



Teaching kids to train their ponies, and not just 'ride them', greatly boosts their confidence and learning. Image courtesy Equitation Science International.



# From Little Trainers Great Trainers Grow



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Teaching kids to train their ponies, and not just 'ride them', greatly boosts their confidence and learning. Kids as young as six easily learn and understand the basic principles of horse training, such as pressure-release, rewards, timing and one signal for one response.

In this exclusive series, Manuela McLean co-founder of Equitation Science International, explains some of the techniques developed by herself and Dr Andrew McLean to help children learn about training and, at the same time, teach them to re-train and correct some of the common problem behaviours that many ponies learn.

## Safety first!

When teaching kids, and especially when helping them to overcome control problems with their ponies, safety should be the number one priority.

If, at any time, the pony starts to get out of control or the child is becoming unseated in any way, it is very important to make the pony stop. In learning theory we call this 'deleting undesirable behaviours', and despite being obviously safer to stop, it is often underestimated by many instructors and parents who tell the children things like "sort him out" or "show him who's boss".

Most children will never ride a pony through a difficult situation successfully because they have the same flight mentality as the pony.

Anxiety is displayed in fight, flight or freeze, and most kids are in freeze-mode when they are scared and out of control, so will be unable to respond. Sure, there are a few tough little kids out there, but you invariably find that they have better suited ponies! This is why picking the right pony for your child is so significant.

## Small achievements add up to great success

Give children achievable tasks and build their confidence over time. Kids just need small achievements not big ones.

If the child is too scared, there will be no progress in learning. In this case, it is always worth considering if the pony is suitable for that child.

As the coach, you are responsible for making safety assessments all the time. There will be situations where putting the child on a leading rein and working towards gradually transferring the control from the handler to the child will be appropriate; times when somebody more capable will need to re-train the pony; and others when it will be best to find a more suitable and easier-to-control pony.

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In most cases, children begin riding on the lead rein and transferring the control of the pony to the child is a process in itself that will be discussed later.

## Basic controls before position

Coaches should worry less about the child's position (except for encouraging a strong posture that is effective at delivering the aids), and more about the child's ability to make the pony stop, go and turn.

Once those basic controls are established, you will be able to work on developing their position.





**IMAGE A:** Teach children that scratching at the wither rewards the pony.

**IMAGE B:** training a step back from a tap on the canon of the foreleg helps to improve the back response in preparation for “parking”, standing still until asked otherwise. If the pony moves the child taps the foreleg that has moved till it steps back. The tap also helps improve the backward response from the reins if the pony resists backing by leaning on the bit and/or not backing.

**IMAGES C & D:** Habituation to the whip is an important part of training. If the pony moves because he is worried or gives the wrong response, we step him back. I am close by to help if the pony gets too strong in this situation.

Photos by Angi Schernthaner, courtesy Equitation Science International.







## Horse training basics

Children can learn the basic horse training principles (what we call learning theory) and, in my experience, children as young as six learn the following basics very quickly:

1. **Pressure-release:** Kids easily learn that the pressure motivates and the release is the pony's reward and what trains him in what to do. For example, the child learns that the pressure to 'go' is the tap-tap of the heels (they are unable to squeeze with their calves at this age), or the whip (on the shoulder) and that they should keep tapping until the pony goes and then immediately stop tapping, and that's the pony's reward for doing the right thing.
2. **Reward by scratching:** They get that rewarding the pony, not only by releasing the pressure but by adding something nice such as food, or a scratch at the base of the withers, increases learning.

3. **One signal for one response:** Kids can understand that two legs are for 'go', two reins are for 'stop' and one rein means 'turn', and that they should not use two different signals at the same time.
4. **Timing achieves obedience:** They learn that releasing the pressure as soon as the horse responds correctly is the way to ensure that their signals will continue to work.

With these basics in hand, and providing the child feels balanced, instructors can help them to successfully overcome many undesirable behaviours, because they are the result of confusion to the aids and the aids can be re-trained.

## Making your pony go

A common problem with little kids is they can't make their ponies go, so let's start by explaining how I teach children between the ages of six and 12 to improve their ponies' 'go' and 'stop' response.

