

Teaching children to train ponies.

by Mette Hald Rasmussen & Merete Stenner, Ædellund

For the demonstration we have chosen a few of our basic exercises. We show them in the sequence that they are used during the beginner lessons. We hope that the exercises and our thoughts about training of children may serve as an inspiration. In the following text you can read about the intention of our demonstration. What is going to happen, however, depends on the ponies and the children.

Each pony and its handlers wear a colour that corresponds to the colour of the exercise in the text. During the demonstration most groups train two different exercises, one at a time. Merete and I go from group to group and unless somebody needs acute help we try to follow the sequence as it is listed in the text. I will give instructions in Danish and Merete will explain in English. Questions and comments during the demonstration are welcome.

Hannah
Kaya

F +K +I+F

C+J+S+B

On the way into the hall some of the children play a game: **Blindfold game – an eye opener.**

Exercise: The “rider” must steer her ”pony” around the arena. One child, the “pony”, is blindfolded and a rein is attached to each little finger. The other child is the “rider” steering the pony. Only rein signals, touch, and sound are allowed, but no words. Only the rider knows the way around the arena.

Purpose: The “pony” will experience how confusing the signals from the rider can be and that rein signals may be unpleasant. The blindness demands great care and the need to follow the signals from the "rider" in order to avoid hitting objects. The “rider” will experience a cautious and hesitant "pony" with whom she cannot communicate verbally and has to guide, only by means of the rules of the game, in order for it to react in a sensible way. With the game we try to make the children realize how difficult it is to be a pony and to make them think about how they train and use signals.

Catching  all all all all all all all all

Exercise: To catch a pony by whistle signals and food rewards. If whistle and rewards are not motivating enough the catching must be done by walking after the pony and rewarding the pony for stopping by also stopping and, after a short pause, to approach the pony again whenever it moves away from the child.

Purpose: The children learn that ponies can be trained to react to sound signals and that they react to movements. They learn that a pony can be approached in different ways eliciting different reactions. In addition, they learn that stopping their approach is experienced as a reward by the ponies.

Handling from the ground

Sara
Nanna
Bruno

Exercise: To lead the pony from A to B in a certain gait, tempo, and posture. To make the pony stand still while being groomed and saddled. To make it stand alone and to come when called.

Purpose: To teach the children and their helpers to train the ponies to be easy and safe to handle by means of signals that are slightly annoying and that must stop as soon as the pony reacts as wanted in order for the pony to feel rewarded for its correct reaction. In addition, to teach the children how to use treats as reward and to become aware of which kind of signals that make the ponies react, for instance whether it is the sound that makes the pony stop or go forward or whether it is the child’s own movements. We aim to teach and train signals from the ground that may also be used when the child is sitting on the pony.

Louise
Olivia
Trine
Theodor

Grooming

Sara
Nanna
Bruno

The exercise and its purpose: The children have to learn that, as far as the pony is concerned, grooming is done to:

1) clean the pony so that no dirt irritates its coat and no stones its hooves.

Laura
Sarah
Daim

- 2) check the whole body for wounds and sore spots that may irritate the pony and affect its reactions during riding.
- 3) give the pony a pleasant massage and feeling of its body.
- 4) give the pony a feeling of the mental state of the rider, preferably one of calmness and harmony.

Celine
Johanne
Silje
Bella

As far as the rider is concerned, grooming is done to:

- 1) learn to do a systematic check of the pony's body so that the whole surface of the pony is checked. I often compare the check with a picture in a [painting book](#) all of which must be filled in with colour.
- 2) learn to use her own body symmetrically and in a sensible way. Both hands must be used an equal amount. The child must stand grounded and balanced next to the pony so the risk of an accident is reduced in case the pony becomes agitated. The child may never squat and the nearest hand must rest on the pony while the other hand holds the brush.
- 3) learn to read the pony's reaction to the grooming in case of sore spots.
- 4) learn to understand the behaviour of the pony and to train it to remain calm during grooming.
- 5) learn that some ponies consider grooming rewarding whereas others show flight behaviour or aggressive behaviour because they are tied up and cannot escape.
- 6) learn to be aware that their own attitude and mental state has a big effect on the reactions of the pony. Calmness, patience, and breathing must be trained. Grooming is done both to clean the pony and to train calmness in pony and rider.

