

5 *The vaulting child*

Some children come to you experienced in horse matters, some as novices. Some come courageous, some overconfident, some shy and some afraid. Try to find out initially *why* the children are brought to you. Asking the right questions at the beginning saves you a lot of trouble later and spares them disappointment.

Is it their own burning wish to vault?
Have they seen vaulting before?
Did they get pushed into it?
Do they ride?
Do they have background in gymnastics?
Have they ever seriously trained for anything?
Do they like horses? Animals in general?
Are they afraid of height, of a fall? (You can't vault without ever falling!)

If the children brought to you are overweight, don't ride and show that they are afraid of horses – be careful! They just might take *your* smile out of the training sessions. . .

Before accepting a child for training, I would always approach the horse with him/her and see how s/he reacts. Observe how the child reacts to you as well – a child who can not be separated from his mother for two seconds is too young to train! (You will always have the mother in the ring with you – we'll get to that topic later.) Ask the child to do a somersault for you on the ground, make him hop up onto the dummy horse (or lift him up) and observe how he reacts to the 'challenge'.

In chapter 8 we ask: what are you training for? Obviously your expectation of the children will vary with the type of

performance you are training for. But no matter for what reasons the children joined your club, the talented ones will always want to push on after their first successes. So you will end up by dividing the committed ones from the ones who just want to play – that way all can have fun.

Trainers come with very different talents and interests. But no trainer has the time and energy to do everything: train children for serious vaulting competition *and* run a daycare *and* correct all the psychological problems a child might bring from home *and* educate the parent at the same time. Children who seriously want to train, or show, or compete, must know who has the authority around the horse. The trainer must be trusted and listened to. Children who really make your job as a vaulting trainer too difficult must learn that they risk being excluded.

Tell them early in the game what you expect from them: show them the difference in commitment when they move from one group to the next level (for instance from playgroup to juniors, or from there to show team), and don't let them get the idea that they will be 'promoted' just because they get older. The right performance, attendance and attitude (towards the sport and the team) must be there too! All of this will improve through correct training.

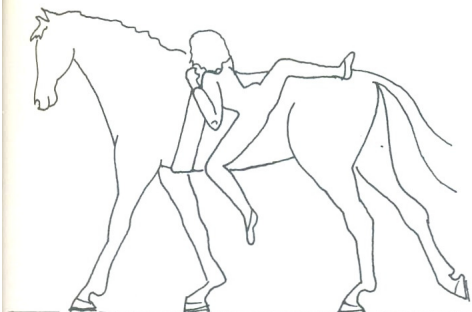
I cannot give you a recipe for instilling psychological trust and friendship in your vaulters. Children are very different; some will take to you and some might not. In general I think children recognize honesty, and if they realize that in your training you don't show personal favouritism and administer positive criticism to help them improve, and praise only when it is deserved, they will respect you. The physical trust is easy to achieve: run along and hold them. Prepare them for exercises by training on the ground and on the dummy horse until they trust your judgement that they can indeed perform this exercise. Never force children into something they are not ready for (fear causes accidents), but rather grip them by their pride if they shirk without reason.



Don't overestimate their understanding! Some vaulters can be very agile and courageous, but truly do not understand the risks of a fall or the limit of their strength or ability. Young vaulters have to try out and experience – they have little use for words – older ones can get the finer points through explanation. Adjust your training to the different age levels and performing groups, otherwise some will drop out frustrated (because they don't follow) or bored. Also group your children according to their ambition if you can, and challenge the ones who want to get ahead.

The things I personally do not accept are:

- 'I can't do it!': The children are not in training to be able to do it, but to *learn* to do it. Tell them to say instead: 'I find this difficult to do', which is true and always acceptable. Children have very different thresholds of frustration, and I don't think you necessarily have to take a psychology class to get to the bottom of it. Just deal with it. Ask them if their sentence is really meant to tell you: 'I'm not willing to try', or 'I'm scared.' If they are scared, again: run along and hold them. When beginners start standing in canter, I first sit on the neck, holding them, later I run a lot... But it is important to let them try, and they will want you to take that hand away before you know it (and before you should!) Move exercises from walk to trot to canter, but if they can do an exercise well in walk, still run along in canter... Always be there when they want you there, offer to run, but tell them you resent running unnecessarily. If they are not willing to try, pass over it, they may have a bad day or be tired. But if this occurs frequently, they should not vault, or drop back into the play-group so as not to hold up the others.
- 'But it hurts...': Sure, sometimes they get a bruise when vaulting. But no sport is learned without bruises. Some children have the attitude that it is their job to show *you* how

