

Is It Legal to Be Young?

Foals, like children, are a blank slate.

Why do children need supervision? Why do teenagers do dumb things? Why are self-destructive behaviors more common in the young? Why is it easy to get lost in a strange city? Why do people get kicked or bit by cute yearlings? Why do we get bucked off young horses? Why do we say, “Boys will be boys?” Why do we say, “He’s just being a horse?”

The common thread running through these and other similar questions is, “Where, why and how do I fit into the picture in which I find myself?” Without having lived before, the foal is a blank slate. He reacts to and learns from his environment and is influenced by his inherited tendencies. Because he doesn’t know about our expectations or barbed wire, sharp tin and the many other land mines on farms, he desperately needs guidance and protection.

Self-interest is the common denominator with a young horse and young human. If he doesn’t get the needed guidance and protection, he will become a youngster whose world is small and his focus will be on his own interests, wants and comforts. In our youth we are convinced that our little picture is the big picture. That’s why we know so much when we are young. When we are a frog in a small pond we learn about that pond quickly and therefore become quite knowledgeable. When we eventually hop around until we find a bigger pond, we may think that it is the same as our small pond. We are deceived and heading for trouble. Instead of viewing the bigger pond with awe, honest curiosity and some suspicion, we swim around with an arrogant confidence, failing to regard the warnings about snakes and snapping turtles. Because we have never seen one, we don’t believe they exist. Those who warn us about them are narrow-minded adults who are stuck in their thinking.

In our youthful idealism we refuse to believe snapping turtles eat frogs. We are convinced that frogs, snakes and snapping turtles can get along

in peace if they only would try harder. It makes no sense that a turtle would actually eat a frog.

We understand that the best way to protect oneself from adult foolishness is to surround oneself with other young frogs who know as much about the world as we do. Or we follow the example of old frogs that never grew up. We make role models of old frogs that were last seen being swallowed by a big, hungry snake.

Do you see the dilemma of the young horse? He is not only young, self-centered and naive, he is thrust into our world that is very different from his, compounding his dilemma. Do you see how desperately he needs guidance, teaching and leadership and the structure they provide? When we don’t provide that protective leadership, we are throwing the young frog to the snakes and turtles.

Just as not all teenagers are bent on foolishness and self-destruction, not all young horses give their people serious problems. Nevertheless, they all need teaching, training and discipline—none of which is possible without an established code of conduct.

If we don’t believe a horse should bite people, we will have no reason to put an end to the biting. The reason a young (or old) horse keeps biting is the handler believes the horse has little intelligence and the adolescent horse is treated like a baby. He is petted and coddled. His wants are indulged with little or no responsibility required.

When a horse bites or tries to bite, he should get a solid slap in the mouth. We don’t slap a horse because we are angry; we slap him because it is a language he understands. Don’t worry about him getting head shy, he’ll get over it. A bite is a clear signal of disrespect and it cannot be tolerated.

The young horse is not stupid and he can be taught to control his impulses. If he doesn’t learn self-control in his youth, the problems he causes for himself will affect those around him. He is pursuing his own demise and will probably take others with

him. He needs somebody in his life who does not pity him and feel sorry for him. He needs somebody who knows that it's an exercise futility to talk to a young frog that doesn't believe in snakes and turtles.

Something has to be done that clearly introduces him to the concept of cause and effect. When a young horse is taught self-control based on a clear code of conduct, he is calm, safe to be around and is content. That contentment is the fruit of mutual trust and respect between human and horse.

The horse that stands quietly for farrier work is secure in his relationship with humans. He knows about boundaries and manners and accepts them without a chip on his shoulder. The horse that misbehaves does it because he can. His people don't know he is intelligent, don't know what, why or how to teach him or refuse to cross him. As a result he becomes a spoiled brat. Spoiled brats of any race are no fun to be around.

The spoiled-brat syndrome is in all levels of society and government. We have indulged ourselves and the fruits of our folly have come upon us. It's not any one person's fault. If you really want to know who is at fault, go look in the mirror. We have danced and the fiddler wants to be paid.

If you don't want your horse's mind to suffer a collapse, then don't indulge his wants or protect his self-centeredness. Handouts and entitlements may seem harmless but when they take on a life of their own, the result will be a spoiled brat. A horse in that condition is going to hurt somebody and has been robbed by his government of the clarity in life he needs. If he doesn't stand quietly for hoof trimming, it is because he has voted himself a government that does not require personal responsibility. It is a government he wants but not one that he needs.

All political parties and forms of government are contaminated with the spoiled-brat syndrome; it's just that different brats are spoiled. The answer is not in mindless finger pointing but is in a good look in the mirror. Finger pointing is common on horse farms. Horse owners can be very creative in making excuses, which they want to use as reasons.

He's too young, he's too old, I haven't had time, I hurt my hand, it's too hot, it's too cold, I lost my horse training book, he's been abused, he's too scared, he's too stubborn and on and on! What we really mean is, it's not that important to shape the life of the young horse. As a result it may actually become illegal to be young.

If there is chaos and collapse in your horse-human relationship, vote in a different administration. It may be that the spoiled-brat syndrome cannot be dealt with by spoiled brats. The government our horses are stuck with resides in our mind. If we make the changes in our thinking that our horses need, there will never be any need for a bail-out.

Let's consider the natural government of the horse herd. There is no democracy. No vote is taken. Order is inflicted on the herd without pity if necessary. That is a concept that is clearly understood by all horses. Painful experience has taught them that it's in their own best interest to comply with the established code of conduct.

No, it is not illegal to be young. We have all been there. There are, however, ways and concepts to keep youth from being synonymous with disaster. If there is trouble in our horse-human relationships, the inconvenient truth is that it is happening because we have made it possible. Nobody makes a little child or a young horse into a tyrant. That tendency is in the DNA. The chaos is there because we knowingly or unknowingly have allowed it.

What kind of government are your horses stuck with? If it's a bad one, hold your own election and vote the bums out. If your philosophy is bad, change it. If you don't know how to use your chosen techniques, find out. Create change your horse can believe in. When we really get serious, we discover that talk is cheap. We find out that blame talks back, reasons have become excuses and the truth hurts. If we don't get serious, we will discover that being old can be just as illegal as being young.

For what it's worth,

— Warren Bengtson