

Starting a Hand-Led Pony Ride Business

by Linda Liestman

Question: I own some small horses that my grandchildren ride. I would like to start a hand-led pony ride business in part because I would like to have the horses support part of their expenses. I am primarily planning to do backyard birthday parties at my place and also at the houses of people who want the ponies brought to their location or in parks. If I would get an offer to give rides for a shopping mall, I would like to do it. What do I need to consider for start up of a hand-led pony ride business?

Answer: This is a commonly asked question. Pony rides are a wonderful service to provide, fun for children and enjoyable for operators who love both children and ponies. One cannot discount the importance and value of pony ride operations for the horse industry. It is likely that many people eventually become avid horsemen and horse owners, in part, because of that safe, enjoyable early ride on a hand-led pony.

Setting up a pony ride business needs very careful consideration and planning because of the seriousness of providing the safest possible pony rides located in varied environments to young children. Pony ride operators will frequently say that the business is more like a hobby for them; they have the ponies already and they want other children to enjoy a ride on them. They frequently say that they don't want to spend a lot of money to set up the business and they don't expect to spend much for insurance because of the semi-hobby status of the business. New pony ride operators can initially be pretty lax in their concern for safety. A young child riding a small horse or pony led by an adult handler can seem pretty harmless, especially if one has never experienced injury or problems before. In reality, without careful planning and preparation, much can go wrong.

One must have a healthy respect for the situation. Young children, lacking experience, skill, and attention span, depend upon adults to make sound judgements concerning their safety. No one wants to have a child injured while participating in his or her horse activities. So no matter how small, the pony ride business should be managed in a professional manner. Child safety issues combined with the unpredictable nature of horses or ponies require a pony ride operator to provide a high level of care and safety. Safety should be the highest priority. With a business-like, safety oriented, common sense approach, pony rides can be provided quite safely and enjoyably. Anything less is simply too risky.

Pony Selection, Training and Condition

Ponies or small horses used for pony rides should be at least 4 1/2 years old, and must be trained, desensitized, and seasoned so that they are accustomed to crowd, ring and ride conditions. Never use stallions, mares when in season, or those that have bad habits or vices such as jumping and shying at sharp noises or movements, are head-strong when led, biting, kicking, running away, rearing up, balking, pulling back when tied, stumbling or lying down. Granted, all horses (ponies) will take these actions at some time, but they should have no history of these problems being habitual and they should be well trained so as not to exhibit such behavior. One of the greatest problems of training ponies is that they are often too small for a proficient adult to mount and train, so much training must be done from the ground and with a small rider participating in some of the training. Nonetheless, ponies used for rides should be as "bomb proof" as it is possible for a pony to be. Ponies should always appear and be healthy, well groomed, well fed, well treated, and not over-worked. Also, be mindful that the more high profile your operation becomes, the greater the chance it will be scrutinized by animal welfare and animal rights organizations.

Equipment

In relation to safety and public image, your equipment is the next most important consideration after having suitable ponies. You, your staff, your equipment, and your ponies should look well groomed and be attractive, setting forth a public image that says, "We care, and we want our customers to have a safe and enjoyable experience." Many operators provide uniform clothing of the same type and color so those staff members can be easily identified. Your equipment can be plain or fancy, but for commercial use your equipment must be of high quality, properly assembled, and maintained in excellent condition at all times. This means frequently checking equipment prior to and during use to avoid equipment failure. Many operators develop a checklist and procedure for this. "Must Have" safety equipment includes the following:

- **Portable Fencing:** Pony rides should always be given inside of a small fenced enclosure, usually of a dimen-

sion that is from around 40 feet across up to one-half acre in size. Low and / or flimsy fencing is not suitable for this. The confinement fencing is intended to provide a solid, sturdy control barrier that will deter adults and children from just running up to the ponies, and also to provide a strong “mental” and physical barrier to contain the ponies. If a pony should escape from a handler’s grip, they will be closely contained and more easily caught. The fencing should be strong enough that if a person tries to stand on it, it will not be damaged or collapse. Likewise, if a pony pushes up against the fence, there should also be no danger of it collapsing. The fencing should be between three feet eight inches to five feet in height.

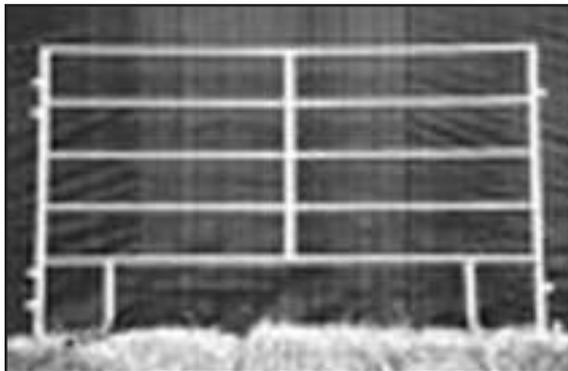


Illustration 1

The most suitable portable fencing appears to be four, five or six rung horizontal welded fencing, or gate panels, that can be bolted together. Gate panels can be purchased at farm stores, and from other commercial suppliers, and some metal workers. This photo example is of one panel, provided courtesy of John Lyons Round Pens™. More information about this product can be found on-line at: www.johnlyons.com or by calling 970-285-9797 ext. 110.

