

November/December 2019



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Photo by Angi Scherthaner,
courtesy Equitation Science
International.

From Little Trainers Great Trainers Grow

Part 4: Choosing the Right Pony



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This series has so far explained some of the techniques developed by Andrew and Manuela McLean, founders of Equitation Science International, to teach children how horses learn (how to train them). It has also outlined some useful exercises and games that enable them to correct some of the problem behaviours that many ponies learn.

If you missed Parts 1 to 3, you can purchase back copies and/or read them online at: www.horsesandpeople.com.au.

In this issue we begin to wrap up the series as Manuela shares her advice on choosing the right pony for a child.

Setting up your criteria

When deciding to buy a pony for your child, think carefully about what is needed (size, breed, age, experience) and the experience, age, nature of the rider.

Every rider needs to feel safe in order to have fun and develop a rewarding relationship with their pony. Unless you are a professional or highly experienced rider (in which case you probably don't need to read this article), the ideal pony should be easy to control, safe to ride, and suit your child's level of experience.

Challenges will surface along the way, but if you buy a pony that displays any conflict behaviour (shies, leaps, bucks, displays tension or is aggressive) when trying him out, you have to be very confident that you and the child will manage and ride that behaviour, because when you get him home to a new environment, the behaviour will more than likely occur.

It is a good idea to write a list of the qualities you are looking for in your purchase. You will then be able to tick the boxes the potential pony has, making your assessment easier, as well as giving you some key words to look for.

Some of the boxes may bear more weight than others.

For example, if you are a beginner or novice rider then a 'bombproof' or quiet older pony is more suitable than one which is young, green or inexperienced or even 'good looking'.

In the case of novice riders, the age of the pony is less important and the experience the pony has had is more important (in fact, the older pony that has 'been there and done that' is more often ideal for the beginner or novice).

Every rider needs to feel safe in order to have fun and develop a rewarding relationship with their pony

Consider your circumstances. If you live near a road or you will want to do some road riding or go on trails, then it is important that you know something about how the pony goes when in traffic and on trails with other ponies.

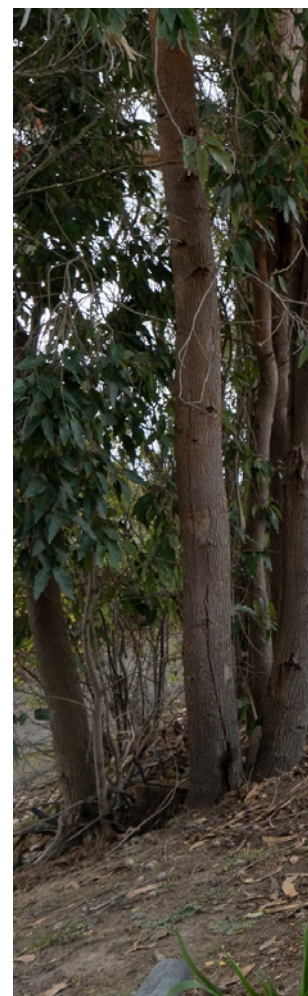
- Has he been in traffic and what is he like on the trail?
- How does he cope with noise?
- Is he scared of moving objects, cars, bikes or prams?
- Has the pony been to pony club or been out in company?
- How does he behave with other ponies?
- Is he easy to drench, shoe or clip?

IMAGE A: The ideal pony should be easy to control, safe to ride, and suit your child's level of experience.

IMAGE B: It is always best to buy a pony your child feels confident on today than it is being talked into a bad fit in the hope your child 'will grow into it'.

IMAGE C: Consider your circumstances. If you live near a road or you will want to ride in group lessons or do some road riding or go on trails, then it is important that you know something about how the pony goes when in traffic and on trails with other ponies.

Photos by Angi Schernthaler, courtesy Equitation Science International.



Your child's needs

Thinking about the activities your child will want to participate in, will help you decide the criteria your new pony will need to fulfill.

Green or young ponies need experienced or capable riders that have an independent seat and are, therefore, able to ride any behaviour that may be unseating or scary for a less experienced or less balanced rider.

Ponies very quickly learn bad habits such as not going, pigrooting, or not turning if the rider releases the pressure of the aid at the wrong moment - for example because they became unseated or they lack experience.

Beware of green or young ponies for a beginner or young child.

Although your child may be very confident on her current pony, she may not be able to train one, particularly if the pony is bigger and more forward. Confidence can very quickly disappear with the wrong pony.

Young ponies need regular training from experienced riders for them to become schoolmasters; they also need many hours of training.

It is a nice thought that your child and pony may grow up together, but realistically this rarely works without a knowledgeable person to help with the training as often as required.

If you are buying a second pony or one that is bigger than before, it is important to find one that is not too big a jump up in size or movement.

