

How Young Is Too Young?

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THE prospect of seeing their charge mounted on a pony small enough to fit in a car at the earliest opportunity is often sufficient payoff for horsey mothers who have to put riding on hold during their pregnancy and with a newborn baby.

But the way in which a child is introduced to ponies and riding can remain an influence well into adult life. A safe, fun experience will probably result in a lifelong love of horses — but one scare can put a child off forever.

Riding schools tend not to take children under a certain age because of insurance restrictions. The British Horse Society (BHS) admits many do not cater for toddlers — parents report about their struggles of finding a school that will take their children under the age of five — but each individual centre has a different policy.

According to the BHS, communication is a key skill required in order to learn how to ride a horse, and the child must have acquired the skill to understand basic instructions.

SOME centres across the country have spotted a gap in the “mini” market and devised “pony playgroups” as well as short, individual lessons.

Natalie Bucklar, owner and chief instructor at East Devon Riding Academy, says teaching the under-fives is more labour intensive and needs experienced instructors.

“Group riding makes more money per hour, but a group of three or four-year-olds would need more staff to be safe, so many riding schools don’t bother,” she says. “It would increase the already enormous overheads.”

Natalie runs a pony playgroup, which lasts an hour and a half, with the option of a 15-minute individual lesson afterwards for one- to four-year-olds.

“We set up our pony playgroup specifically to help young children engage with ponies, enabling them to begin their equine journey in an enjoyable, confidence-giving and ethical environment,” she says.

“At such a young age, it’s about learning balance, basic communication and respect for the pony. I strongly believe this should be through age appropriate activities, not round and round in circles or holding on and bouncing around,” adds Natalie. “These early lessons are the foundations for possibly a lifetime of involvement with horses.”

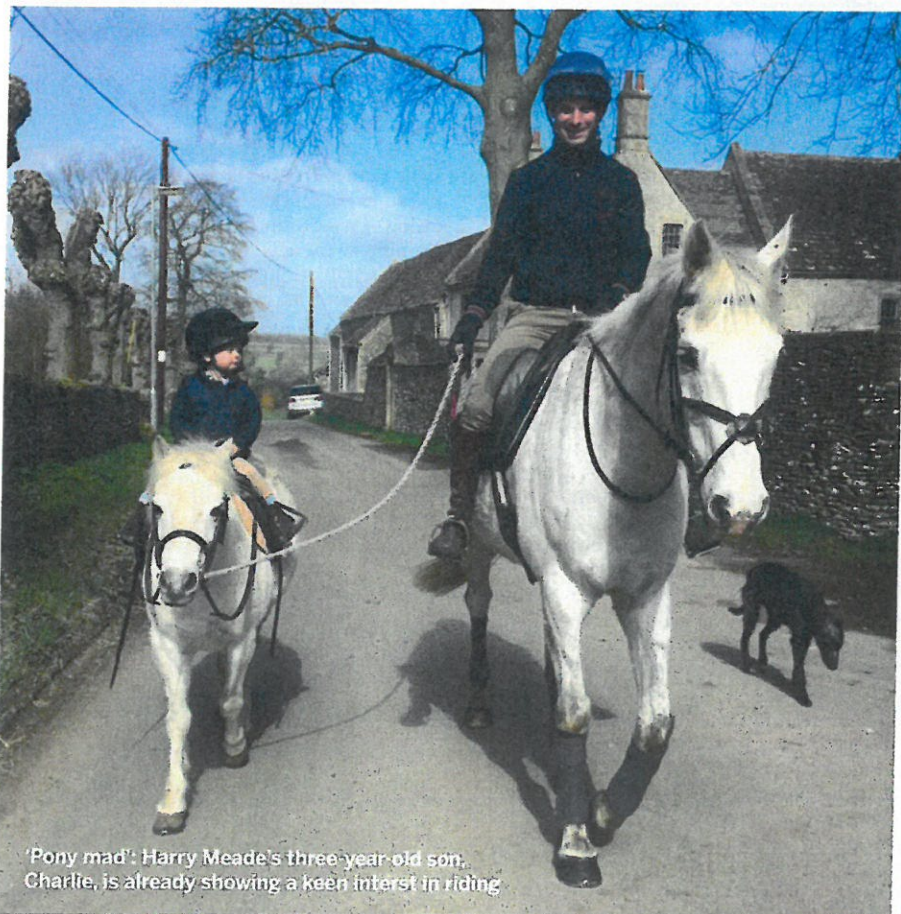
Caroline Pluck, who teaches for the South Oxfordshire Hunt (South) branch of the Pony Club, says they hold a “mini” camp for three days alongside junior camp for children from three to four-year-olds up to the age of eight.

“The emphasis is on fun,” she says, “with lots of entertaining activities such as steering around blocks or through parallel poles, learning balance and basics while laughing and smiling.”