The enclosure should have clearly marked entry and exit points, with a gate that closes and secures or latches shut and can be controlled easily by your staff. At this time, the most suitable fencing is four, five, or six rung horizontal welded pipe fencing, or gate panels, that can be bolted together. Panels should be heavy enough to be free-standing when it cannot be staked down, such as when set up on pavement. (I have also seen metal panels with vertical bars that are suitable.) When purchasing the panels, be sure to choose a length that can be easily handled by two people. Once erected, the fence should be free from sharp points or projections, and all staking ropes, stakes or other semi-hazardous but necessary features should all be clearly marked with orange tape or ribbon, flags, or signs that warn people about their existence. (See *Illustration 1*)

- **Footing Material:** You should always evaluate the footing, drainage, and cleanliness conditions. Setting up on a paved lot can pose different problems than setting up on a sand or clay lot, or on a picture-perfect lawn you don’t want to damage. The addition of wood shavings and other added footing materials may be considered, so long as you can remove the material completely when done. Ponies can sometimes be shod in ways that keep them from sliding on certain surfaces.
- **Saddles and Other Tack:** Saddles and all other tack should be in excellent condition. Pony ride tack, i.e., saddles, lead lines, and halters or cavessons should

have fittings (snaps, rings, metal parts) that are made preferably of durable brass or steel, not of white metal (also sometimes called “pot metal”). White metal breaks more easily and cannot be repaired. All tack should be cleaned and / or oiled frequently and should be checked daily for wear, breakage, loose stitching, and other repair needs. Do not use equipment that is in need of repair. If equipment is in need of repair, be sure it is marked and tagged as such, and that it is removed immediately so it cannot be used by mistake. Cinches, halters, and lead lines made of woven nylon or cotton webbing should be checked for breakage, tears, and frays and should probably be replaced every year or when they fade in color. Saddles should be strongly constructed and preferably made of good quality leather. Over the past 20 years I have been amazed to see cheap saddles constructed out of low grade plastics, fabric, and even of cardboard materials. Ponies and horses are very strong and powerful, and they need to be handled and ridden with equipment that is strong and durable. This becomes doubly important when horses are a business.

Saddles should be of a size that fits the pony who will wear it, and it should be properly fitted and padded so that long wear on a pony’s back will not cause them pain or irritation. This is far from a pure science, as there are many saddle-fitting variables. But, you still should consider the shape of the pony’s barrel, back, and withers when selecting a saddle. A saddle can fit a pony differently if the pony loses or gains weight, and will depend to some degree on the thickness and type of saddle blankets placed under the saddle. Lowering of the head and stretching of the neck while standing or walking, and sometimes hunching of the back can be early signs that a saddle may be hurting or pinching the pony. Hand and finger pressure to the pony’s back can help assess if a saddle is causing soreness. Try different blankets or apply foam pieces under the saddle either in the front or the back to see if you can ease saddle-fitting problems for your ponies. Saddle girth / cinch width should be from 3 1/2 to 7 inches in width, as wider cinches can help to stabilize saddles.

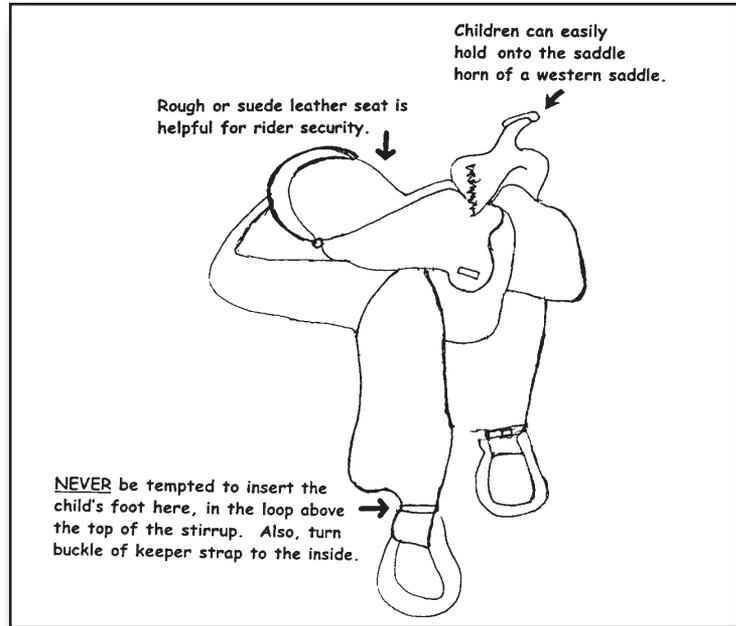
Many children will be riding with tennis shoes, in lieu of boots, and a phenomenon these days is that children seem to develop larger feet earlier in life. Because of this, you may need to replace the stirrups that are on the saddles when you acquire them. Stirrups need to be wide enough that a foot cannot become caught in the stirrup, but not so wide that a foot can go all the way through. “Train” the stirrup leathers so those stirrups will twist outward to better accommodate a foot pointing forward. Some do this by wetting the stirrup leathers, and while the saddle is on a rack will twist the stirrups backward and

insert a broom handle through both stirrups. Over time with repeated applications, this works quite well.

