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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 Part 2



**WORDS BY** Manuela McLean  
NCAS Level 2 (Dressage Specialist), BSc (Biology), DipEd  
[www.esi-education.com](http://www.esi-education.com)

In Part One, Manuela McLean explained how to teach children the basic horse training principles (learning theory). Kids as young as six learn very quickly and can understand the principles of pressure-release, rewards, timing and one signal for one response.

This two-part series explains some of the techniques developed by Andrew and Manuela McLean, founders of Equitation Science International, that help children learn about training and, at the same time, help them correct some of the common problem behaviours that many ponies learn.

If you missed Part One, be sure to read it online at: [www.horsesandpeople.com.au](http://www.horsesandpeople.com.au).

Once the children and ponies have 'go' and 'stop' at the beginner level, the next responses to teach are 'faster and longer' 'slower and shorter' as well as 'turn'.

We will do these and talk about re-training some of the related problem behaviours that ponies may learn.

## Safety first!

When teaching children and helping them to overcome difficult situations with their ponies, safety is the number one priority.

If, at any time, the pony starts to get out of control or the child becomes unseated in any way, it is very important to make the pony stop (delete the behaviour). In this way the pony learns to stop the undesirable response and the likelihood of the child falling off is decreased.

Safety must always be the number one priority and falls should be prevented as much as possible.

Parents and instructors should always consider if the pony is suitable for that child at that time and never expect a child to ride a pony through a difficult situation. Just like ponies, children express their anxiety with fight, flight or freeze and, when young riders feel unbalanced and not in control, most of them go into freeze mode and are unable to respond.

Children's confidence should be built over time by giving them achievable tasks that make them feel successful. The right pony is significant in achieving this goal. However, they can be hard to find and there are many behaviours that can be improved with the right training.

## Progress and re-training

Undesirable behaviours are the result of the horse or pony's confusion, lack of or incorrect response to the aids, and the aids can be re-trained.

In the previous article, I spoke about improving the 'go' response and how to get the ponies going forward from the rider's light aids for an upward transition (a butterfly kick-kick of both legs and if there is no response, a butterfly tap-tap of the whip on the shoulder).

If the child is old enough or able to squeeze with the calves, the aid for an upward transition is a squeeze of both his or her calves.

Children's confidence should be built over time by giving them achievable tasks that make them feel successful. While the right pony is significant in achieving this goal, there are many behaviours that can be improved with the right training.

## Going 'faster' or 'longer'

Children will also need to make their ponies go faster/longer and, for training clarity, this has to be a different signal from the upward transition.

For longer/faster use a single tap of the heels or a single tap of the whip.

If the pony does not respond to the heel kick, then a tap with the whip every 3-4 steps is used until the response happens.

As always, use frequent repetitions for quicker learning and aim for three correct repetitions before resting and asking again. With good practice, the pony will learn that one light kick or tap means lengthen the stride or go faster within the same gait.

IMAGE A: The passing game in trot. The pony in front does a slow trot while the pony behind does a big trot to pass.

IMAGE B: Cantering past the trotting pony.

IMAGES C & D: Children need to look ahead at all times (ponies are likely to kick when being passed at this position), and look at their pony's facial expressions for signs of kicking or biting. Ponies are likely to bite in this position.

Photos by Angi Scherthaner, courtesy Equitation Science International.



### Ponies that kick out or pig-root

A pony that kicks out or pig-roots when asked to 'go' forward, doesn't 'go' from light aids. The first thing to do is look at the child and evaluate how capable they are. If the child is becoming unseated or scared, it is not going to work and somebody else will need to re-train the pony to 'go'.

When a child becomes unseated or frightened, they will remove the pressure and the pony will learn that bucking and pig-rooting is the right answer to give.

In order to re-train 'go' with ponies who have learned this, the rider has to be capable enough to keep kicking or tap-tapping until the pony gives the right response of going forward, so the training success will depend on the pony-rider combination.

Ponies learn to kick out or pig-root when the aids are used randomly, instead of according to the pressure-release principle where you maintain the pressure until the horse gives the right response and stop immediately when he does.

Pig-rooting and kicking out, can also be the result of confusion. This might happen when the child's leg aids are continuous (no self-carriage) or they are also used as a signal to turn, which means there are now two or more answers to the same question or signal (the leg aid).