Invariably, when a pony doesn't 'go' very well, the 'stop' response also needs to be trained, and they can both be practiced at the same time through repetition of 'go' then 'stop'.

In the next article I will continue with the 'turn', and also talk about those tense and "goey" ponies that don't stop very well. In most cases, ponies that don't 'go', don't 'turn' and don't 'stop' very well either, so working on one response will help improve the others.

## From the ground up

At our pony camps, the children start the day 'active riding', which includes handling from the ground. That is, getting their ponies to 'go' and 'stop', 'step-back' and 'park' from the ground.

This gives the coach a chance to see what the child and the pony know about the different signals and responses, as well as giving the ponies time to get used to the new environment. The groundwork training sets the day for safe riding.

This is when we start to talk to the kids about pressure-release (negative or 'removal' reinforcement), about watching the pony's leg movements to see if it is walking or stopping, about timing their release to the correct response and about using one signal for one response.

There is the odd pony that is scared of the whip and, with the help of a coach, we can explain 'habituation' whereby, the pony gets used to the whip rubbing all over his body and habituates to it.

The instructor, of course, is there to prevent the pony moving while the whip is rubbed over the pony's body, by stepping him back.

The whip is only removed when the pony stands still. The pony is then rewarded for standing still and so becomes habituated to it being on him without a pressure. He 'gets used to it'.

## Improving 'go' under saddle

To improve the 'go' response under saddle, I get the kids to pretend they don't have legs at all and to use only whip taps until the pony goes.

This is how to train the whip as an independent aid (see the point earlier about pressure-release) and it also works with ponies they think go forward well, because many don't respond or know the meaning of the whip as an aid or cue.

Of course, to be able to press the 'go' button, we need to have a 'stop' button. At this stage the 'stop' signal or aid, is purely adding a pressure on both reins and releasing that pressure (make a little loop in the reins) as soon as the pony stops or changes gait.

Small kids between six and nine carry a short crop and use it on the shoulder. They are not really big enough to handle a longer whip and tap behind the leg, and half the time they hit the saddlecloth anyway, so it is easier for them and just as successful to tap the shoulder.





**IMAGES A & B:** The kids can learn to get their pony to walk forward from two 'butterfly' taps on the shoulder, they keep tapping and stop tapping when the pony walks on.

**IMAGE C:** The kids learn to get their ponies to 'park', or stand still until asked to walk.

**IMAGE D:** We start in an enclosed arena on the right rein and ask the kids to hold the whip with their right (inside) hand.

Photos by Angi Scherthaner, courtesy Equitation Science International.

We start in an enclosed arena on the right rein and ask the kids to hold the whip with their right (inside) hand.

We are aiming to train the ponies to go halt-walk from two light whip-taps (we like to call them 'butterfly taps'). So it's 'tap-tap' on the shoulder.

The kids tap-tap and if that doesn't work they continue tap-tap-tapping until the pony goes. They can increase the frequency of the tapping or they can increase the strength of the tapping (make the whip sound louder) and, of course, stop tapping as soon as the pony walks forward. We then go back to halt and repeat again.

### *Counting games to teach timing*

At this stage I ask the children to count the number of taps it takes to make the pony walk, which usually starts with seven or eight taps. This teaches the kids about timing the aid and the release. It also helps them learn that we reward the pony for walking by stopping the tapping.

After their pony walks about 10 metres, they stop, repeat the exercise and count the taps again.

The ponies tend to get the idea pretty quickly and, because each time it takes less taps to get them to walk from the halt, the rider can see that they are progressing towards reducing the number of whips taps to just two.

It usually takes about five to seven repetitions of the exercise to reduce the signal to just two butterfly taps.

Now, it's time for a little rest before doing a second set of three correct repetitions, and I like to ask them to notice if their pony has a good memory or not.

On this second set of repetitions, it usually takes about three to five halt-walk transitions to get down to two taps. Another rest and a third set of three repetitions (by this stage the ponies go from just two light taps on the shoulder), and this is a great opportunity to tell the kids they have really clever ponies!

