A VOICE FOR HORSES

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EMOTIONS

Includes article on children and ponies

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The Emotional Bond That Supports Children

How Horses Can Offer Children Valuable Emotional Support

Many of us can get quite emotional around horses. Sometimes we sense their emotions. Sometimes they evoke our emotions. Children often meet horses with a natural openness that can give them better: an emotional connection, which is much needed by many kids these days in a world full of unrest and uncertainty. In my opinion, this is something we as teachers, trainers and parents can and should support and facilitate.

PHOTO: VIEW BY KWP / KAJA WENNICH PHOTOGRAPHY.

The emotional connection with horses is cherished by people of all ages.

Horses are prey animals—wired for survival through sensitivity. Their safety depends on their ability to read energy, emotion, and intention in others. They notice changes in muscle tension, breathing, heart rhythm, scent, and micro-movements—signals of emotions that often arise before we are even aware of our own feelings.

One of the most often-cited examples of emotions evoked around horses is fear. We know that if we are scared when riding, the horse feels it too, and it might make the horse anxious. But when we connect with horses, a whole spectrum of emotions may arise. When I talk to horse people about emotions, love is also mentioned: love for the horse, love for what they do for us. Yet, horse life can spark a wide range of feelings: joy, pride, curiosity, anger, frustration, sadness, shame. No matter what emotions, horses can mirror them, which can help us humans recognize and tackle our emotions.

A Space Without Judgement and Pressure

The emotional connection with horses is cherished by people of all ages. But children often meet horses with a natural openness—they haven't yet been shaped by years of habits or expectations. Where adults may think, (over)analyze, or compare, many young children simply feel and respond. This honest, intuitive connection allows them to listen deeply and build trust with the horse from the very beginning.

In a time where so many children are struggling with anxiety, stress, and feelings of loneliness, the bond between children and horses can offer something rare—a space where they can simply be, without judgment or pressure. The horse doesn't care about grades or performance; it responds to presence. That makes the relationship both safe and deeply meaningful. The bond can support emotional awareness, regulation, and resilience. It is a bond, I feel, that we as teachers, trainers, and parents need to be mindful of and help facilitate.

Children's Emotions Around Horses

During the school years, children experience a wide range of emotions as they navigate learning, friendships, and growing independence. I do not work in horse therapy, but I meet so many parents telling me that their kids carry emotional challenges, i.e. anxiety, loneliness, and low confidence. When I observe the kids being around their horses during lessons or while I am doing bodywork, it is obvious that horses make children feel calm, safe, and more at ease.

Many scientific studies show that interactions with horses can support children's emotional development. In a randomized trial, children who participated in an equine-facilitated learning program showed lower stress hormone levels (Pendry, Smith & Roeter, 2014). Another trial showed improved emotional and social competence (Pendry & Roeter, 2013). Horses respond sensitively to children's inner states, offering non-judgmental feedback that helps them recognize, express, and regulate feelings such as fear, joy, or frustration—skills that extend far beyond the stable.

How We Can Help and Support

We can guide children to understand that their emotions matter and that they can influence the space around them through presence and care. When children are leading horses, grooming, or riding, we can ask them questions such as:

"How are you feeling right now?" (self-awareness)

"What happens if you slow your breathing?" (self-regulation)

"How do you think the horse is feeling right now?" (empathy)

"How do you think the horse feels about this?" (responsibility)

Over time, this awareness builds a foundation of confidence and self-trust. The horse's honest responses become gentle guidance, showing the child that emotions are safe to feel and possible to navigate. It's not about perfection, but about awareness—a life skill that supports emotional balance and wellbeing far beyond the stable.

We can furthermore support kids by teaching them mindfulness, which helps them connect and focus.

PHOTO: PHOTOSBYAHE

Horses listen—and through them, children learn to listen too.

better. We can suggest that they sometimes just hang out watching horses, noticing the emotions that arise. We can also help by choosing riding schools that make mindfulness a priority.

A Valuable Support for Life

What a child learns with a horse can go far beyond the barn. In the classroom, they may recognize when frustration rises—and choose to breathe. With friends, they may sense when someone is sad—and offer kindness. In life, they may trust their own feelings—and listen deeply to others.

When children connect with horses, they discover that feelings are not problems to fix, but messages to understand. Horses listen—and through them, children learn to listen too. It creates an emotional bond that supports children throughout their lives.

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