There is no perfect rule concerning safest possible stirrups. Official safety testing of stirrups has not been done. "Breakaway" stirrups, though expensive, can be considered. One type of breakaway stirrup will actually unhinge if a rider falls off and the angle of the stirrup will trip the hinge mechanism. Also, well-designed hooded stirrups (with tapaderos) can be considered. The latter can potentially keep a non-booted foot from slipping all the way through and becoming caught in the stirrup. However, the design is important or these could potentially cause more harm than good. If the stirrup hood or tapadero does not flare forward enough, the child's toes may only be able to rest on the stirrup base and this provides little security. For best security, the foot should move forward enough so that the ball of the foot can rest on the stirrup base. The tapadero must also allow enough room so that a thickly soled, wide tennis shoe toe cannot wedge tightly into the tapadero opening and become caught. Another potential design problem is that the area from the stirrup base to the base of the tapadero should be closed so that a toe pointing downward cannot become caught between the stirrup and bottom of the tapadero.

The saddles should also fit the children as well as possible. Sometimes a child cannot insert his feet into the stirrups when the stirrups are adjusted closest for the child's leg length or if the child's foot is too large for the stirrup. Under such circumstances, it is perhaps safer to leave the child's feet out of the stirrups and have a staff "spotter" walk alongside the pony to watch and assist them, if necessary. Don't be tempted to add a second set of stirrups that dangle down from the top of the saddle and / or are attached to the saddle horn for smaller children to use. (Yes, they are out there!) These stirrups are simply not stable enough, nor would they place the legs adequately under the child's body. And also do not be tempted to insert a child's foot into the leather loop that holds the stirrup onto the fender, so that the foot would rest on the top of the stirrup. This is simply too dangerous a practice; yet, I know of it being done. (See *Illustration 2*)

It is my opinion that western saddles are best because children can hold onto the horn for security. In addition, western saddles do not roll to the side as easily as "English saddles" will, and stirrups do not swing forward as easily. Rough side out, or suede leather seats are also advised if one can find them. Also, I caution against attaching extra straps or loops to the saddle for a child to hold onto - anything extra that could wind around and "hang up" a little hand.



It is highly questionable if a child going on a five-minute ride should be able to hold reins that are actually attached to a curb bit in a pony's mouth. The staff handler, not the child rider, should be in complete control of the pony. If you choose to have the pony wear a bridle with bit and reins, snaffle bits should be considered because a sharp direct pull on a snaffle by a child will usually cause little or no reaction from the pony. Such reins should be "closed" or tied together. Side reins, while often used for lunge lessons and vaulting with older youth and adults, may also be considered as they keep a pony from dropping his head and neck and bending too much. However, side reins are not often used for hand-led pony rides. If side reins are used, it is important that a pony is well trained to them in advance, and the potential for a child to get caught in a side rein must also be factored into an emergency plan.

I would not lead a pony with reins and bit. Ponies are best led with either a cavesson, or with a strong halter having brass or steel fittings with an obedience chain over the nose as described later in this article under the heading "Leading The Pony." Not many people are aware of this method, but it is worth considering. Most pony handlers depend upon the training of the pony and simple halter and lead line for leading security and safety, but I would want more control available.

- **Protective Headgear:** When riders fall from a horse, laws of physics allow that a certain percentage will land on their heads. It can happen oftener with chil-

Illustration 2

It is the author's opinion that western saddles are best for pony rides. The saddle horn will provide a primary means of security for the child.

dren because their heads are large in proportion to their bodies. You want to avoid having a child fall, of course. But, if it happens, you will want to mitigate the potential for head injury. A properly fitted and secured riding helmet is the best remedy. *SEI CERTIFIED ASTM STANDARD F 1163 EQUESTRIAN HELMETS* (hereafter referred to as *SEI ASTM Eq. Helmet*) have been in existence since 1989. This standard of helmet has proven to reduce the potential of the wearer to incur head injuries and even death if they have a blow to the head. Today, these helmets are reasonably priced, they fit well, and are available in sizes, fittings, and color patterns for children. Pony ride operators should not provide a ride for any child rider without having the child wear a properly secured and fitted *SEI ASTM Eq. Helmet*. (An exception may apply to riders with certain types disabilities. Refer to section of this article on disabled riders.)