By repeating the response to go forward from the whip frequently, the pony learns more quickly and, just like learning to spell, you need three good responses before taking a rest.

Once the ponies are responding to the halt-walk transition from two butterfly taps, I then move on to walk-trot transitions in the same way and I don't bother with the canter, as in most cases the kids can't canter yet.

I also tend to stay on the right rein for the entire set (unless the riders are a bit older and fairly capable), before moving on to the left rein. This is because most of us are right-handed and it makes it easier to start using the whip in the right hand. Of course, if you are teaching a single rider and they are left-handed you could start on the left rein.

### Re-introducing the leg aid

Once the whip tap-tap on its own is working well in the halt-walk and the walk-trot, I re-introduce the leg aid.

The actual leg aid that I teach depends a lot on the child's size and strength.

While the ideal would be for the rider to squeeze their legs, for really little children whose legs don't go much further down than the saddle flaps, I have a lot of success teaching them that, if a butterfly tap-tap from the whip means go, then a butterfly kick-kick with the legs means the same.

So, the kids go kick-kick, and if the pony does not begin to move at the first kick they tap-tap with the whip. Pretty soon, the ponies learn that kick-kick means go.

### Troubleshooting

By rights, the ponies should be on two light whip-taps before we add the leg aid, and the sequence - kick-kick, tap-tap should work. But, if it did fail, you would ask the kid to continue tapping with the whip only (no legs), until the pony goes.

You would also ensure the kid is not pulling on the pony's mouth at the same time they are asking him forward (the reins are the brakes) and also look at the

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child's use of the whip, to ensure they are maintaining the taps without breaks and the moment their pony walks two steps they stop tapping.

Encourage the kid to tap at the same speed as counting so their pony can learn effectively. Horses have a very short 'short-term' memory and the responses need to be achieved within 3 seconds for the pony to learn.



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### Adding fun games

Games get the kids focused and really motivated. To improve 'go', you can use walking races like What's the Time Mr Wolf? and any type of counting game - remembering to also have many rests. The whole idea is to make kids feel they are successful so, if you can set things up to help the children achieve the task, they will learn faster and gain confidence.

The "Passing game" is also great. Pass the rider (who is walking) in front of you at the trot, then wait and walk, so he can pass you in trot.

### Teaching kids to notice stalling

Once the pony is going from halt to walk and walk to trot reliably, you can start to talk to the child about speed and about maintaining a speed. This is what will develop into rhythm.

The rule is that the pony should keep the same speed until we say otherwise so, for example, if he is in walk, he should keep walking until the rider asks him to stop or to trot. There should be no kicking from the rider to maintain the gait.

IMAGES A & B: 'Blowing up a balloon' is a good way to teach children to use their core to make themselves quite strong and prevent the pony from pulling them out of the saddle.

IMAGE C & D: We teach the pony to 'go up a gait' from two 'butterfly' taps on the pony's shoulder, and later we re-introduce the leg aid. If a butterfly tap-tap means go, then a butterfly kick-kick also means go.

IMAGE E: Give children achievable tasks and build their confidence over time. Kids just need small achievements not big ones.

Photos by Angi Scherthaner, courtesy Equitation Science International.



When the pony stalls, apart from the change of speed, there is usually something else that happens. He may put his ears back, or lift his head, or drift off line, or make you kick - and these are all little signs that you can teach the child to recognise, so they can use the 'tap-tap' to get the pony going again, before the stall becomes a complete stop.

The 'tap-tap' of the whip should always mean go up a gait and not just maintain the gait. There is only ever one response from one signal. Or one answer to the question asked.

Practicing and improving the 'turn' can really help the 'go' button as well because, especially with kid's ponies, a failure of 'turn' usually involves a stall. I will explain how to go about this and other problem behaviours, such as kicking out or pigrooting and I will also deal with those "goey" ponies with 'stop' problems in the next issue.

