

Check out horse camps before signing up your children

To the Editor:

With summer around the corner, many will attend riding camps. How do you decide where your child will be safe, and learn will to treat horses in a responsible and caring manner? Where will you get the information you need to understand horses and their behavior, before climbing aboard?

Learn what safety, responsible behavior and good care mean. The boarding business is unregulated so owners, managers and trainers operate at their own discretion. Visiting several facilities at different times, preferably during camp, is a great way to gain insight. Generally appointments are not necessary and visitors are welcome. Look closely, ask questions. A property that looks beautiful, may not be clean or safe. A less impressive property that is clean and not in disrepair, may belong to a conscientious owner.

Is the facility clean? In "horse"-speak, this means the absence of manure and ammonia smells. Hay on the floor may mean horses have access to their stalls and eat continually. It may also indicate dust management. Is the riding area fully enclosed? Are children under the age of 18 allowed to handle horses on their own?

What is a happy, healthy horse? Horses grazing does not mean they are in good care. A horse lying down may be sleeping peacefully or in serious digestive distress. Lesson horses should not be sick, injured or unsound, old and arthritic, or overused. A horse in pain may react by throwing a rider. Bits manipulated by inexperienced hands, martingales preventing head movement or badly fitting saddles hurt or stress the horse and can endanger the rider. On the ground, we can be stepped on or knocked over if we aren't paying attention. Bombproof horses don't exist. If frightened or threatened, horses will react to protect themselves by biting, kicking out or running.

What about the teaching environment? Are horses left alone on crossties or is a experienced adult present to help in a panic situation? Is the facility quiet or chaotic? Are children playing around the horses? Are the horses calm? There are many levels of abuse and neglect. Hitting horses with whips and crops or kicking them is no different from hitting a dog and teaches children that it is OK to hurt animals. Would you know what to look for?

Horses are wonderful animals and riding camps can be a positive experience. Making informed decisions will keep your child safe and give them the opportunity to develop lifelong relationships with horses.

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