

# RIDING LESSONS FOR YOUR CHILD Is your child old enough and what to expect

*By Katherine Blocksdorf, About.com Guide*

Horses are good for children, and there are many reasons why a child should learn to horseback ride. A parent should be glad of any request that gets their child away from the TV, cell phone, game console or computer! That first lesson can be a step towards a lifelong activity that benefits both body and soul.

Before your child begins you'll want an approved riding helmet, proper boots and comfortable clothes. A torso protector although bulky, is a good idea too. Most garments can be bought used, but a helmet is the one thing you will want to buy new, off the store shelf. Store staff can help you make sure that the helmet fits your child properly.

## **How Old Should a Child Be to Take Lessons?**

How old should a child be to take lessons? Most instructors will take children as young as seven, but some will take even younger children. How much any child will take away from a lesson will depend on their maturity level. Some very young children will be able to grasp the basic skills quickly, while others will really be enjoying the 'pony ride'. Either situation is fine, as long as everyone is safe and happy.

## **Your Child's First Lesson**

During a lesson, very young children will need to be led, or have a side walker. To ride effectively, you must have a physical presence on a horse. Young children may not have the physical strength and dexterity to manage a horse completely on their own. Lessons should be private or semi-private so the coach or instructor is nearby at all times.

Older children will probably progress from lead line to longe line, to riding by themselves within a few lessons. Very keen children may feel they are being held back, but trust the coach's instincts. You'll want your child to feel successful, but the coach will know what is safe. Often a child will ask to ride another horse. Trust that the coach knows how to match riders to horses and will best be able to decide when your child is ready for a change.

Young children will probably enjoy a half hour lesson, rather than a full hour. It's better to keep them wanting more, than wearing them out with long lessons, and have them begging to dismount.

Even young children should be taught to move safely around a horse on the ground, and help groom and tack up as much as they can. Again, the coach or an assistant should stay very close as children are easily distracted and can forget the 'rules' quickly.