Basic rein handling

Agnes
Heidi
Maja

Exercise: Learn to hold the rein (*bike handle*), know the difference between *long/short* and *loose/tight*, to shorten the reins (*thumb helps thumb*) *secretly for the pony*, as well as to release - say THANKS - to the pony as soon as it stops or turns correctly. Learn not to use the legs simultaneously with the reins and to let the reins be loose while the legs give signal to move forward.

Cille
Karita
Max

Purpose: To enable the smallest riders to use rein signals and forward signals as early as possible because it is highly motivating for the little ones to be able to steer their ponies themselves. At the same time they must learn how the ponies react to pressure from the reins and legs and release of pressure (the THANK YOU).

Focus and advanced rein handling

Laura
Sarah
Daim

Exercise: Make a plan! Where are you going? Hand position and whip position. The hard hand and the soft hand. To make the pony walk exactly to where the rider wants to go by focusing on the course. Precise rein signals and correct hand position and rein length that enables use of the whip for increased pressure. Softness in fingers and wrist to compensate for the pony's head movement, as well as encouraging movements of the reins to maintain a signal without giving the pony an unintended reward by loosening the reins, should it be motivated to go somewhere else.

Louise
Olivia
Trine
Theodor

Purpose: To train the rider to give precise signals that are maintained for as long as the pony does not react and that stop as soon as it reacts correctly. To give the rider an understanding of the connection between focus on the exercise and precision and timing of signals and release as a reward for correct behaviour.

Fie
Klara
Ingeborg
Freja

Mounting and dismounting

Exercise: Mounting - the rider shall lead her pony from the ground up to the mounting block so that it stands calmly waiting for the rider to get up and for the signal to go forward.

Dismounting - the rider shall ride her pony close to the mounting block so that she quietly can step down without losing her balance. Both mounting and dismounting shall be done from both sides. When the mounting block is in the arena, it is like a concrete block that cannot be moved. The pony must be led to the block, not the other way around! In addition, the children shall learn to "give a leg" plus help by keeping the pony calm and standing still.

Mathilde
Mette
Emma
Romeo

Purpose: To teach the rider to help the pony by using the mounting block and to swing the leg up without touching the rump of the pony. To motivate the pony to stand while being mounted and dismounted. To teach the rider to use signals from the ground to place the pony in the exact place and to make it stand still. To teach the riders to help each other if there is no mounting block.

Ellen
Caroline J
Bella

Basic fall technique

Exercise: Park the pony between two mattresses. The child holds both arms close to the body (*hugging herself*), looks down on her stomach, falls down on the mattress and rolls away from the pony. The exercise is done to both sides and a helper helps the child up on the pony.

Isabella
Caroline F
Lady

Purpose: To train 'body cognition' and to de-dramatize falling off a horse. To train easy mounting and to teach the pony to stand still also when the child makes unexpected movements.

Trot on the lunge

Agnes
Heidi
Maja

Exercise: First, the rider shall find and feel her flexible lower back moving forwards by the movements of the pony. The rider starts sitting in *couch position* with a *rubber band between the shoulder blades*. *Pinocchio's nose* must be very long and point out between the pony's ears and a *carrot is tied to its end* that makes the pony go in the direction of the nose. When the rider has found the right position and back flexibility the pony is brought forward in trot. If the rider gets tense to keep her balance the pony is slowed to the walk. The pony has a rope around the neck, which serves as a handle for the rider to help balancing and avoid pulling on the reins.

Cille
Karita
Max

Purpose: To teach the rider to use as few muscles as possible to keep her balance and to sit quietly and relaxed with an independent seat and calm torso so that the rein signals can be given softly and precisely and so that the legs can be used independently. It is ALWAYS the decision of the rider when the signal to trot should be given and whether it is the rider or the person lunging that should give the signal. The rider must feel safe at all times.

Celine
Johanne
Silje
Bella

Direct turn, timing in relation to the movement

Fie
Klara
Ingeborg
Freja

Exercise: To move the pony's front leg to the side by means of a rein signal, first from standstill and later during walk and trot.

