

Building a Successful County 4-H Horse Riding Program

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Positive youth development is the foundation of 4-H. Extension agents and volunteers help create environments in which young people can belong to a group, master skills, develop responsibility, practice generosity, learn leadership skills and become more independent. Using the horse project to accomplish these goals can be a very rewarding project for many families. Here are some suggestions for creating positive learning experiences through the horse project.

1. Identify capable, interested, unbiased **adult leaders** who are willing to put aside their own family or personal interests to work for the good of the club and county 4-H members. Granted, this is one of the most difficult steps, but is essential for the long-term growth and viability of the club. Those who cannot put aside their own personal interests or the interests of their children should not apply. Hopefully, this is a person who is familiar with the horse project, but does not have to be, if they are willing to learn and to recruit qualified help to support the horse project. County Extension Agents should continue to take a guiding role, communicating with and encouraging the volunteer adult leaders in the county.
2. **Recruit interested families.** Everyone in the family has to be engaged, as a horse project will require some adult supervision and help (hauling horses, helping care for the horse, helping coordinate clinics and shows). This is a great opportunity for the family to work together.
3. Identify **key resource people** in the area who can help with educational programs. Every county has individuals who are successful in their business and are willing to give back some time to help youth, especially 4-H. Look to professional horse trainers, judges, horse breeders, farm managers, experienced horse show amateurs, saddle makers, feed company rep's, farriers, even previous successful 4-H members who are still in the area. Anyone who can help the youngsters improve their horsemanship, horse handling skills or help them do a better job of caring for their horse can be utilized in meetings, clinics and riding sessions.
4. Schedule **regular club meetings** (one or more per month) to conduct club business, teach parliamentary procedures, leadership skills, teamwork, and to have short educational programs of interest to the horse riding member. There are numerous resources available for informative meetings including training or showing videos, magazine articles, Extension publications and websites which can be presented and discussed by the 4-H'ers.
5. Hold **regular club riding sessions.** These monthly, bi-weekly or weekly riding sessions, to which everyone brings their horse to a common arena or location for help and group riding are absolutely essential to get everyone involved and to help improve riding skills from week to week. At these sessions, schedule specific subject matter clinics conducted by older 4-H members, knowledgeable adult leaders or horse professionals from the area. For example, one week may work on basic horsemanship, the next week pleasure, the next week, barrels and poles. Encourage all 4-H members to participate each week with their horse, even if it is an event they may not be good at or are not particularly interested in.

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6. Each year, hold at least one or two **county-wide 1, 2 or 3 day riding clinics** such as the TAMU Summer Horsemanship Schools. These can be general horsemanship clinics with application to all members or may be specific event clinics such as a reining clinic or stock horse pleasure clinic. Encourage all youth to attend and make it clear that they do not necessarily have to have experience in that specific area to attend. You never know when you will peak a youngster's interest in trying another sport!
7. **Recruit** other interested adults to become leaders and committee members to work on planning educational programs. Even dads who don't ride, can help prepare the arena or cook hot dogs at the riding sessions.
8. **Encourage having fun!** Have a hot dog cookout or make homemade ice cream after each riding session. Schedule a day-long group trail ride at a local area ranch. Take the entire group to a horse farm or major horse show event in the area, so they can see the level of professionalism and competition it takes to excel. Have group fund-raising activities to help fund these trips and other educational events.
9. **Keep members informed** of 4-H rules and deadlines. It should be the club manager's responsibility to be sure everyone is informed of validation and entry deadlines and rules for participation in 4-H events. However, it is all our jobs to communicate throughout the year. 4-H families need to be encouraged and reminded that they have resources, Extension employees and volunteers to help them.
10. Take advantage of **available resources** (publications or video), such as the **Texas 4-H Horsemanship Leader Guide**, which provides lesson plans on how to advance youth and horses from basic to more advanced skills. Many resources are found online through the Texas A&M AgriLife Bookstore or go to the Texas A&M University Animal Science Horse website, <http://horse.tamu.edu>.

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