

Highly committed parents provide support for planning, studying, practicing and competing throughout the time the **youth ride their horses**. Committed parents usually help build and strengthen groups where their kids and other kids ride and compete.

4. **Encourage youth to join horse organizations.**

AQHYA provides worldwide opportunities for youths 18 and under, including leadership seminars, horse bowl, speech contests, judging, showing and many leadership roles. **Breed organizations like AQHYA** typically operate on a national or state level and provide opportunities to learn and compete.

4-H is organized on local or county levels and provides educational opportunities in a group setting. 4-H programs typically offer horsemanship practices and clinics, plus recreational riding opportunities like trail rides or parades. Interaction with senior 4-H members who serve as role models is important for younger

members. Eventually they will have the opportunity to accept leadership roles, become involved in community contributions, work as a team member and receive support from other adults.

5. Help kids design a guiding road map.

Parents should explore educational and competitive opportunities by talking to county extension agents, 4-H leaders and other parents, plus performance and breed association representatives. Check out a list of [AQHYA advisers](#) by state to find out how to get involved with your local [AQHYA group](#). Parents should then present opportunities to their kids, so the kids, not the parents, can decide what they'd like to do. When the child makes plans and the family agrees upon them, they should be written down.

Scholarships, leadership opportunities and contests – oh my! Don't miss out. Join [AQHYA](#) and take your horse-showing project to the next level.

Beginner family plans obviously focus on the immediate year. Later you'll be aware of other good opportunities, and a longer-range road map will start to take shape.

Don't be afraid to take risks. Kids need controlled risk to provide adventure. Risk develops courage, confidence, trust, faith and ability to handle fear and growth. **Roping at a big rodeo**, qualifying for a national show, exhibiting at a major stock show, or **purchasing a horse** with hard-earned money all provide adventure.

School and other activities usually demand more time as kids get older. School activities are extremely important, because of peer pressure from classmates, with whom kids spend a high percentage of their time. One-hundred percent **horse activity**, with no other interests, is probably not good. Competing hard with horses for several years, then slacking off of horse activities late in high school is a workable plan to have the best of both worlds. Owning a low-maintenance horse, or specialty event horse(s), and riding and competing if and when possible, is another workable approach for advanced youths. Some advanced youths concentrate on a short term (March-August) **futurity horse**, then sell the horse.

With young people's busy schedules and time pressures, be sure that their horse remains an asset and never becomes a liability.

6. Track your family's progress.

As your youth set goals, it's helpful to have a method of tracking their progress toward those goals. [OnlineStable.com](#) is a new record-keeping system that allows them to do just that. For youth who want a lifetime with horses, it's important they know the financial and time realities of **horse ownership**. With [Online Stable](#), you can track **horseback-riding hours**, time spent with the project animal, achievements, community service and leadership. Additionally, you can track a horse's health record, feeding habits and expenses. At the end of a year, you can download and print reports of all your activity from year to year. Online Stable can also send alerts reminding you of your animal's upcoming appointments and important dates, such as dewormings, vet and farrier visits, etc. For more information, check out [AQHA's Online Stable announcement](#).

Check back next week for more tips on how to create a beneficial horse-showing project for youth.

AQHA Member Benefit Spotlight

Money doesn't grow on trees. That's why AQHA gives members a **Quarter Horse Outfitters** discount. Shop and save today!