The concept that each signal can only have one response is easy to teach to children using examples: That the letter 'a' is always the letter 'a', and that cat is always spelt the same way. So a kick-kick, should always mean up a gait (and they have to remember the release of pressure).

Older children still use a heel kick for longer as it is different to the squeeze of the calves for an upward transition.

Take care that the child removes the leg aid when the pony responds and then tests the pony for a failure of the 'go' button before re-applying the leg aid. This is testing for 'self carriage' of the 'go' response. Nagging legs result in poor 'go' responses and habituation to the leg aid.

To help children learn about self-carriage at this age I tell them it is like free-wheeling on a bicycle: "your pony should continue doing what you asked him to do without any help from you".

### A great game for ponies that bite or kick each other

Ponies that bite will charge or accelerate towards another, and ponies that kick generally stall and back up to do so.

This means that the pony that bites will need better brakes and the one that kicks will need a better accelerator.





We play 'The Passing Game'. Use two kids together riding in line. To start the game they both halt, then the pony behind has to pass the one in front and halt two-three horse lengths in front, then the other does the same and so on.

At the walk, the one in front does a slow walk and the one behind passes in a fast walk. You can then add trot. The pony in front walks while the one behind trots past. Continue the same exercise with slow trot and fast trot in the same way.

This is a great way to improve the 'go' button and improve the confidence of the children!

The ponies that kick always lay their ears back whilst passing or being passed, so the children need to practice accelerating when the pony is beside them as soon as the ears go back, until there are no ears back. This game also teaches them to read their pony's body language.

The pony that goes to bite while passing or being passed generally accelerates, so he needs to stay slow. Of course, make sure the riders give each other a wide berth if any of these behaviours occur.

Children who ride these ponies often look behind them, which invariably makes them 'stop' their ponies, so make sure they look ahead and accelerate away.

A pony that has a tendency to kick should always wear a red ribbon on the tail to warn others.

The passing game itself and any other exercises working on faster and slower will reduce and often eliminate these behaviours. Aggressive behaviours are often a result of confusion unless they are associated with food.

This exercise is also great for adults, particularly if their horse displays herd bound behaviour.

### *Going shorter or slower*

Older children that have learnt to accelerate - that is go faster with longer strides - will also need to decelerate, slow down or shorten the stride. Both of these responses will help refine the turn response but are not necessary in the very beginning or for the beginner rider.

The 'shortening/slowing' aid is a briefer rein aid than the stop aid. I teach it to children who can already stop, go and turn, as until they can do these, adding the 'faster' and 'slower' is too much for them to comprehend or train.

Once we have trained the pony to go faster/longer with a kick, we train him to go slower with a 'woo' - a brief rein aid - almost to stop in the walk and almost to walk in the trot.

If the pony does not shorten, repeating the 'woo' every three to four steps each time a little stronger will shorten his strides. Once the pony will shorten with just one 'woo' aid, the response has become obedient.

I then play games such as counting the number of steps between two or more letters/markers. The riders have to take less steps between the letters for longer strides and more steps for shorter strides.

It may be easier to count the number of strides rather than the number of steps. For example only counting the outside foreleg. This is a great exercise that really helps riders develop a sense or feeling for the rhythm of their pony.





## Fast and 'goey' ponies

Ponies that are really tense and 'goey', and whose riders hang on and try to hold them slow all the time, soon learn that bit pressure actually means 'go fast'. This can happen because the rider releases when the pony goes faster, because of tiredness or because the pony pulls the reins forward or reefs as they speed up.

When I come across tense and 'goey' ponies in my lessons, the riders are already pretty scared, usually in tears and it's all rather dramatic!

If the child is not in control, I get the parent to lead the pony - and this is actually a really good skill for parents to learn as well and we will discuss in the next edition.

You will notice that these ponies often do not stand still! So, in the ground work, we train the ponies to 'park', which simply means 'stand still until you are given an aid to do otherwise'.

To train this either from the ground or under-saddle, as soon as the pony moves forwards or sideways, they are made to 'step-back' to their original position.

**IMAGE A:** Holding the reins correctly improves control for downward transitions. Hannah, on her grey pony, is showing a good hand position.

**IMAGE B:** A gripping leg de-trains the go button.

**IMAGE C:** Showing the rider how to push the ankle away so as not to grip, and as a test of self-carriage.

**IMAGE D:** Testing for self-carriage or rhythm, by putting the hands forward toward the pony's mouth.

**IMAGE E:** Park everywhere.

Photos by Angi Scherthaner, courtesy Equitation Science International.



