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From Little Trainers Great Trainers Grow Part 3



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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 four-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 Parts 1 and 2, be sure to read them online at: www.horsesandpeople.com.au.

In the first two articles we talked about 'go' and 'stop' at the beginner level, 'faster and longer' 'slower and shorter'. We then worked on 'turn' and tackled some of the common turn problems.

In this issue, I want to focus on ponies that spook or shy (which is also related to problems with turn, stop and go responses), and explain how parents can help their children train their ponies on a lead rein. I will finish by going over all the basic responses with more games and exercises.

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.

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.

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.

Let's start with a recap on the 'turn' response and delve a bit deeper into some of the turn-related problems.

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.

IMAGE A: Applying the left direct turn by moving the left hand to the left.

IMAGE B: Use cones in the corners to provide boundaries as well as improve turns. The outside rein is used against the neck to bring the pony around the corner.

IMAGE C: engaging the core by 'blowing up the balloon' is just as important while turning as it is for the 'stop' or 'slow' aid.

IMAGE D: The reins are used to 'turn', not the legs! The legs are used to 'go' and can be used once the pony has changed direction. One aid at a time is a lot easier for the child and for the pony.

Photos by Angi Scherthaner, courtesy Equitation Science International.



At a glance: Turns for children (and beginners):

Direct turn aid: Keep things simple: I have found it best to tell children to "pull the right rein sideways to turn right" and "pull the left rein sideways to turn left".

Position cue: Teach the kids to 'look' to where they want to go, and remind them to use the aid and release (move the hand back to the wither when the pony has turned).

Indirect turn aid: With older or more capable kids ask them to "push the outside hand toward the neck"). As they get better the aid becomes: 'turn your body and both hands to the left to turn left and vice-versa to turn right.

One aid at a time: Teaching children to use the outside or inside leg during the turn will actually cause problems. Using more than one aid at a time is too complicated and will easily confuse both, the children and the ponies.

Make it fun: Use cones and games to practice turns (like bending races).

Most common 'turn-related problems:

- Won't turn
- Shooting out the gate
- Drifting
- Shying or spooking

Remember:

The lightness of the turn is always better if the 'stop' response is also light, because the turn aid is primarily the reins. So it's important the children can also slow their ponies well from light rein aids.

To get the full picture, read Part 1 and 2 of this series. Go to: www.horsesandpeople.com.au



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.

Turn-related problems

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 on a bicycle you pedal hard and have only half turned the handlebars, you will spin the back wheels 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 the 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! There 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', because the 'turn' will not happen if the pony is leaning on the bit (this 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 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 (from two butterfly whip-taps) or faster/longer (single whip-tap) after the 'turn' is necessary to maintain the speed and rhythm of the gait.

When 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 (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.

IMAGE A: 'Shooting out the gate' is common. This pony is running first. To correct it, ask the child to 'stop' or 'slow', then 'turn' and 'go'.

IMAGE B: Ponies often bend their necks instead of turning.

IMAGES C, D & E: Use cones to get the children to ride a wiggly line. It does not matter that their position is not perfect at this stage.

Photos by Angi Schernthaner, courtesy Equitation Science International.

The shying, spooky pony

The pony that is genuinely scared will have a startle at the object. At this stage, let him stand and look and wait approximately 15 seconds until his heart rate slows and he becomes less adrenalized. He may then become curious and look or look away. This is the time to approach. When the heart rate is high and the horse is adrenalized he is less likely to respond.

These are often the ponies that do not stay on the line. The shy begins with a stall, then the pony turns away and then runs away from the so called boogy man.

When dealing with this problem, we need to explain the sequence of events that happen and then deal with them in reverse, like rewinding a movie. So the child needs to 'stop' his pony, (from running away) then turn (never in the same direction the pony went) back towards the scary spot and approach ('go') the so called, 'boogy man'.

With the smaller ponies, shying is usually just a stall, so this can also be corrected by re-training both 'go' and 'turn'.

Some ponies turn and run away, so 'stop' immediately first (which is why it's so important the children can slow their ponies well from light rein aids) and turn back to the scary object, remembering that if the pony turned left you must turn right, and not do a circle in the same direction taken by the pony.

The wiggly line games

A useful 'turn' exercise is to ride a wiggly line on and off the wall. It is generally easy for children to turn off, away from the wall, but harder to turn back towards the wall because of the tendency of the pony to stall as they approach the wall.

Getting close to the wall or outside track involves a direct turn (outside rein towards the wall) followed by the faster/ longer leg aid or whip tap on the inside shoulder when the pony stalls.

Staying close to the wall

This is the time to practice wiggly lines using road cones, bending lines, games and any tasks that will get the children focused and motivated to ride toward the wall. In doing so, the children stay on the outside track and there are less problems of ponies crowding toward the middle.

Stopping at every letter sets up another challenge for 'stop' and 'go', and trains the ponies to stay on the outside track.