## Improving 'stop' under saddle

Before we work on 'stop', I teach all children how to use their core to make themselves quite strong. I do this standing in front of them holding the reins and, as I try to pull them forward out of the saddle, I say to them:

*"You've got to make yourself quite strong, keep your shoulders nice and back, and think of blowing up a balloon and holding [that breath] tight. So, when I pull, blow up that balloon".*

Blowing into an imaginary balloon is a way for the children to experience strengthening the core and posture, and is meant to prevent them from being pulled out of the saddle.

It doesn't matter if their legs shoot forward, especially with little kids, because maintaining a perfect position is just a matter of strength.

It is important that they keep their elbows by their sides (I tell them to squash their armpits as if they were going to be tickled!). Many kids 'fly' with their elbows and this allows the pony to pull them out of the saddle.

We then practice 'stopping' the ponies by "blowing up the balloon" and applying a pressure on the reins. I may need to bluntly say that they will need to pull on their pony's mouth if they don't understand the word pressure. The hands need to stay in front of the saddle and wither. They need to squash their fingers on the reins to stop.

As they get older we refine the aid, still with a strong core (balloon) but adding stopping the movement of their bottoms just before and during the rein aid. In this way the pony will learn the seat cue. It should always be applied before the rein signal and maintained with a strong core and resisting hand, until the pony has stopped or changed gait. This is Classical Conditioning.

The 'stop' response from the walk should occur within three steps, in that, by the count of three the pony should be stopped or have changed gait. Ponies that are delayed to 'stop' generally lean on the bit. A small child is not able to pull as strongly as the pony, so vibrating or giving short sharp tugs is an effective technique.

If the child is old enough to understand to lift a little on the outside or both reins while asking the pony to stop this will also help to improve the lightness and obedience of the stop response. Yes, there is a chance that the pony may go hollow (raise the head) but what is more important is that he stops. Ponies that lean on the bit and lock their jaws will need vibrations or a raising hand to improve the response. With this technique, the pony is less likely to lock the jaw, as the bit will slide up the tongue.

The children need to be reminded that they must release the pressure the moment the pony has given the response.

Remind them that the pressure motivates the pony to give a response, but it is actually the release of the pressure (negative reinforcement, which literally means 'removing the pressure') that trains the response.

Teach the children how to 'give' or release by moving their hands forward towards the pony's mouth and giving a scratch at the base of the wither while saying "good boy/girl". This is positive reinforcement, which means adding a reward.

As the child gets older, the give becomes a relaxation of the fingers on the reins. The stop pressure becomes a closing of the fingers on the reins (as if squeezing a sponge) and the release is the 'unsqueeze'.

## Keeping a rhythm

The children need to test for 'self-carriage' at this time too to see if the pony stays stopped or at the same slower speed. A failure to do so leads to a hard mouth and all sorts of behaviours involving flight (bolting, leaping, bucking, shying).

Remember that the bit can be painful with prolonged use or pressure.

Testing self-carriage or maintenance of the response, e.g., that the pony remains halted or at the same speed, is taught by giving forward with the reins, "hands towards the mouth".

Depending on the rider's ability, we practice walk-halt aiming to achieve the halt in 2 to 3 steps from giving the aid, and we practice slow trot-halt in 4 steps.

Ponies that move at the halt are not staying halted (what we call 'parked'), and should be made to step back to the original halt position.

We already practiced the 'step-back' aid early in the lesson (remember, it is reins only!) We did it on the ground and we can do it under saddle, vibrating the reins or lifting one rein, if the pony is heavy or delayed to 'step-back'.

I like to get them to practice step back when they are lined up at the start, because it is a good opportunity for me, as the coach, to help the riders by pushing the ponies back with my hand on the chest (in the groove beside the windpipe or brachiocephalic muscle) or by tapping their front legs (provided they have learned to step-back to the whip-tap in hand).

Teaching ponies to stop from a light aid is crucial because, once a child can stop their pony, the fear factor disappears as the answer to being scared is to stop, get control and try again.

## Next time...

Once you have 'go' and 'stop' at the beginner level, the next response to teach or improve is the turn. We will do this, train faster and slower, as well as re-train some problem behaviours in the next edition.