When buying helmets be sure the SEI ASTM F 1163 labeling is inside the helmet and look for the manufacture date there also. Do not use bicycle, fashion style equestrian helmets, or other helmets, as they do not provide the same protection as a SEI ASTM Eq. Helmet. This means, of course, that the pony ride operator will need to provide, maintain, fit and secure the helmets on the children's heads, preferably with the assistance of the attending parent or guardian. The operator needs to purchase newly made helmets, because helmets must be replaced when five years old, that is, five years past the manufacture date as stated on the label inside the helmet. A helmet should be replaced earlier if it has received a sharp blow or if it shows any damage or wear to any part. Helmets should be kept clean, and they may be disinfected and cleaned only according to care instructions that come with the helmet. Some disinfectants can quickly break down plastics and damage the integrity of the helmet. Some parents may be concerned about head lice. Some operators place coffee filters or some similar material on the child's head first and then the helmet over it. Cleaning the helmets, checking them after each use, and offering a protective cover should usually put a parent's mind at rest. I always think though that head lice are curable, a head injury may not be.

Insurance

If you consider taking your pony rides on location in a supermarket or department store parking lot, the corporation will likely have you sign a contract, and that contract will require you to carry liability limits that meet or exceed \$500,000 to \$1 million. It will also require you to provide proof of coverage and sometimes to list the corporation as an "Additional Insured" on your policy. After Horse Rentals and Horse Drawn

Vehicle Rides, the Pony Ride business is one of the highest risk horse business activities that exists. At \$800 to \$1,500 per year, buying liability insurance may seem like a fairly substantial initial outlay for a small business. However, if something went wrong and a child was injured, the investment could seem very small by comparison to the expense of defending you and possibly paying a settlement in a legal challenge. Just be sure that your insurance agent understands exactly what you are doing, and that your liability policy specifically states that it insures pony rides, in addition to reading any equine related exclusion the policy contains.

Keep in mind that your general liability policy will not cover bodily injury incurred by you the operator, your employees, volunteers, or family members. **If you compensate your helpers in any way, they are considered to be employees, and therefore your state will likely require you to carry worker compensation insurance.** To not provide this coverage may be a serious violation of employee labor laws, and the state can potentially force you to pay for all the employee's medical and disability expenses, in addition to assessing you with fines and legal problems. Also, if you use volunteers who are not immediate family members, the volunteers should also be covered by worker compensation. Family member helpers should at least be insured under a good major medical plan, but usually may also be covered by worker compensation. If you purchase a worker compensation policy, you the operator usually may also declare to be covered under the policy at the time it is put in force. When working with horses, the employee injury exposure is high enough that you should not consider going bare of this coverage.

Providing The Ride

Preferably with the assistance of the parent, guardian, or child care provider, a riding helmet should be fitted and secured to a child's head prior to them entering the ring and getting near a pony. A maximum rider's weight for small ponies is 100 pounds, and for larger ponies, 125 pounds. The pony should be appropriate for the size of the rider [and stirrups adjusted] so that the rider's legs will be under the rider's body and the feet to reach at least half-way down the pony's sides. Some operators enforce maximum and minimum height measurements.

Mounting and Dismounting Supervision

Staff members (not the parent) must supervise each child while mounting and dismounting. Be sure the child is not carrying or wearing anything that can fall down or blow away in a wind and scare the ponies. Also, watch the child's attitude to determine if there is a serious fear factor. Just prior to mounting, check the girth for tightness at the widest point on the side of the pony's barrel, and also at the lowest point under the pony's barrel. At least one staff member should be holding the pony at the head during mounting and dis-

mounting. Staff members may have to lift some children to set them on a pony. Other taller children may be able to mount with assistance from the ground by inserting their foot in the stirrup or cupped hands locked together. If you use a mounting block, be sure it is wider at the base than is the top platform so that it does not tip easily; and remove it from the ring immediately after use. Once mounted, instruct the child to hold onto the saddle horn. Then shorten or lengthen the stirrups as is appropriate, and insert the child's foot in the stirrup. Continue with any special safety instructions to the child. Prior to moving off, ask the child if he or she is ready to go and wait for a response, watching for a fear factor problem that may require termination of the ride.

Be sure that the outside fender and stirrup areas are completely free of buckles, etc., and are totally smooth. I recall one claim, a freak accident where a little boy slid off the saddle with his stomach against the saddle and he lost a testicle in the process.

Instructions to Child Riders

Children usually have short attention spans and are often excited to ride a pony, so they may not be listening when you give them instructions the first time. Any safety instructions that you give to a child should be calmly, slowly, and clearly stated; then ask if they understand. If there is no response, repeat the instructions until they acknowledge that they understand. You may get a "yes" or a head shake, but at least you will know that they are paying attention to you.

Preparation of the child for riding can involve showing them how to place their hands on the saddle horn to stay secure, how to sit straight in the saddle, where to place their lower leg, foot, etc. Be careful not to touch a child in any way that could be interpreted as inappropriate. It may be wise to ask the parent or the child if it will be "OK" with them if you touch the child's hand, leg, foot, or shoulders in order to show them how to sit more safely in the saddle.

