

Teaching Pre-Schoolers To Ride

I tell parents that I teach a pre-schooler the same things I teach an adult beginner. My techniques are less verbal, but it's all basic dressage. Working with a pre-schooler is like working with a young horse. Whatever we do lays the foundation for all subsequent learning.

I honor the student's desire for "connection", one's own emotional/spiritual attachment to the horse. This is why grooming is so important to the pre-schooler. I always teach compassion. "How would it feel to the horse?" – if we didn't clean the dirty places under the saddle, if the saddle blanket were doubled over, if the bridle were crooked, if the saddle were too tight?

Compassion extends to the way a rider sits on the horse and how he uses his aids. "How would it feel to the horse" – if you were sitting sideways, or had one rein longer than the other, or were pulling on the reins while you were asking the horse to go, if you were to hit him with the whip out of the clear blue, or – without warning – just pull on the reins?

Just as in training a young horse, symmetry is important. As with all beginners, I insure that the reins are the same length. All of our reins have "stops", little tabs on them – so the rider can easily tell if the reins have slipped or have become uneven in length.

I work a lot with straight lines. If the rider is heavier in one hand, if he sits off to one side, if he uses one leg more strongly than the other; a rider inadvertently struggles with straight lines. I teach pre-schoolers "school figures". Pre-schoolers are very much "tuned in" to shapes and letters. They love dressage school figures!

Building confidence is essential to the training of any rider. We maximize safe experiences by using school horses we've owned for ten years or more. In the beginning the instructor walks along side the pre-schooler. We also do trail rides this way. We see a child's confidence grow dramatically with each passing lesson.

Often parents have unrealistically *low* expectations for their pre-schoolers. In being anxious to assist, parents often "dis-empower" their children. Perhaps the biggest benefit to the pre-schooler of riding lessons is showing the *parent* what the child is actually capable of doing!

Do pre-schoolers *like* riding lessons? They must. (In addition to our older students) I've taught well over one hundred pre-schoolers in the last ten years. Do they learn anything? Well, I've seen kids who *only* took riding lessons as pre-schoolers return as teenagers. Much to the consternation of their peers, they mysteriously do in fact "know how to ride".

Our experience and the research of others support the fact that riding lessons impact little kids on a neurological level in a very positive way. It is satisfying to know that my lessons to a pre-schooler are preserved even if the child *doesn't remember them!* Wow!

Kristann Cooper, with an MS in counseling psychology, is Executive Director of Centaur Rising. The 501©(3) nonprofit organization works to restore Man's connection with Nature. The welfare of *all horses* is our primary mission, as is the promise of personal growth for humans. This is accomplished through the teaching of classical horsemanship. Please visit our website at www.CentaurRising.org. Reach us at info@CentaurRising.org or 303-838-5086. Your financial support is very much needed for our work to continue. Thank you!