During basic training from standstill the rider must feel, or the instructor must observe, how the pony has placed its legs so that the rein signal is given on the side on which there is the greatest chance of a correct reaction from the pony. The rider lifts her hand with the rein a little, moves it a little forward and swings it out to the side (*like opening a door*). The signal must not be a jerk when the rein is tightened. The pressure must be released as soon as the front leg is moving to the side. If the pony moves the opposite front leg first the rein pressure must be maintained until the correct leg is moved in the right direction. From walk it is necessary that the rider can feel, or that the instructor can say, when the signal should be given, i.e. when the opposite front leg is placed on the ground and the leg that shall turn is ready to be lifted. The rider must sit straight and in balance on the pony and the hand position is important in order to also hold a whip without hitting the pony.

Mathilde
Mette
Emma
Romeo

Purpose: To train the pony always to follow the leading rein and to train the rider to be able to feel and follow the movements of the pony so that the turn signal is given at a time when the chance of a correct response is greatest. To train the rider to give the signal from a balanced and independent seat and with a hand position that enables the use of a whip as an additional signal without touching the pony unwillingly.

Isabella
Caroline F
Lady

Riding by a "dangerous" object

Exercise: To guide the pony through, over or by a challenging place or object in a controlled way.

Ellen
Caroline J
Bella

Purpose: To test whether the previous exercises have been fully understood and included in the riding, and to test if the pony's reactions to the rider's signals are well established, also in a somewhat stressed situation. To teach the children how to use gradual desensitization.

Thoughts about our training:

I always try to provide explanations to all the why's from the children and their parents, also the why's that they have not said. Everybody must learn that everything we do around the ponies trains them. We use everyday language, comparisons, and pictures to explain the use of signals and why the ponies react to them. The children learn that ponies do not think but that they feel and then react on what they feel, just like children do not think when they start laughing or crying if something is funny or sad, that they jump to the side if they are afraid of the ball, or that they feel hungry when they need some food.

In the basic riding instruction I use pictures to obtain sufficient relaxation, such as the *couch* to train the independent seat, the *rubber band on the shoulder blades* to get enough tension for a correct position, *Pinocchio's nose* to get their focus forward between the ponies' ears so that balance and direction are easily maintained, *thumb nails as solar panels* so that the hand position is correct, etc.

The children have different prerequisites to be able to understand and use the signals. Their mental ability to focus and their physical ability to balance are vastly different. Our job as instructors is to get all the different tools, plus an understanding of what a pony is, into their work with the ponies so that they have the best chance to have good and safe experiences together with the ponies, both when they groom them, when they take a walk with them, and when they ride them.

To give both children and adults a basic understanding of what kind of an animal a pony is we use the six F-words that Susan Kjærgård from Blueberry Hill use to describe the most important motivations in the life of a pony. The six F-words are easy to remember and give a good explanation for the behaviour and reaction of the ponies as well as our possibility to influence their behaviour and reactions in all situations. In addition, the children and their parents learn the important message that different ponies have different priorities of F-words and that the priority of the words may change from one situation to another.

Food: Eating is important for most ponies and food is very motivating.

Flock: To be part of a group is the safest.

Flight: Fear, anxiety and discomfort lead to flight behaviour or, if flight is impossible, to aggression.

Freedom from discomfort: Ponies are very motivated to be free from any kind of discomfort and will react by showing behaviour that alleviates the discomfort.

Reproduction: ('Formering' in Danish) The oestrus periods of the mares when their behaviour is dominated by the desire to be mated, as well as mares' protection of their foals. The motivation of stallions to collect, defend, and breed mares.

Pleasure: ('Fornøjelse' in Danish) Comfortable touching and rubbing, by each other or by people, is rewarding and motivating for the behaviour that the pony showed right before it was touched.

In my opinion an important message to convey is **to remember these motivations of the ponies and to realize that we train ponies as soon as we are within their hearing and vision. If that becomes our ingrained knowledge we will be able to handle and train our ponies on their terms, so we obtain better pony welfare and safer handling and riding of the ponies.**

And remember: the hesitant children always determine the speed themselves. Do not pressure them! Happy children learn best and the same is true of ponies.

Oh can't you see - you're training me - I'll come your way - depending on the steps you take