

By Christine McClintic

# Horse sense, kid sense

*The ideal place to nurture your child's well-being is your own barnyard*

**A**s parents, we want the best for our children. With good intentions we race against time, chauffeuring them to and from lessons, practices, and other activities hoping they will become well-rounded pools of talent, possessing all of the skills they need to succeed in life.

Well, slow down, partner. According to experts in the field of equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP), an ideal environment for teaching children important life skills is actually as



**Photo:** Julia Shields of De Soto, Kan., steals a quiet moment with her horse amid chore duties.



**Above:** Children involved in farm activities tend to be more motivated and will likely gain a greater sense of self worth.

close as your own stable, corral, or pasture. And opening the gates to that learning process is you, the parent, when you encourage your children to engage in—and learn valuable lessons from—daily activities on your acreage.

“In many ways, society’s problems started when we bypassed the corral,” says Greg Kersten, whose early work with at-risk youth led to the development of EAP, a certified approach of using horses to aid the growth and learning process of kids in therapy sessions. Over the years, Kersten’s work has proven that horses are highly effective in helping people in their journey of self-discovery. That’s because a horse’s unconditional, honest response can help clients understand and improve their nonverbal communication skills and better understand and react to the complex array of human emotions. “These beautiful, great ani-

mals provide so much information about ourselves,” explains Kersten. “If we’re angry and aggressive, they pick up on those feelings and respond appropriately. They help us to learn to control our emotions and work it out with the horse. These lessons transcend the corral and are applied to everyday living.”

**T**oday, as founder of the O.K. Corral seminars, Kersten builds on his original theories and steps out of the clinical setting and takes his proven philosophies to the general public, including schools, corporations, and families. He offers participants a host of practical exercises to use right at home to help bolster their emotional well-being, giving them a sense of “I’m OK and capable of handling life’s challenges.”

One way that families can derive these emotional benefits at home is to allow children

to be vested in the day-to-day “peripheral” activities that surround the ownership of the horse, Kersten explains. “Preparing the horse for the show or pulling together, making the farm, ranch, or acreage something that they’re proud of—all of these peripheral activities are what make families healthier.” They are valuable opportunities for growth and learning, he says, if you take the right approach.

**Kid challenges.** “Parents who buy their kids a horse so they can dictate a bunch of chores and teach responsibility and work ethic are doing it for the wrong reasons,” explains Kersten. Rather, a more effective approach, he says, is to give children the opportunity to work through challenges and learn problem-solving skills on their own, which is very empowering.

At the center of these barnyard activities are



PHOTO: PATTY GARRETTSON



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**Above:** Greg Kersten is a pioneer in equine-assisted therapy. **Left:** Kersten proved that horses are highly effective in helping people with their journey of self discovery.

**H**

*“When the helpless become helpers, they gain the sense of dignity and self-respect that is the hallmark of productive well-being.”*

—H. Stephen Glenn

some important psychological benefits, including motivation and self worth. The late author H. Stephen Glenn addresses this very same subject in his book *Raising Self-Reliant Children in a Self-Indulgent World*. “Children feel more significant when they are involved, and they are more enthusiastic about following plans they helped to create,” he writes, adding that children can help make a list of all the chores that need to be done to help the stable run more smoothly. They can then brainstorm for creative ways to accomplish these tasks. “When the helpless become helpers,” writes Glenn, “they gain the sense of dignity and self-respect that is the hallmark of productive well-being.”

Involving children in activities helps them to realize that they are an important, integral part of the operation’s overall success—a part of something that is much bigger than them.



PHOTO: AMERICAN QUARTER HORSE JOURNAL

**Above:** Preparing a horse for show is always an opportunity to learn. **Right:** Family togetherness promotes a healthy well-being in children.



**H**

*“The minute we try to become a teacher, telling them what is right and wrong, it puts too much pressure on the kids and they rebel.”*

—Greg Kersten

Amy Shields of De Soto, Kan., depends on her three daughters, Clarissa, age 14, Julia, 10, and seven-year-old Colette to do their part in caring for the 40 horses on their farm. Each girl performs some feeding chores and cleans stalls, while Clarissa has the added responsibility of some health care and training. Even at young ages, the girls realize they play an important, valuable role in the farm’s success.