The children either use the reins to make them 'step-back' (the 'stop' button once again!) or tap their ponies' front legs until they 'step-back' in the ground work.

In a line up, there is always a pony that won't stand still! Every time he moves just one step, we step back using the rein aid, vibrating if the response is not immediate, and releasing the moment he steps back.

Parents with a lead rein are very useful in this case, they should not be holding the pony still, as this is a lack of 'self-carriage'. Of course, you need to 'dare' the pony to move by giving the reins, but immediately stepping back the instant they move. It is amazing how quickly these ponies become calm and relaxed once they learn to park.

Tension goes hand-in-hand with shortening the neck, so it is very important that the child learns to let go by improving the 'stop' response and 'self-carriage'. To let go, the rider needs to put their hands forward to test for 'self-carriage' and correct the pony when he makes the mistake of changing pace.

Say the pony is walking and the rider lets go - if the pony trots without being asked, the rider brings it back to walk then lets go again. It doesn't have to be a slow walk as long as it is a walk.

If the pony goes to walk off without an aid at the halt, he needs to 'step-back', wait and then be asked to 'go' from an aid not just because the rider released the brakes!

Teaching the children to walk and trot slowly is a great way to improve fast 'goey' ponies. We often count the number of steps between two letters or markers to achieve this. Counting the number of steps is also good to increase the length of stride.

### Ponies that reef the reins

It is important to understand that any time there is an increase of pressure on the bit it should mean 'stop' or 'slow', and this also applies when it is the horse who initiates the pressure (for example by 'reefing the reins').

Teaching the children to walk and trot slowly is a great way to improve fast 'goey' ponies. We often count the number of steps between two letters to achieve this.

Ponies that reef don't 'stop' well (that is, stop to a light aid and in three steps), because they learn that pressure of the bit means something completely different, like eating grass, turning away, going faster, etc.

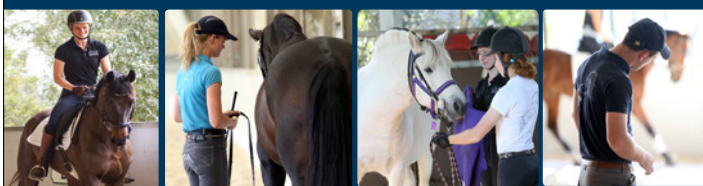
As soon as the pony applies pressure on the bit, you should make him stop, and not only that, but stop in two steps, applying a stronger pressure on step two and vibrating stronger if necessary, until the pony stops easily in two steps.

If the pony reefs the reins while in halt, he should step-back.

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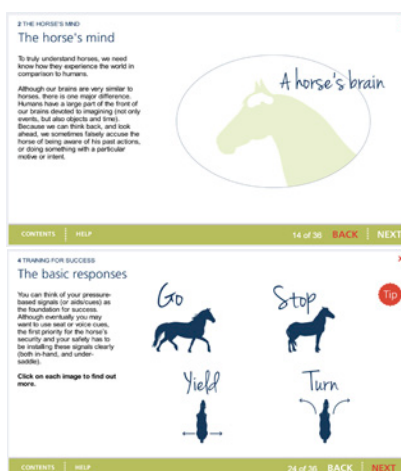
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IMAGE A: Setting up a series of cones on a straight line is the best way to teach turns.

IMAGE B: Look to where you want to turn and open the turning rein.

IMAGE C: Ponies often stall while turning, so accelerate with longer strides after the turn.

IMAGE D: Place a cone in a corner to get the children to ride into the corner, teach them to use the outside rein toward the neck to keep the pony's neck straight.

IMAGE E: Grass reins can be made simply with a piece of baling twine that goes from the D ring of the saddle through the bit ring, over the poll and back to the D ring on the other side of the saddle.

Photos by Angi Scherthaner,  
courtesy Equitation Science  
International.



Nevertheless, with little kids and especially if it is a really hard case - like one that reefs the reins and then changes speed or direction (which is fairly unsettling and unsafe for the child), it is easier to fit grass reins.

Grass reins are just a piece of baling twine that goes from the D ring of the saddle through the bit ring, up over the poll, back to the D ring on the other side of the saddle. Some people tie them in a different way, or just to one side, but I find the above the best way.

Ensure the baling twine is loose while the pony has his head in a natural carriage and only reaches tension when the nose is pointing too far out. You do not want the reins to be tight when they don't need to be, as they will act as a 'stop' rein aid. I think nowadays you may even be able to buy grass reins.