Keep instructions simple and down to just a few, let's say, three to six points. Pony rides will not last much longer than five minutes, so it is not necessary to go into detailed safety or riding instructions with a child. It is important that they are told they should not yell or scream while on the pony, that they sit up straight, and not to let go of the saddle horn.

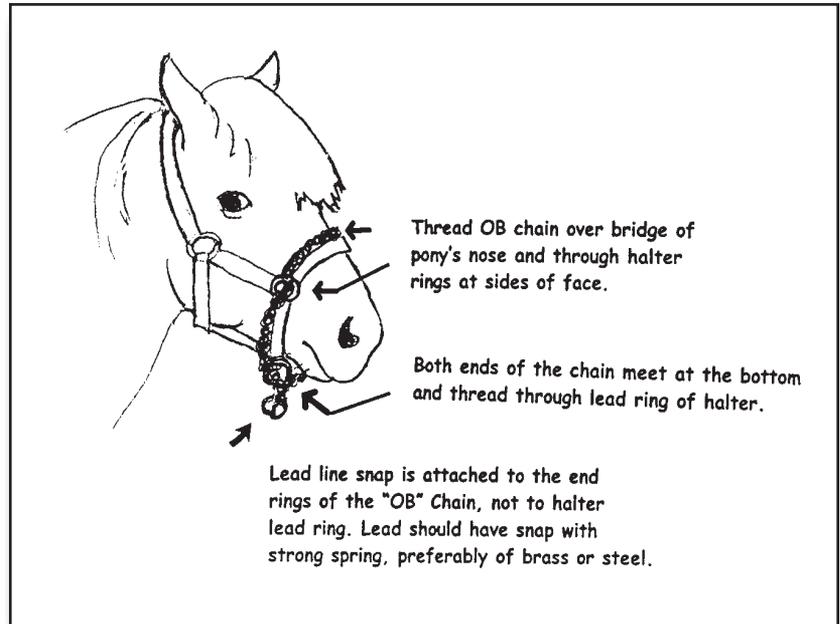
Sometimes parents will be insistent that a frightened child goes for a ride. If the child appears overly frightened or concerned about riding the pony, it is best to terminate the ride immediately or not to allow the child to ride in the first place. A panicking child on an excited pony is a bad combination all the way around.

Leading the Pony

As a risk reduction specialist in an ideal world, I would like to see two people on the ground leading the pony, one on each side. That way, if a pony jumped or bolted, or a handler tripped, or fell down and dropped

the lead line, the other likely would not. With an older child riding a well-prepared pony in an enclosed ring environment, this may be over-doing it. Questions also arise concerning the fact that realistically only so many people can be near the pony and child during a ride. When a second person is used, that person could be best placed and utilized in some other capacity than for leading the pony. The common practice is one person leading one pony, and one or two spotters are added for smaller or disabled children.

I suggest leading the pony with either a properly fit-



ted cavesson, or with a strong halter with a (dog) obedience ("OB chain") chain threaded through the rings around the bridge of the pony's nose, coming together through the lead ring at the bottom, and then attached to the lead snap. The lead rope snap **would not** be attached to the halter, just to the "OB" chain end rings. (See *Illustration 3*) It is very unsafe to lead a pony that is a little headstrong and can out-stride the handler. Training ponies with an "OB" chain over the bridge of the nose will make for easier, lighter control, and can be more forcefully applied when necessary. Most ponies trained to it also respect the OB chain's presence. The intent is certainly not to use the OB chain in an abusive way, but to lighten and enforce the pony's training and speed of control. Leading should be backed up with the pony being trained and responsive to word commands that mean "stop", "stand", and "walk."

The handler should follow standard leading procedures. Lead the pony on the near side, holding onto the lead line firmly with the right hand, about 14 inches down the lead below the pony's chin. The end of the

Illustration 3

"OB" Chain Application

lead is held firmly in the non-leading left hand, while walking forward with the pony just a bit ahead of the pony's shoulder. The lead strap should not be exces-

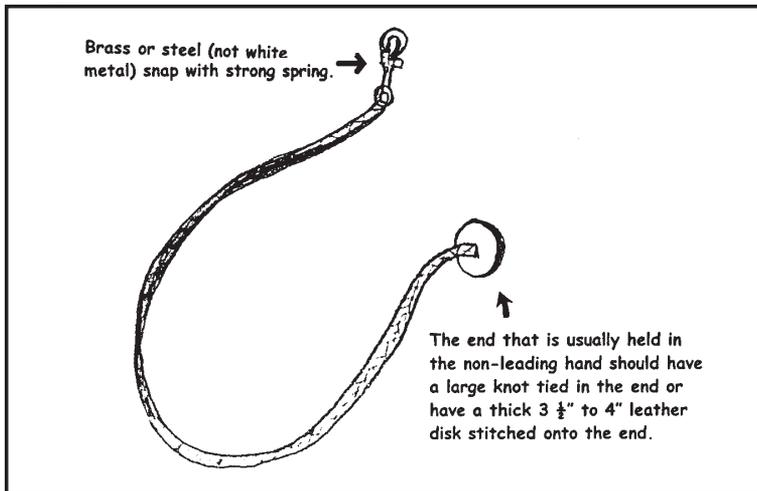


Illustration 4

Pony ride lead line should be strong and durable. It should be long enough that you can hold some excess in your non-leading left hand, but not so long that it is difficult to contain, i.e., no threat of the bandler stepping on it or getting hands or feet tangled in it.