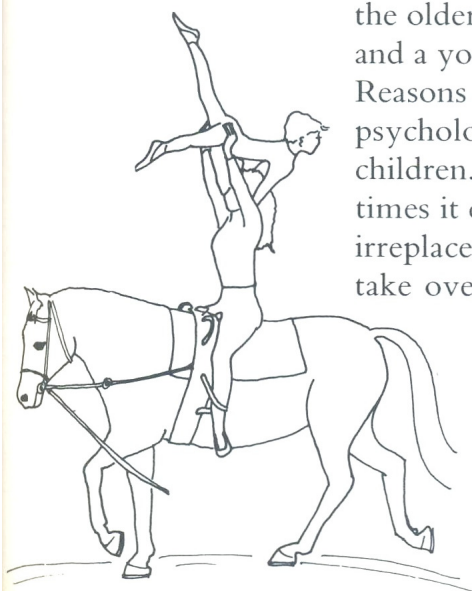


Some will eternally
wait for a push...

hard vaulting is. Some people will hang on the side of the surcingle and eternally wait for that push. I would tell them that *I know* how hard it is and never promised it to be easy. I've done it for years. And personally I don't push children any more after I know that they can, and have seen them, mount by themselves. Some children still get their shoes tied by their mother at age twelve...that might be the problem you're dealing with. Tell them you're not their servant, and that their attitude is a misunderstanding of your position.

Other children are trying to tell you by this behaviour that they don't want to vault at all — find out who pushes them into it...and let them quit. If their heart is not in it, they will have accidents, and you know who will get blamed... In team exercises children sometimes use this excuse to tell you that they do not want to perform with a certain partner. Again, the reason can be dislike (in which case: rewrite your kur!) or distrust. Distrust usually has valid reasons: make them talk about it, and concentrate practice in the areas of concern. Dislike can sometimes be mended, especially when the older of the two (often we are talking about an 'underman' and a younger 'flyer') is mature enough to help in this process. Reasons can be physical (like bad breath or clammy hands), or psychological. If you can't find out what it is, separate the children. Cooperation is a must in team exercises, and sometimes it does wonders for them to understand that they are not irreplaceable, and that in case of dislike, someone else will take over their exercise.

Make it work!



- Abusing team partners: when a double or triple exercise does not work, all partners can get very frustrated. But they have to understand that blaming each other will not make the performance better, and that the goal is to make it work, not

to fight. It is the trainer's job to find out exactly *why* the exercise does not work and correct the mistakes which make it fail. If the vaulters have constructive criticism (often they detect the faults themselves) they can help each other by making suggestions. They have to learn that the exercise with *all* partners will only get praise, look good or achieve good marks in a competition, if *all* partners in it do their best. Vaulting is an excellent tool for learning real cooperation and team work! Never support them in laying blame!

- Taking their frustration out on the horse: As mentioned before, this is in my opinion a reason for sending the children out of the ring, until they have cooled down sufficiently to distinguish who of the two, the horse or the child, should show more brains and understanding. *Never* let them get away with making the horse suffer. If the horse needs to be yelled at, this is the lunger's job, not the vaulters'.

Normally, children within a vaulting team form close friendships and show excellent abilities in cooperation. It is a joy to see team spirit grow, and trust develop between them. Working on a problem together and physically supporting each other, and then 'shining' together when show time comes around, forges them into an entity. In competitions (although they must learn always to show an attitude of good sportsmanship to the competitors) one can then really observe how they 'stick up' for each other, and how protective and proud they can be!

Treat your vaulters with respect, and if they show intelligence and willingness, give them credit for their social abilities as well. They should all have to take on certain responsibilities early, such as learning the sequence of a show, taking care of the horse and cleaning the equipment. The older ones can take over 'baby-sitting' jobs within the team, supervising a little one in the stable and during shows. They also do much of the explaining and can take quite a load off the trainer's shoulders. They can prepare the horse (plaiting etc.) before a show, get him wrapped for travel-

ling, and assemble the equipment necessary for the event. When you have a good team together (and that takes a year to grow) everyone is proud and supportive of everyone else.

Although the older vaulters in your club might train as individual competitors or *pas-de-deux* partners, the team aspect should never be neglected, as it is in my opinion the *best* part of this sport. Eventually most children will quit vaulting, very few go on to World Championship level or become professionals. But the experience of real team spirit will have done something very valuable to their heads, and will hopefully be transferable to other situations later in life!

Trainers have very varied opinions about the right age to start vaulting. I believe that the trainer, through his interest, patience and general ability to deal with children, will determine to a great degree at which age his vaulters can start to learn something useful. Attention span in young children is of course a factor, as well as the size. Naturally a child is limited in his vaulting, if he can't reach even the inside grip of the surcingle. But size and mental capacity can not necessarily be tied to age: I have trained some five-year-olds, who were incredibly focussed! It is indeed true that groups with very young children should have smaller numbers, so the children do not get bored and scatter in all directions. . . . For playgroups it is very important that the trainer have at least one helper to oversee and supervise.