Although someone maybe very capable on a 14 hand pony, that does not mean they can deal with an Off The Track (OTT) 16 hand Thoroughbred.

Think also about the time you can devote to riding. It may not be sensible to buy a green pony if you have a very busy family, school and/or work schedule.

It is generally best to outgrow a pony, in fact, be too big for it, before jumping up to the next one.

Be realistic about the child's ability and experience, age and nature. These will all influence and help identify the qualities written in the advertisements that show or describe the pony's suitability.

A timid or nervous rider will prefer to ride a slower moving and stable pony than one that is slender and quick moving; Children very quickly lose confidence if over mounted.

It is generally better to learn to push a pony forward rather than holding him with the reins because he is too fast.

This aspect really influences the development of the rider's seat and posture when riding. Kids that have to hold on to slow the pony all the time, tend to have a less effective seat than those that have had to learn to ride a pony forward.



Look for a pony or pony that is suitable to the child's shape. Wide or broad ponys are less suitable for short-legged people; it is harder for these riders to make the pony more forward as the most sensitive part of the ribcage is below the saddle flap. Similarly a narrow slender pony would not be suitable for a larger person, their backs are often not strong enough and their balance is compromised.

Where to look

Ponies found by word-of-mouth are often the best. They have already been found reliable by others and have a reputation. Of course, this is not always possible and one needs to find a pony through an advertisement, so it's important to decipher the 'creative language' commonly used when advertising horses for sale.

For example, a beginner or very young rider will not want a pony that is advertised as 'suitable for experienced rider' or 'knowledgeable home only'. 'Forward moving' ponies or ones that 'love to jump', may be a bit too fast for a novice rider.

These qualities often suggest that the rider is not able to use much leg pressure something which can be quite an unnerving feeling.

Such a pony may be one that is strong in the contact and not have a particularly good 'stop button' or be able to slow well.

'Quiet' and 'a bit lazy' is easier to ride for beginners or novices than 'sensitive' or 'alert type' of pony.

Ponies that can be ridden in a snaffle bit suggest that the pony will stop from lighter rein aids or pressures. And remember! The noseband should be loose enough to be able to put two fingers between it and the nasal plane. Tight or complicated nosebands might mean the pony has 'contact issues'.

We all love a pony that is good to shoe catch and float so if it is not stated in the advertisement (good to s,c,f,) it may pay to ask and, if there is a problem with any of those, ensure you have a knowledgeable person to help re-train the pony.

Although your child may be very confident on her current pony, she may not be able to train one, particularly one that is bigger and more forward. Confidence can very quickly disappear with the wrong pony.



IMAGE A: Every rider needs to feel safe in order to have fun and develop a rewarding relationship with their pony.

IMAGE B: Thinking about the activities your child will want to participate in, will help you decide the criteria your new pony will need to fulfill.

Photos by Angi Schernthaner, courtesy Equitation Science International.

If you are looking at video of a pony advertised for sale, look at all aspects of the pony:

- conformation,
- movement (tempo, regularity, stride length, etc.)
- behaviour, both on the ground and under saddle.

Highly edited videos are not a good sign that the pony is always calm and obedient. It is often the 'ugly' moments that are edited out.

If you're not certain, ask for a video of the whole workout – from the rider getting on, the walk, trot and canter on both reins in one single take.

Ask your instructor or someone of experienced to help you determine if you the pony may be suitable. Two sets of eyes are better than one when looking at videos or when going to see the pony.

So, you have done a lot of research about buying the perfect pony and you have found one that is the right breed, type, shape, age and experience level. It's time to go for a look and try him out.

Looking at the pony

Once a pony ticks all of the important boxes, you will need to organise a test ride and make sure the advertisement is a real reflection of the reality.

Try to arrive early so that you may get a chance to see the owner catching and leading the pony before your arrival (or better still, ask the owner to wait for you to arrive so you can do this together).

On the odd occasion, you might find that the pony you are going to see is being lunged. This is not a good sign! Particularly if the pony was advertised as supposedly 'quiet'.

How well does he tie up? Fidgety ponies are not suitable for little children to be around. Yes, they can be trained to stand still but this isn't easy for a beginner or novice rider, and often suggests some anxiety in the pony.

Temperament is important when purchasing a pony; a fractious or anxious pony is not going to be suitable for beginners or novices.

Look at his posture and facial expressions; a high head carriage, eyes wide and alert, nostrils flared and ears very pricked or pinned back are not good signs if you are looking for a child's pony.

When you put your hand out to greet him is he inquisitive, smelling and allowing you to approach?

Is it easy for the owner to brush him and pick out his feet ready to be saddled?