sively long that the end drags on the ground. You don't want to step on it nor get your feet, body, or hands tangled up in it. If the leading right hand accidentally lets go of the lead line, the left hand will, hopefully, continue hanging on. The lead line will not slip out of the left hand so easily if a large double knot is tied at the very end, or if a 3 1/2 to 4-inch diameter, thick (about 1/4") leather disk is added to the end of the lead. (See *Illustration 4*)

While leading the pony you must keep watch of where you are going, but must also have "eyes in the back of your head." Keep calm and alert, watching for behavior problems in either the pony or the child, as you want to avert any small or large disaster before it happens.

Only you or your trained staff should handle and lead the ponies. **PARENTS, GUARDIANS, OR OTHER CHILD CARE PERSONS SHOULD NOT ACT AS HANDLERS OR LEADERS OF PONY RIDES.** I know that of some pony ride operators allow the parents to lead the ponies, but this is not a "BEST MANAGEMENT" practice in my opinion. The primary reason is that parents are not experienced enough to handle and control your ponies, and ponies are the most responsive with the handlers who usually work with them. If the parent handler can't keep up or is not confident enough to control the pony well, not only can they get hurt but their excitement and lack of skill can potentially cause serious harm to their child as well.

Very Small Children

No child under one year of age should be allowed to ride. No child should be placed on a pony that cannot hold his or her head, neck, and back upright, and whose feet do not come at least halfway down the pony's sides or barrel. Experienced spotters, preferably employed by you, should walk alongside smaller child-riders and hold the child's back upright by lending support with one hand, especially when the pony stops and starts. A parent or guardian may possibly participate as a spotter for their own child, so long as the parent / guardian appears to be calm, not afraid of horses, and is in condition to stride out enough to keep up. If a parent / guardian spots for a child, they need to be instructed about where to walk and stand so there is less chance of them getting stepped on or kicked at.

Pricing Your Rides

While many people give pony rides for the love of doing it, there are many expenses you need to factor into your pricing in addition to what the competition is charging in your area. A reasonable profit should be between 10% and 30% after expenses. However, pricing of rides need to factor in your expenses for:

- Advertising;
- Forms creation and printing;
- Purchase, care, feeding and training of the ponies;
- A portion of the animal transport trailer, maintenance and insurance;
- A portion of the transport vehicle, vehicle gas, and maintenance, auto insurance, and future replacement;
- Pony ride liability insurance and worker compensation (if you have employees or volunteers who assist you);
- Purchase and maintenance of high quality saddles, bridles, ropes, blankets, and other necessary tack (some items, such as halters and ropes will need to be replaced once every year);
- Pipe or other high quality strong, portable fencing; and
- Child-size SEI Certified ASTM Standard F 1163 Equestrian Helmets and the need to replace these within four to five years.

Keep in mind that some items, such as saddles, fence panels, and transport trailer are investments, which if well cared for, will hold and possibly increase their value at resale time.

Staff

Pony ride managers must be seasoned, experienced pony ride handlers of at least 18 years old, while assistants should be at least age 16. Many pony ride operations are family run, and younger children are often present to run errands, etc. Younger children, however, should not be leading ponies and trying to lift children

onto ponies, etc. At least two people should be in attendance with any hand-led pony ride operation. One person should not be leading more than one child on one pony at a time.

Today, staff can be trained in first aid by going online, or through your local Red Cross. Staff should be drilled regularly on general safety, and emergency procedures and routines. Have more than one emergency plan in place for instances when a pony might get away from the handler, or a child becomes too frightened to ride, etc.

If you have part-time or full-time employees, exchange labor, contract labor, volunteers, or family members working on your behalf, be sure you are in compliance with the worker compensation and labor laws of your state and that you have carefully considered what will happen if one is injured.

Local Ordinances

Before taking your pony ride to a location away from home, be sure to check with local government for zoning laws and ordinances that would require you to get a permit or that may not allow you to operate at all in that locale.

Other Procedures and Safety Considerations

- **Providing Walk-Only Rides:** It is not recommended to give pony rides at a pace faster than a walk. The next level of speed for most ponies is the trot, and the trot of most ponies is too bouncy for a child to sit securely.
- **Fastening Riders to Horses:** Over the years, I've heard of some strange tying-on practices. I've even heard of someone tying a disabled man's feet to the stirrups at his request.

