

Notes for Parents

Parents who ride, particularly those who have been through Pony Club themselves, will already know what having a pony in the family entails. So these notes have been prepared to mainly assist parents who have never ridden, or possibly have little knowledge of horses. Riding is not a cheap sport, but its benefits are enormous. It provides healthy outdoor exercise; it can be enjoyed alone or in company; and this enjoyment can continue throughout one's life. With proper parental support and assistance, riding can do a great deal to develop responsibility, understanding, and sportsmanship, in the young.

Find the Right Pony to Start On

If you have never bought a pony before, do get advice – there are many pitfalls. Avoid in particular the pretty show pony, likely to be much too lively for a beginner; and young ponies, they may be cheap but they have simply not had the time to acquire the necessary experience and reliability. The idea of child and pony growing up together, attractive as it may seem, rarely works out in practice. A good rule of thumb is that the age of the child and the age of the pony should be 21 years or older – ie, the younger the child the older the pony. Pony Club members will be only too happy to show you the ropes and to offer advice about suitable ponies and equipment. No instructor wants to have to cope with a keen child on a pony that may not be only unsuitable but could be a danger – to its rider and to others in the class. The news that you may have spent your money unwisely is just as hard for the instructor to hand out as it is for you to accept!

It is possible that somebody at Pony Club will know of a suitable, outgrown pony. If nothing is available locally, enquiries can be made at other clubs or for ponies advertised in newspapers or magazines. However good the pony's references are, always try to let an experienced person see your child riding it, to make sure that child and pony are physically and temperamentally suited to one another before you clinch the deal.

Buying the Right Equipment

You can often buy the pony's own equipment with it, and this is a good idea provided it fits well. Again, if in doubt, do not hesitate to ask for advice. Saddlery will be inspected at every rally day, to make sure it is properly fitted and cared for. Safety is paramount, a helmet should always be worn when riding; and footwear is important around ponies – bare toes and ponies' feet don't mix well!

Pony Club Instructors

These are dedicated people, from all professions and all walks of life, who devote much time and effort to help children get the most out of their riding and to take better care of their ponies. The instructors are not only unpaid, but most of them spend time and money attending courses to further their knowledge. Naturally they vary – some are more expert and experienced than others, or favour a particular discipline – but there is not one who is not keen to see their pupils improve and enjoy themselves. Instructors really do need parental support and interest in what goes on at Pony Club.

How You Can Help at Rallies

Be on time. If your child is dependent on you for transport, get them there on time. The arrival of latecomers will disrupt a carefully-planned lesson that has already begun, and may mean that the child misses out on the very important gear check. It is also extremely rude to the instructors.

Be tactful. Take an interest, but *never* interrupt a lesson in progress by talking to the instructor or to our child, or by making audible comments on the sidelines. No system is perfect – if you are not happy about what is being done, have a word with the Chief Instructor, or with your child's instructor after a lesson.

Be helpful. Assist with the games section of a rally. All that you need to do is help keep order and see fair play – to the ponies too – extra eyes are always useful! You can also give a hand with the lighter equipment such as dressage markets and gymkhana gear.

Be strong. Some of the equipment is heavy or hard to manage, so extra help is essential, especially when setting up or moving jumps.

Man the canteen. Help prepare and sell items in the canteen.

Pony Club, like any other youth movement, needs adults to organise and administer its activities. Some of these adults must have a specialised knowledge of horses and riding, but there are many ways in which even the least horsey parent can be of great assistance. Your own personal knowledge and experience may be invaluable, so never be reluctant to offer your services, even if you know little about horses.

Before, during, and after competition days there are many jobs to be done, including:

Making sure the buildings and facilities are clean and maintained;

Painting and mending jumps and other equipment;

Building showjumping and/or cross country courses;

Flagging and numbering showjumping courses;

Setting up arenas, bunting, bending poles, barrels, whatever is needed;

Acting as a steward, timekeeper or scorer.

These jobs are easily explained and it is satisfying to be part of the action. Of course, there is always the clearing-up and putting-away afterwards!

This list must look somewhat daunting, but it is to give you an idea of ways you can help – don't worry, you won't be involved in all these activities the moment you appear at Pony Club. However, do make yourself known, say how much time you have available if you would like to help, and get involved.

Acknowledgment goes to 'Pony Club Manual No 1', written by Elaine Knox-Thompson and Suzanne Dickens, as most of the information contained here is extracted from that book.