

Northwest Horse Source Magazine

Dr. Hannah Evergreen

Horses and Youths:

Horses stole my heart from the moment I laid eyes on them as a child. This attraction quickly led to riding lessons and shortly after, a horse of my own. I experienced firsthand the importance and benefits of horses for children. Horses have changed my life forever and have shaped me into the person I am today. Over the years I have also watched horses teach the same important lessons that I learned, to the many young people involved with them. In particular, the deep impact that horses have on children by teaching them life skills.

Important lessons learned: Assertiveness, responsibility and compassion.

Horses teach children assertiveness and leadership. Assertiveness is the ability to appropriately and confidently take charge and express opinions in a situation. Horses rely on their human to be an assertive leader and reward this behavior by being compliant and well behaved. Horses give children immediate feedback and reward when they are being assertive to help teach this important life skill. This has helped many a shy child come out of their shell and raise their self-esteem. Learning assertiveness through horses also teaches children how to control their anger and aggression; those of us who have learned this lesson as a child (or an adult) have found that anger puts us right back to square one with our horses and makes us have to re-establish trust all over again.

Horses teach children responsibility. When children are put in charge of the daily chores of their horse's care they are rewarded with and motivated by riding and companionship. We all know that it's not easy caring for a horse. There are consistent, structured chores every day, no matter what... cleaning out the stall and paddock, feeding, watering, grooming, exercising and training. Horses rely on their people to make sure their needs are being met. They are also quick to point out to their children if their needs are not being met... kicking and whinnying in the barn when they are hungry, knocking over buckets when they are thirsty, finding the perfect piles of manure to roll in when their stalls aren't cleaned... Horses leave no room for excuses. Children should also be encouraged to keep detailed records of deworming, vaccinations, dental floats/yearly veterinary exams, and farrier care. 4-H and Pony Club are helpful programs that time and time again teach children responsibility and record keeping. Children that become successful horse owners develop an ingrained sense of responsibility by the time they are adults that stays with them and helps them throughout their life.

Horses teach compassion: Learning to love and care for an animal teaches children compassion for all life. I believe horses have an extra special ability to heal people and this innate quality seems to soften the hearts of those they encounter. Children are especially sensitive to this and those children raised with the bond of a horse develop a strong sense of unconditional love for all life. Gandhi taught us that "The greatness of a nation can be judged by the way its animals are treated" and growing up with animals only strengthens this.

Assertiveness, responsibility and compassion guided me through many years of school to become a veterinarian and still guide me today. Seeing the importance of these skills in my life reminds me constantly of the importance of passing these skills on to the younger generations through horses. Now that I have fulfilled my dream of becoming a veterinarian, I feel a great responsibility to in turn give back to the youths of our community.

Community service is part of my holistic approach as a veterinarian, and that includes educating the young people. I was involved in horse 4-H throughout my childhood, so naturally I enjoy doing talks and demonstrations for the local 4-H clubs. Doing talks for horse rescue groups has also been a good way for me to influence young people in our community. I have fond memories of riding along with my vet as a child, so in-turn, I also have an extra seat in my truck for kids (and adults) with a strong interest in veterinary medicine to ride along with me as I go about my daily farm calls.

It's only natural for those of us touched by horses to want to share what we've learned with the next generation. I know the young people of today will follow in our footsteps and do the same. Horses have kept this cycle going throughout the generations by teaching us these important life skills in a way that no other can teach. There are many ways to share horses with children such as teaching riding lessons, supporting local 4-H, Pony Clubs, and horse camps. Sometimes, all that it takes is offering a lead-line ride to an eager child on your trusty horse to get them hooked. Once their hooked, you've changed that child for the better for the rest of their life.