If this has already been done by the time you get there, then ask for the pony's feet to be picked out again.

Temperament is important when purchasing a pony; a fractious or anxious pony is not going to be suitable for beginners or novices.

Try to be a little interactive and get involved in the grooming. This may be a good time to check his conformation and any weakness in his musculature or asymmetry in his posture.

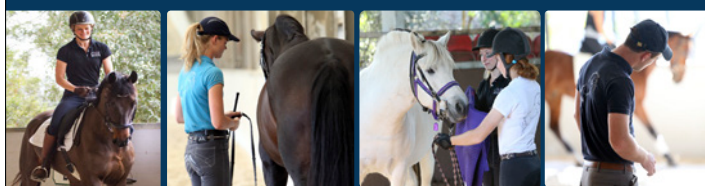
The perfect pony for your child may not have perfect conformation but ideally, you want him to look a healthy weight (neither thin nor fat) and have a strong and sound physique.

Saddling up is next...



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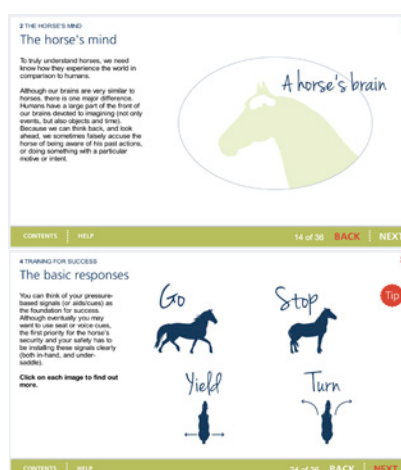


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IMAGE A & B: Look at the pony move, from the side, from in front and behind, in the different gaits. Can he stay in the same rhythm everywhere?

IMAGE C: Staying 'parked' until asked to move forward is a sign of good training.

Photos by Angi Schernthaner, courtesy Equitation Science International.



Look for signs of comfort, signs of discomfort and pain, or behaviour such as laying his ears back when being saddled. Of course, ears back can precede biting, so it is best to have a pony that is not reactive to being saddled if you are not experienced enough to handle that.

Does he keep his head still when his mouth is being opened to put the bit in when being bridled?

If he raises his head or throws his head around, will your child manage or are you capable of re-training that?

The more simple the gear, the better. Martingales, tight or complicated nosebands, strong bits or big spurs are signs that the pony is not in self-carriage.

Watch the owner ride first

Generally, the next thing that happens is that the owner of the pony will ride in front of you.

Does the pony stand still to be mounted and wait until the rider is organized and tells him to move forward? You do not want a pony that moves while your child gets on and begins to move forward before being asked to.

'Parking' to be mounted is a sign of good training but is also a response that is fairly easy to train (by stepping him back each time he goes to step forward or sideways), but you need to be comfortable of training this. 'Feeling fresh' is not an excuse for moving around while being mounted!

Look at the pony move, from the side for a general look of movement and type, and from in front and behind, to see if he travels straight and his legs are straight (although straightness is less important than temperament when buying a pony for a beginner or novice rider).

The pony's feet are also important, the front feet should be a nicely rounded shaped, the back feet are more oval in shape, and they should match each other. Asymmetry in the feet or crooked legs can lead to unsoundness later on. Hoof rings are also of concern, because even if the pony is sound, they are the early signs of laminitis.

Does the pony or pony live up to the qualities desired on your checklist?

Unless you are experienced, you may not notice that a pony is strong in the rein contact and running, or that the rider is constantly nagging him with the legs to keep him moving.

Running is a much bigger problem than stalling, and there's a simple test that will tell you if a pony has a tendency to run.

Ask the rider if they can give with the reins (make a loop in the reins) and maintain that for a few strides to show self-carriage.

This self-carriage test shows if the pony - first stays at the same speed with a looser rein and; second, more or less maintains the same head position.

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Ad design by daZoop Designs

IMAGE A: Asking the rider to make a loop in the reins for a few strides is an easy way to check that the pony is in self-carriage. If he instantly goes faster or flings his head, this is a sign the pony runs or is 'heavy mouthed'. These are not good qualities for a novice rider's mount.

IMAGE B: It is always best to buy a pony your child feels confident on today than it is being talked into a bad fit in the hope your child 'will grow into it'.

Photos by Angi Schernthaner, courtesy Equitation Science International.

Handy Tip:

Take a video of your test ride to show others, or to watch back through before making your final decision.

An experienced coach should be able to tell whether the pony is the right one for your child.



Of course, if he instantly goes faster or flings his head in the air, this is a sign he runs or is heavy mouthed – these are not good qualities for a novice rider's mount.