**Guideposts of well-being.** Amy also sees lessons being learned in routine activities, whether a horse escapes because a gate wasn’t properly shut or the right tools weren’t brought for a fence repair. There are many teachable moments, she says, especially when it’s coupled with a consequence. “There have been times when one of the girls will fall short on their responsibilities, such as a morning feeding,”

recalls Amy. “Rather than force the chore on her, I’ll simply give her allowance to whoever assumes the responsibility. Sometimes that payment goes right back to me.”

Rather than intervening, Amy says she often tries to stand back and give her daughters the freedom to explore their own way of handling a task or chore, yet she’s also there to offer assistance, when needed. Kersten applauds this approach, using the corral as a metaphor to the ideal role that a parent should take. He says parents should be the posts that support and guide, but not to force. “The minute we try to become a teacher, telling them what is right and wrong, it puts too much pressure on the kids, and they move and rebel from that pressure. It also takes away an opportunity for learning.”

Although it can be difficult for adults to step back and watch a child struggle with

a task, Kersten suggests, within reason, giving children freedom to creatively problem solve and experience the consequences of their choices—on their own. From this, they learn to become self-reliant and capable of bouncing back from a tough challenge.

“I love putting up fence with young kids. It takes forever,” relates Kersten. “Sometimes we redo it, because they take short cuts and don’t dig postholes deep enough.” Metaphorically speaking, there’s also a good message to anyone who’s looking to improve his or her emotional well being, he says. “It takes more work to dig deeper and get the dirt out of our lives, but when we do, we become more solid, more stable throughout life, as a result.”

Another way that parents can offer support is to “enter into the relationship zone” with their kids. In his clinics, Kersten uses horses

to demonstrate two key nonverbal messages. One is the face-to-face encounter known as the “stop zone.” The other is a more effective approach where the two join up side-by-side in the “relationship zone.” Kersten advises parents to spend more time in the relationship zone with their kids. Working side-by-side is more empowering because parents and children are more receptive to working together, making decisions, and discussing values. It also promotes a team-player mentality.

Kersten’s work in EAP led him to a founding role in the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association, an organization that trains horse people and mental-health professionals in the techniques of EAP. One professional trained and certified in this program is Starr-Lee Heady. She is a licensed mental-health counselor and a certified-riding instructor who

**Above:** Clarissa Shields feels she plays an important role in her family’s horse operation.



**Top:** Amy Shields demonstrates farm teamwork with her daughter Julia.  
**Above:** Amy lets her other daughter, Clarissa, take a lead role in fence repair.

used her EAP training to start PX Equine Enterprises, Inc., of Green Cove Springs, Fla. In her “Parenting from the Barn” clinics, Heady further relates the benefit of family members working together. “Here’s an opportunity for children to learn problem-solving skills in a natural way, with natural consequences, so that a child is not thrown into a situation in society where they can’t cope,” she explains. “By working alongside their parents, children are able to witness how people with different levels of frustration and tolerance actually

work together—and the critical-thinking process that goes into figuring things out.”

By working alongside children, parents or other adults are able to role-model healthy behavior, says Heady. For example, rather than responding to a difficult situation in anger and frustration, parents can model a merry heart by showing their children how laughter can relieve tension and help them to enjoy the humor of a plan that goes awry. A frequent, lighthearted response also helps children realize that being an adult is not all dreariness and severity. As a result, the parent plants a long-lasting positive self-image and teaches their children important coping skills for life, explains Heady, “and it eventually becomes a behavior pattern for the entire family.”

**B**y nurturing these skills, children carry with them a wealth of interpersonal skills that they can offer to the outside world, whether at school, work, or play. “We expect children to automatically get along and work on team projects,” says Heady. “It’s important to give them opportunities to be creative and to learn to take natural consequences with others.” As a result, children will naturally grow to become better team players, effective leaders, and problem solvers.

In fact, trace the history of some of our country’s most respected leaders, says Kersten, and you’ll find a majority have roots in farm or ranching where they learned important lessons that helped them become creative thinkers, masterful problem solvers, and resilient in the face of adversity.

**Empower kids.** And it all begins right at home—in the corral, stable, pasture, or even in the backyard. The fact of the matter is you really don’t need a horse and stable to reap the emotional benefits. Any activity that engages families in interactive work, such as gardening or household chores, can serve the same purpose, agrees Kersten and Heady. The key, however, is to approach the activity as an opportunity for growth and learning. Allow the child the freedom to experience challenge, explore creative problem solving, and take ownership in the decision-making process. Then, stand back and allow them to reap the emotional rewards. It’s a sense of accomplishment that one can’t hand over to a child, say the experts. The reward is much sweeter when it comes from self-effort. **H**