Ask the children to reach out to touch the letters if possible. It's amazing how a little competition improves their control!



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IMAGE A: Enjoying the first ride, using the saddle to stay in balance.

IMAGE B: Learning to 'stop'.

IMAGE C: Learning how to hold the reins - it's like holding a mug of your favourite drink... don't spill it!

IMAGE D: Ready to 'kick,kick' for 'go'.

IMAGE E: The leader helps the child achieve control, stopping after the rider has asked the pony to 'stop' and going after the rider has asked the pony to 'go'. Turning is next, it's practiced by turning away and back to the leader.

Photos by Angi Scherthaner, courtesy Equitation Science International.



Riding into the corners

Placing a cone about 2.5 m from the corner is also very useful and, in this case, I don't mind if the children have to stop or slow right down to get around the cone, but they must ride around the cones and into the corners!

Testing for self carriage of line

Self-carriage means the pony stays on the line and maintains the gait or speed without being signalled by the rider.

With older or more capable children, we test that our ponies stay on a line by giving with one rein or the other ('testing for self-carriage').

Start by giving on the outside rein and if the pony drifts in, then steer him back out with the rein. Remember, the leg is only to accelerate, not to turn.

In no time at all, the pony will learn not deviate off course!



Teaching the parent with child on the lead rein

With lead rein ponies, the aim is to transfer the control gradually from the parent to the child.

Parents are really keen to learn because they want their kids to be safe and succeed, so I include them in the active riding sessions where we train the ponies in-hand to 'stop', 'step-back' and 'park', as well as 'go'. We do this before riding and, it is not just good for the ponies' training, but also gives me, as instructor, a chance to see how much the parent, child and pony know about the different responses.

In the very beginning, the parent has control of the 'go' and 'stop' and the child just has to sit there gaining confidence and feeling the movement. The teaching should progress gradually up to the point where the child can make the pony 'stop' while the parent keeps walking by, and 'go' while the parent remains standing.

If they can do that, you will know for sure that it is the child stopping the pony and not just the parent! This simple process makes the transition to lead-less safer.

At the start, the parent stays close and holds the pony on a short lead, and when the child understands and the pony responds well, we do it all on a longer lead, further away from the child.

The parent is the back-up plan should the pony not 'stop', 'go' or 'turn' as he/she can apply the aid via the lead rein to make it happen within three steps.

I prefer to attach the leading rein to the bit via an equalizer (a strap that attaches to both bit rings with a D-ring for the lead rein in the middle), so that the leading 'stop' and 'turn' pressures are the same as the rein pressures the child uses.

To 'stop', start by telling the child to make themselves strong, pull (apply a pressure) or vibrate the reins and stop the pony in two steps (even though really it will be the parent stopping the pony).

Then the child has to make the pony 'go' using leg-taps. When the pony is going from the child's leg aids and not being led forward, I get the parent to wait until the pony goes before walking themselves.

With every transition walk-halt-walk, you build on transferring the controls until the child is in charge of stopping and going, and the parent is only there in case the pony doesn't 'stop' in three steps. The parent also moves away gradually, lengthening the lead, until they are about a metre or two away.

Once the child seems to be stopping and going well, I tell the parent to move **after** the pony responds, so in the case of 'go', the parent waits until the pony is moving forward before they walk forward themselves and, in the case of 'stop', the parent keeps walking on while the child makes the pony 'stop'.

Horses are very good at learning to follow the movement cues of their handlers, so this is the best way to know that the pony really is responding to the rider. Add some 'turns' using cones and pretty soon you will know that the child is in control, and you can assess if they are ready to go off lead.

Adding fun games

When the child is quite able to control the pony in the downward and upward transitions, walking races (where you ask the pony to go faster in walk and those who trot have to do a circle and walk) are excellent to teach the ponies to walk at different speeds without breaking pace.

Races where they walk one way and trot back can be adapted to suit the ponies so that the slower ones trot back and the faster ones trot away. This is where it is important to 'read' and know the ponies well so the tasks are achievable and the children feel they are safe and successful.

Other games the children love are 'Simon Says' and 'What's the Time Mr Wolf?'

A recap on the importance of learning theory:

The correct application and removal of the signals ('pressures') is the key to ensuring they will continue to work and children need to learn the basic horse training principles. Random signals (pressures applied or released at the wrong moment) lead to a lack of response to the aids, confusion and result in undesirable behaviours.

Remember that children's confidence can be built overtime if they are given achievable tasks, feel safe and can successfully control their ponies.

What children should know about training (learning theory):

1. **Pressure-release:** They easily learn that the pressure motivates, and the release is the pony's reward and what trains them in what to do. For example, the child learns that the pressure to 'go' is the tap-tap 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. **One signal for one response:** They 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.
3. **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 provided the children feel confident, instructors and parents can help them re-train their ponies to prevent or correct many of the undesirable behaviours.

Part 4 is about choosing the right pony for your child, so stay tuned!