With grass reins, you can at least teach the pony that reefing is going to hurt, and this usually stops it.

Grass reins don't teach the pony to stop, they are only a preventative and safety measure, as reefing can easily escalate into bolting, bucking or leaping.





Some ponies reef and stall, in which case, when the child feels the reef, he needs to accelerate or go up a gait.

When dealing with problem behaviours, keep pony and rider within a boundary where they are safe and make sure you keep a close eye on how things are going.

You can continue to practice 'stop' and 'go' to make sure the pony remains light and responsive to the aids before adding 'turn' aids.

## The 'turn' response

Keep it simple. The turn aid for a little child is purely, "pull the right rein sideways to turn right", and "the left rein sideways to turn left". This is the 'direct turn' aid.

I use cones to teach turns, like a bending race. This keeps the kids fairly organised in the group and teaches them to manoeuvre around the cones.

The response to turn becomes: 'look' to where you want to go, put your hand towards that spot (direct turn) and turn your pony. And remember to put your hand back to the wither when he has turned to release the pressure and reward your pony.

Later, when they are proficient at this I add that, at the same time they open one rein, they can close the other (outside) rein on the neck, placing their hand close to the wither.

This later becomes "push the outside hand toward the neck" (indirect turn) and "open the inside hand away from the neck" (direct turn). Of course, to do this, the children need to know the difference between outside and inside.

As they get older, it becomes look, turn your body and both hands to the left if turning left and vice-versa to turn right.

## When children can't turn their ponies...

'Turn' problems often arise because children are taught to use their outside or inside leg during the 'turn'. This is much too complicated for little children and not-so-clever ponies, so remember 'one aid for one response'.

Using legs to turn can be confusing for the pony because the leg now means 'turn' as well as 'go'. When teaching children I ask them to think of riding a bicycle; you do not turn with the pedals, just the handlebars so, in the pony's case, right rein means turn right and left rein means turn left.

If the pony is already heavy in the reins, he will probably not turn at all, run or turn with great difficulty. For the pony to 'hear' or feel the turn aid he must be trained to a light contact.

If the pony hasn't changed direction, short tugs or vibrations on the turning rein will stop ponies lugging (leaning) on the turning rein but, as soon as the pony turns, make sure the pressure on the turning rein is released. It is only after the front legs have turned that the accelerator or 'go' aid can be applied.

Remember one aid at a time. If you are on a bicycle you pedal hard and have only half turned the handlebars, you will spin the back wheel sideways and not complete the turn, in fact, you will probably stall!

The lightness of the 'turn' is always better if the 'stop' response is light since the turn aid is primarily the reins. So it is important that children can eventually also slow their ponies, particularly if they are running and not turning. These ponies often "shoot out the gate".

## Shooting out the gate

Shooting out the gate is very predictable! The typical sign is either a 'run' on the approach to the gate or a 'stall' near the gate. Ponies that run must 'stop' or 'slow' first, then 'turn' and 'go'. It's important to stop or slow first because the 'turn' will not happen if the pony is leaning on the bit and because leaning is the 'stop' response aid).

If the pony wants to turn right instead of left, do not circle right, as this does not re-train the correct response to the left turn. Ponies that stall, however, should be made to go faster or go up a gait near the entrance.

Some ponies do a bit of both! If you are not sure, carefully observe the speed of the pony's legs and apply the appropriate aid. Any leaning on the bit is the 'stop' response and should always result in a 'stop' or a slowing response, otherwise the pony will become too heavy for the child to control.

## Turning and drifting

Ponies that stall after the 'turn' often bend their necks during the turn and then drift sideways. When the pony has changed direction from the rein, an upward transition (two whip-taps) or faster/longer (single whip-tap) after the 'turn' is necessary to maintain the speed and rhythm. If turning to the left, the child should hold the whip in the right hand and rest it on the shoulder and, if the pony slows, they can tap on the shoulder to accelerate after the turn.

The indirect rein aid (outside rein towards the neck) also helps to prevent neck bending and improves turning of the forelegs. The aid for faster may still need to be used if the pony slows down.

## Next month...

In the next issue we will talk about ponies that spook or shy (which is also related to problems with turn, stop and go responses), we will explain about how parents can help their children train their ponies on a lead rein, and we will recap on all the basic responses with more games and exercises.