“I don’t feel there’s a right or wrong age to start riding, but it’s important for parents to realise that they are introducing their children to a sport that could be lifelong, with many highs and lows, and expenses. However, it can

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NATALIE BUCKLAR



‘Pony mad’: Harry Meade’s three-year-old son, Charlie, is already showing a keen interest in riding

Pictures courtesy of Millie Moore/East Devon Riding Academy and Harry Meade



The main thing is to make it fun: Sarah Parker's son Owen, 3, is already enjoying being around ponies

SEVEN RIDING SCHOOLS AROUND BRITAIN THAT TAKE UNDER-FIVES

- 1 Stag Lodge Stables, London.** Three to six-year-olds. Pony Park Lessons, 30-minute lesson, £25 weekday/£30 weekends. ridinginlondon.com, 020 8974 6066
- 2 Freshfields Equestrian Centre, Market Drayton, Shrops.** Four years old and above. Lead-round sessions, 30-minute lesson, £25. ridingschool.org.uk, 01630 652495
- 3 Feather Bed Stables & Riding School, Stratford-upon-Avon, Warks.** Two years old and above. Tots ride, 15-20 minutes, £15. Sunday morning tots session, 30 minutes, £20. Kids club, £35. featherbedstables.co.uk, 07974 374854
- 4 East Devon Riding Academy, Branscombe, East Devon.** One-to-four-year-olds. Pony playgroup, £6.95 plus individual 15-minute lesson, £14.95. ridingacademy.co.uk, 07771 903220

teach them to think of something other than themselves, help them make great friends, learn to work alongside other people and challenge themselves."

"When doing this job, you need a quiet, happy pony who is trained to cope with the parents walking alongside and other challenges that come with young children — running, wobbling, screaming and even tantrums," says Natalie.

"It's quite a specialist job for a pony and you have to be mindful that they haven't chosen their job, so kind and patient training is important. It takes time that some riding schools are unwilling to invest."

Caroline agrees: "A steady, reliable pony is best. Looks are not important, but temperament is," she says. "My daughters were lucky to have a Shetland in his 20s, who they rode in a basket saddle before they could walk."

"When to start riding can also depend greatly on a child's circumstances, too," adds Caroline. "Children born into horsey families do have the opportunity to ride earlier."

EVENTER Harry Meade's children, Charlie, three, and Lily, five, share a pony at home, 10 minutes from the Badminton Estate, but it's Charlie who seems to be showing the most interest.

"He's pony mad," says Charlie's mother Rosie.

"From about six months old, they both started sitting up in front of me on the saddle to get a feel of the movement," says Harry, who believes some children are born "bitten by the bug".

"Ones who are not can easily be put off," he adds. "I think it's great to get them up there without going overkill. It's fairly easy to gauge that some children are mad keen and others are more cautious — you're more likely to put off a child by trying to over expose them."

Three-year-old Luke Reynolds, son of *H&H's* showing columnist Simon Reynolds, has a Welsh section A.

"Luke is a typical boy," says his mother, Natalie. "Some days he's mad keen and other days he's not. He can often prefer brushing and mucking out to riding. We just keep it fun and go for a hack on the lead-rein around the village. Sometimes this involves taking toy super heroes or going dressed as Superman!"

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NATALIE REYNOLDS ON HER THREE-YEAR-OLD

Natalie says if Luke wasn't lucky enough to have his own pony, they would consider going to a riding school.

"I think children are more likely to stick with riding when other children are around. I do fear sometimes that three is too young, but I've seen some three-year-olds, usually girls, who absolutely love competing."

"Instead of the show ring, I'd much rather Luke go to Pony Club and have a more relaxed introduction that isn't based on winning or losing — where fun, games and camaraderie are high on the agenda," adds Natalie.

"I do think riding teaches children kindness, respect and discipline. It can create



Luke Reynolds, three, with his father Simon

new friendships with other children and a real bond with a pony.

"It also teaches them how to lose gracefully, as well as working hard to improve."

Showing producer Sarah Parker (née Challinor) has had one starter pony, Muffin, for her son Owen, also three, and he has now progressed on to his second pony, Jack.

"The main thing for children under five is to make riding fun," says Sarah. "There's no way I would get my son to sit through a showing class of 20-plus. We have been to shows that are just for under-12s, with varied classes."

"Owen loved gymkhana classes — even though he was the slowest, he was standing up in his stirrups cheering the others on."

WEATHER is also key to keeping it fun. "For young children I feel that better weather conditions are best," says Caroline. "I would never expect a young child to ride in the wet or cold, but the keen ones will still want to!"

For Harry's late father, triple Olympic gold medallist Richard Meade, "teaching" children was low down on his list of priorities when it came to riding.

"Like learning language, he believed a child would just pick it up," says Harry. "He felt that teaching could override a natural knack and feel for a horse. It's about having fun and not being over-taught. If the children don't feel like riding for a few days, that's okay, too." **H&H**

Pictures courtesy of Natalie Reynolds and Sarah Parker