At one time, it was a common practice for carousel pony ride operators to fasten riders to saddles by application of buckled or Velcro fastened "safety straps" attached either around the child's middle or over the child's thighs. Carousel rides are more controlled than hand-led rides, so for ten years we felt the procedure was acceptable and the practice posed no problem. We sometimes found that hand-led pony ride operators implemented this procedure as well, which was a more objectionable practice. In 1999, NAHA gathered input from various experts and we modified our position and since then we no longer condone, allow, or insure this practice for either hand-led or carousel pony rides.

There are many ways to do things with horses and none are faultlessly perfect under all circumstances. If one could predict flawlessly which circumstances would occur, our safety practices with horses would be perfect every time. That is not the real world. One of my favorite sayings is, "the only thing for certain with

horses is that nothing's for certain." So, often one has to go with what he or she believes is the lesser of several "evils" when it comes to applying safety practices.

A "safety strap" may keep a child from shifting to the side, thus keeping the child more balanced on the pony. But, the general contention is that if the pony bolts, jumps sideways, bucks and / or runs away, it is better that the child has a chance to be removed from or is thrown free of the pony.

I know of one case in which an operator allowed parents to lead a seasoned, older pony unsupervised down a trail with their child riding. The child was tied onto the pony with a "safety strap" and the operator had inserted the child's feet into the stirrup leathers above the stirrup. A few yards down the trail the "bomb proof" pony was stung by an insect, it bolted, the parents let go of the lead line, and the saddle slid sideways. The child was not wearing a helmet, and injuries to the child were severe. If the operator had followed the key guidelines of the NAHA risk reduction program, this accident would not have happened. Not tying or fastening people to horses remains a "**BEST MANAGEMENT PRACTICE**" for commercial horse ride operations of any type.

- **Double Riding:** Never be tempted to allow two children to ride double on one pony. Many people like to ride double and see nothing wrong with it. Two-person saddles are even available for this purpose. But I will firmly tell you that two riders on one animal can complicate things in many risky ways, and you should consider it a potential for "double trouble." Two riders cannot both sit over the horse's center of gravity creating balance problems and discomfort for the riders and the horse. Only one person has stirrups. Distractions are compounded. Chances are greater for both riders to fall off with the possibility of the horse not being able to avoid stepping on one or having one rider fall on the other.

I know of an accident in which a mother was riding down into a ditch along a roadway in the springtime, while holding her 2-year-old child in front of her in the saddle. It is believed the horse slipped on unseen ice or frost under the grass. The horse stumbled and went down, the mother and child fell off, and the child died. Authorities were not sure if the horse stepped on the child or if the mother fell on her. Granted, this was not a pony ride accident, per se, but it is a sad example of what can go wrong while riding double. It is another "**BEST MANAGEMENT PRACTICE**" not to allow double riding in commercial horse ride operations of any type.

- **Use of “Spotters”:** The term “*spotter*” has many meanings. Two definitions apply to pony ride spotters. Used in gymnastics and tumbling, it is a term for the person who is stationed in the most effective place to guard against an injury to a performer in the act of executing a maneuver. Another definition is that of a person who watches for problems in the activity and behavior of others.

For pony rides, spotters are to be agile, calm-mannered individuals of adult size who walk along side the child rider at about arm's length from the pony. The spotter does not lead or control the pony, but focuses on the safety of the child. The spotter generally watches the rider (and pony) for problems of behavior or balance that could potentially result in an accident. With small or disabled children a spotter can provide a calming supportive personality, and hands-on support at the back or some other part of the body during the ride. A spotter should be prepared to do their best to avert an accident if a pony-handling problem develops, at which time they may be able to quickly help a child off a pony and out of harm's way. Not every child will require a spotter, but some do and it is the operator's or parent's / guardian's judgement call as to whether a spotter is needed for a child. Your staff should be drilled on when to use a spotter, spotting techniques, staying calm, and about common threatening circumstances that could arise. You can't prepare for every potential danger, but you can prepare for the most common problems.

- **Serving Disabled Riders:** You may on occasion be asked to provide a ride for a physically or mentally challenged child, so you need to carefully consider the requirements of the *Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA)* and how you can and should comply with this act. It can be so mutually rewarding to provide those rides, even though you may need all of your staff present to do so. Fortunately, usually a parent, guardian, or care provider will accompany the child, and that person should know if the child can ride a pony at a walk without causing them harm based on the instructions of their medical care provider. It is appropriate to ask the parent, guardian, or caretaker how your staff can help with the special needs of the child. You may need to schedule an appointment to provide the ride when you have adequate staff spotters and “the right” pony present, and a quieter time in the ring to provide the ride as safely as possible. After careful consideration, you will need to assess fairly quickly if you believe you can provide a reasonably safe ride for the child. If you believe that you cannot provide a reasonably safe ride, you may under most circumstances decline to provide based upon that legitimate belief.

