

Getting Started with Horses: Lesson Programs

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It may be tempting to run out and buy a horse the minute you find one, but rein yourself in and put the checkbook away for now. It's a good idea to start your riding career at a reputable lesson barn with an experienced instructor.

If you can, keep your search for a lesson barn local. You don't want to have to drive an hour and a half to the barn once or twice a week. And if your riding progresses, you may have to go more often. You'll soon tire of spending hours behind the wheel.

Anyone can post a sign on their barn offering riding lessons, so it's essential that you do some research before you sign up for instruction. Working around horses and riding them can be dangerous activities, so you should look for a barn where the owners, trainers and workers are professionals, and their horses are safe and obedient.

The best way to find a lesson barn is to ask your equestrian friends for recommendations. Where do they ride? Do they enjoy the lessons? Do they feel safe? Are the lesson horses fun to ride? Do they feel that the lessons are worth the money? If the answers to all of these questions are yes, go ahead and take a closer look at the barn.

If you don't have any horsey friends, pop into the local tack shop. Tack shop employees are usually an excellent source of information about the equine activities in your area. They will know the local trainers and barns, and probably be able to recommend one or two for you to visit. It's likely that the shop will have a bulletin board where barns and trainers post advertisements. Check it out. Take down some names and numbers and then make some calls.

Still can't find a trainer or a lesson barn? Contact the American Riding Instructor Association (www.riding-instructor.com). ARIA tests trainers to make sure they follow safety practices and stick to high standards of teaching.

Barn Visit

Once you've found a few trainers, ask if you can visit their lesson barns. A reputable trainer won't mind you stopping by the barn as long as you arrange a time to come. A trainer can be busy and if you show up unexpectedly, she may not have time to talk to you.

When you talk to the trainer, ask her about her riding experience. If you want quality instruction, choose a trainer with many years of teaching experience behind her or one who has been to a college with a riding program. Does the trainer compete? Maybe you can go watch her at a show.

A good trainer will show you around the barn and introduce you to some of the lesson horses. She'll explain how her lesson program works and tell you how much lessons cost.

Take a good look at the horses. If they're skinny and sick-looking, say goodbye and leave. Lesson horses should look healthy. You shouldn't be able to see their ribs clearly. They should look cheerful and interested in what's going on around them. Lesson horses don't need to be sparkling clean—especially if they live outdoors most of the time.

Look around the barn. It should be neat and tidy. Pitchforks and other dangerous tools should be put away and buckets should be stacked up. There shouldn't be junk such as wire or broken-down tractors near the horses.

Stalls should be fairly clean and have enough bedding. If horses are standing in piles of manure and the smell of ammonia from horse urine knocks you over, obviously the staff isn't mucking out on a regular basis. Time to leave! All of the horses should have fresh, clean water available in their stalls, pens or pasture.

Watch as the barn workers take care of the horses. Are they calm and kind? Don't let your child ride at a barn where people yell at horses or beat them.

How is the staff dressed? The trainer and her team should wear appropriate clothing like jeans or breeches and boots—not shorts and flip flops. You want the trainer to set a good example for your child.

Workers really shouldn't be smoking at the barn. Cigarette ashes can set a barn on fire in a matter of minutes.

Ask to take a look at the barn's tack room. Is tack hung up neatly or is it thrown in a pile on the floor? Lesson barn tack doesn't have to be new or pristine, but it should be clean and supple. Dirty, dry tack can snap during a lesson and cause an accident. Each horse should have its own well-fitting tack and it should be labeled clearly with the horse's name.

Arena Time

A good lesson barn will give lessons in an enclosed arena with a gate that is closed once the lesson has begun. Lesson horses are smart and, if given the chance, some are happy to lope back to the barn and their feed buckets while their riders pull on the reins. Beginner riders often have steering problems and they need to be in an enclosed area for safety reasons. When you become a more experienced rider you will be able to venture out of the arena.

Spend some time watching a lesson. Are the students wearing safety helmets with chin straps? A good lesson barn will require every person who rides there to wear an ASTM/SEI-certified helmet (more on this later). And that goes for western barns as well. Western riders have been known to fall off too!

Some riders may bring their own helmets to their lessons, but the barn should have a few safety helmets in good condition for you to wear until you buy one.

Are the horses calm and obedient? If you are fairly new to riding, you don't want to be mounted on a frisky, untrained horse. The horses don't have to be complete plods, but you don't want them to be so explosive that they make you feel unsafe.

Do the lesson horses seem happy at their jobs? Do they seem safe to ride? Or do they pin their ears back and kick out at other horses. Do they gallop around the arena out of control or buck after a jump?

Good lesson horses are usually older and experienced mounts. They should be calm and quiet. They should steer and stop. If the horses seem dangerous or the riders look terrified of them, maybe it's time to look for another barn.

There shouldn't be more than six students in a lesson. If there are more, the trainer can't spend enough time with each pupil individually. How long do the lessons last? If a lesson is 45 minutes long, the trainer shouldn't spend 15 minutes chatting with someone at the arena fence. You are paying good money for your lessons and you should get your money's worth.

Note the trainer's attitude. Does she make positive comments to her riders? Is she a problem solver who helps a student if he or she is having problems with a task? A great trainer encourages her pupils, and doesn't yell at them or make them feel bad. Riding should be a fun and exciting activity.

If you like the trainer and feel comfortable with her teaching methods, ask to sign up for a few lessons. This gives you some time to get a feel for her methods—and you might get a discount if you book and pay for several lessons in advance.

It's a good idea to pay for one or two private lessons before joining a group lesson. A private lesson gives the trainer one on one time with you. She can determine how well you ride, and she can decide which level of group lesson will best suit you.

After each lesson, ask yourself a few questions. Did you enjoy the lesson? Do you want to go back for more lessons? Do you like the trainer? If you've done your homework and found a great lesson program, you should answer "yes" to all of these questions.

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