If the pony is ridden in spurs to make him move, it will be difficult for a less experienced rider to make him go forward. It is worthwhile asking how the pony responds to the whip; people will often say "my pony doesn't like the whip". The pony that kicks out at the whip is problematic for less experienced riders as the kick will unseat them.

Ponies that shy or neigh constantly are fairly anxious and are displaying conflict behaviours (behaviours associated with flight or fight, i.e., fear). This could be due to pain, discomfort or confusion caused by inconsistency in the rider's signals. It is behaviour that is best avoided for inexperienced riders.

Does the pony or walk calmly on a loose rein at the end of the ridden session? If he does, then his training is looking good.

Remember to state your child's riding ability to the owner to discuss whether the pony they are selling is suitable. Most owners are honest and want their ponies to find suitable homes for them.



Test riding the new pony

Having seen the pony do his workout, it is now time for your child to test him/her for suitability. Do not let the child ride him if, so far, he does not fit your criteria of purchase.

Make sure you have a plan for the workout that will test his responses. It is best to ask for more responses (transitions, turns, etc.), than it is to trot around endlessly at the same speed.

A safe option is to keep the pony on a lead line at the start of the test ride, so you can maintain control and gradually transfer the control to your child. This was discussed in more detail in Part 3 of the series.

Test the brakes

Always check your 'stop and go' early on, for example, ride ten odd steps of walk and ask for a halt transition.

Does your child feel safe? You would ideally like the pony to stop smoothly and without a strong rein aid or bit pressure, this shows he is obedient. Does he wait to be asked to go forward? Will he remain halted if the rider makes a small loop in the reins?

If the transition to halt is not obedient (smooth and easy), then test some more transitions (e.g. halt-walk-halt), to see if they improve. If they don't then the trainability of the pony is questionable.

If you or your child don't feel safe, do not keep going!

Test the 'accelerator'

Test the pony's response to the leg. Does he respond calmly when asked to move forward? Some ponies may be too sensitive to the leg and make the rider feel they have to keep the legs off cannot use your leg – this is a sign that the pony may become tense or too quick for you.

Is he too slow? If so, can you ask him to go faster within the gait. If he responds with his ears back you might find he will then attempt a pigroot if you persist. If he continually slows, it is always better to go up a gait than nag him to stay fast in the same gait.

Check the steering

It is also important to check you can steer. Can you steer him easily? Does he stay on the line you put him on (in self-carriage), or does he drift or fall out towards the gate? Can you handle that and ask him to remain on your line?

Check the same in trot

Providing you or the child feel safe and in control, have a trot and apply the same work out as for the walk, riding trot-walk-trot transitions.

After a ride around in trot, check that you can also ride a halt to trot transition. How many steps and how strong was he?

Check for self-carriage!

Check for self-carriage by giving forward with the reins for 2 steps, there should be no change of rhythm, speed or head position. Also check that you can also speed up and slow down within the gait.

If all is well, check the canter and/ or jump

Most potential buyers would now canter and jump if required. Again, check your transitions and self-carriage. However, if you or your child do not feel safe, then this would be the time to stop and go back to looking for the right pony.

It is always best to buy a pony your child feels confident on today than it is being talked into a bad fit in the hope your child 'will grow into it'.

Ride in a different context

If at all possible, try riding the pony in a different location to check his behaviour is consistent.

Asking for a trial of the pony or pony is always worthwhile however, letting ponies go out on trial is occurring less and less these days. You can always create a contract with the owner about who is accountable for costs if the pony is to injure itself.

The vet check

If all has gone well so far, the next step is the vet check.

Test for self-carriage. If the pony instantly goes faster or flings his head in the air, this is a sign he runs or is heavy mouthed – these are not good qualities for a novice rider's mount.

A vet is chosen to tell you whether the pony is 'physically fit for the purpose you desire' and to check the pony's identity and age.

It is difficult these days (due to litigation against vets), for any horse or pony to 'pass' a vet check or even say that the pony is 'suitable', but the physical exam and flexion tests will highlight any major health problems.

Read the report with a fine-toothed comb. An unsoundness of less than 2/5 is worth investigating. If the pony is older he may not be perfectly sound on a flexion test, but if you're not aiming for high level of competition or strenuous activity then this might still be OK.

A 3/5 lameness is a significant reason to not buy.

Ask the vet if there are any major weaknesses in his conformation or movement. The importance of any weaknesses will depend on what you want to do with the pony.

The vet report is more significant the more money is spent on the purchase; no one wants to spend money on a horse that will require ongoing and expensive veterinary interventions.

After assessing the vet check and deciding to go ahead with your purchase, you will now be ready to talk about the price. There may be some factors that affect the advertised price, or you may feel the price is fair.

Once a price is agreed, the next step will be to prepare for the new pony's arrival!

I will talk about this in the next issue.