Of special note: ① It may not be appropriate or safe for some physically challenged children to wear protective headgear, so this may be the one legitimate exception to the helmet requirement rule, and you should follow the directions of the child's health care provider. ② Children with Downs Syndrome must have a negative X-ray of their necks (or written permission to ride from their medical care provider), as the simple movement of riding a horse can potentially terminate their lives.

- **What a Hand Led Pony Ride Is Not:** NAHA does not define hand-led pony rides to include the concept of having a guide or wrangler (on horseback) “pony” or lead another pony or horse with a child on its back, whether done in an arena or on a trail. Some trail ride operators will do this, but it is too risky a practice to condone. Also, we do not define a hand-led pony ride to include that of a hand-led pony cart ride, in which young children sit in the cart without an adult staff driver in the seat and controlling the reins. As with double riding, these are activities people may choose to take a chance on with their own family members, though we recommend against it. It is our position that these are certainly not safe enough activities for an equine business operator to provide, and we do not want to insure them.
- **Posting of Signs:** Be sure to post rule signs, warning signs, and required state equine activities law signs conspicuously around your site.
- **Use of Release Agreements and Warning Forms:** NAHA does not require pony ride operators to have release and warning forms signed by parents or guardians prior to riding for two main reasons: 1. Because parents and guardians cannot sign away the rights of their young children in most states. 2. Because rides are so controlled, confined, and of such short duration. To do so, however, may have value under certain circumstances. And, it is usually good to provide written warnings to parents or guardians concerning horse activities and the nature of the horse. NAHA leaves the decision to use such a form between you and your legal counsel. In relation to this, I also suggest that you and your attorney review your state's equine activities law, if applicable in your state.
- **Maintain Control of Spectators and Bystanders:** Crowd control of spectators, parents, guardians, and child care providers, can usually be achieved by use of posted signs combined with your staff being good observers and giving clear instructions. Only staff members and the occasional parent who is acting as a spotter for a child should be allowed in the pony ride enclosure. Parents will often want to take photos, sometimes a camera will flash or a motor will

“whirrr” and your ponies should be desensitized to this. Your rules should concern things like when to take photos, not opening umbrellas or moving child strollers near the enclosure during ride time, not making loud, shrill noises, keeping dogs leashed, quiet and under control, not standing on or leaning on the fence, etc. But keep in mind that just because you have posted these rules and instructions does not mean that your ponies should not be desensitized to such activities. Children have limited reading skills, older people can forget, and there are some that think “rules are made to be broken, so let’s do it and see what happens.”

- **Animals as an Attractive Nuisance:** Ponies that are not in use in the ring should never be left unattended, and preferably should be kept in your stock trailer so that people are not tempted to approach them unsupervised. Some operators bring a dog along on location. We don’t recommend doing so, but if you do, be sure the dog has absolutely no vicious tendencies and is supervised and quiet at all times.
- **Think through and prepare your staff for emergencies:** Try to think of various problems that could arise, and then develop and drill on your Plan A, Plan B, and Plan C to divert or mitigate the potential for disaster. At least one staff member, and preferably all, should have training in basic first aid. Today staff can get on-line CPR training, and, of course, your local Red Cross provides first aid courses too.

It is far better to avoid accidents, but if one should happen, be sure to have a cell phone handy to call 911 and get help quickly. Practice only appropriate first aid. Have a plan for controlling the ponies and the people under chaotic circumstances. In the event of a disturbing or severe accident, act quickly to assist in reducing the stress and trauma of your staff and customers who are present. The American Red Cross may be of assistance.

More information concerning “BEST MANAGEMENT” practices for pony ride operations can be found in NAHA Form 24 RISK REDUCTION PROGRAM FOR PONY RIDES, AND FOR CAMPS PROVIDING EQUESTRIAN SERVICES TO RIDERS 6 YEARS OF AGE AND YOUNGER.

NAHA developed its risk reduction program for pony ride operations in 1988 with the input of a long established, successful operator from California who pretty well “nailed down” the safety points that, if practiced consistently, can make pony rides a reasonably safe, fun activity.

The information provided in this article and in the NAHA risk reduction program may not be applicable to all situations. It is suggested that you counsel with your attorney, your accountant, and other equine safety consultants prior to starting a pony ride business.

ON-LINE CPR TRAINING

Get prepped to handle an emergency.

The National Safety Council is now offering interactive first aid and cardio pulmonary resuscitation (CPR) training via the Internet. This program is available at SafetyCampus.com. The basic cost is \$14.95. More advance courses are also available.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Linda Liestman has spent a lifetime enjoying horses as both a vocation and an avocation. Her career has included her own studies of riding in the U.S. and Europe, eleven years as a professional trainer and riding instructor, some of which included teaching in and developing a horse management program for the University of Minnesota. She has 25 years of experience in specialty insurance sales for horses and stables in 50 states and in some foreign countries. She is founder and president of North American Horsemen’s Association, started in 1987. Linda pioneered the safety program concept for the insurance and the horse industry. She is actively involved in reviewing commonly occurring horse related accidents in order to define and update minimum risk reduction standards for the horse industry.

