

Studying farm animals: What about horses?

“Look, Ms. Torres,” says Dickson the first day back after the winter holidays. He shows her a photo of himself offering a carrot to a horse poking its head between fence rails.

“Wow!” says Ms. Torres. “You’re feeding a horse. Tell me about this.”

Dickson explains how his family visited his uncle’s farm in the country. One afternoon his uncle walked with him to a fenced pasture with horses.

Other children gather around to look at the photo: “Did the horse like the carrot?” “What was the horse’s name?” “I wish I could feed him.” “Did you get to ride him?” “Were you afraid?”

“It sounds like all of you would like to know more about horses,” says Ms. Torres. “I’ve got just the perfect book we can read at story time.”



Studying farm animals, a favorite in preschool classrooms, gives children an opportunity to learn about a number of animals, including cows, horses, sheep, goats, pigs, chickens, and ducks. Horses—and mules—were important to U. S. farms until about the 1940s, but they have since been replaced by tractors for tasks like

plowing, hauling loads, and harvesting.

Today some farms have horses, but horses are more likely to be found on ranches, where they are used to help round up cattle and sheep and to separate calves out of a herd. Other farms and ranches raise horses for specialty uses such as racing, rodeos, and equestrian sports like dressage (pronounced *druh-sazh*), show jumping, and polo. In addition,

farms known as *stables* offer a place for horse owners to board their animals as well as a location for the public to get riding lessons and ride for pleasure. In national parks, like the Grand Canyon, horses and mules offer visitors a way to traverse long, steep, and winding trails.

Horses were introduced into North America with the Spanish conquest (after a prehistoric version died out at the end of the



Pleistocene period). Some horses escaped and went wild, spreading throughout the Great Plains and the West. Herds of these wild horses, called *mustangs*, can still be found in parts of the Western states.

Early Spanish ranchers and missionaries taught Native Americans how to work with horses to herd cattle. Because of their deft handling and roping skills, they became known as *vaqueros*. *Vaquero* is derived from *vaca*, the Spanish word for cow, so the translation is “someone who works cows.” In Mexico and parts of the United States, they are known as *charros*, which means “competitive horsemen.” A *charrería*, a Mexican rodeo, is considered that country’s national sport. As Anglo-Americans moved to the Southwest in the aftermath of the Civil War, they incorporated many *vaquero* techniques, dress, and equipment, but they were called *cowboys*.

Movies of the Old West show cowboys *breaking* horses—that is, forcing a bridle and saddle on a young or wild horse and staying on the bucking animal until it gives up the violent movement and becomes placid. But some horsemen have adopted the *vaqueros*’ gentler and more natural way of training that focuses on a collaborative relationship between the horse and rider.

Horseback riding has long been known for its benefits, such as improving a rider’s muscle tone, strength, coordination, and confidence. In the mid-1900s, psychotherapists began having patients interact with horses for a variety of physical and mental health issues, such as cerebral palsy,

Down syndrome, addiction, autism, depression, and anxiety. This *equestrian therapy* is believed to be effective because of a horse’s ability to sense human feelings and needs.

Vocabulary

It’s important as you work with preschoolers and school-agers to use the correct words. Children will relish using new and strange words and delight in using them with family and friends. Use the following words as the opportunities arise.

Horses, along with donkeys and zebras, belong to the genus *equine* (pronounced ee-kwine). (Mules are not a separate genus; they are the offspring of a female horse and a male donkey.) An *equestrian* is someone who rides or performs on horseback. A male horse is called a *stallion*, and a female horse a *mare*. A baby horse is called a *foal*; a male foal is a *colt* and a female foal is a *filly*. Contrary to popular belief, a *pony* is not a baby horse but rather a breed of horse that stays small its whole life. One breed of pony, for example, is the Shetland.

A rider sits in a *saddle*, usually made of leather. Hanging down on both sides are the *stirrups*, which hold the rider’s feet. A blanket or pad under the saddle provides cushioning and absorbs sweat.

Riders can guide a horse by pulling the *reins*, pressing against the horse’s body with their legs, or both. The reins are attached to a metal *bit* that rests in the horse’s mouth. The bit is part of the *bridle* or headpiece that is made up of straps that go around the horse’s head. Another type of headpiece

is the *halter*, which has no bit, and is used by a person on the ground to lead the horse around or tie it to a rail or post to keep the horse from wandering.

Saddles and headgear are called *tack* and are generally stored in a *tack room* in the barn or stable. A tack room may also be found in the front of a horse trailer, which can be used as a sleeping and dressing area for a traveling driver.

Horses that race, jump, or pull loads generally wear *horseshoes* to protect their hooves. Horses that graze in a grassy pasture often don’t need them. A horseshoe is a U-shaped metal piece that is nailed to the outer section of a hoof where there are no nerve endings, so it doesn’t hurt to be nailed on or worn. A person who trims hooves and shoes horses is called a *farrier*.

For centuries, a horse’s size has been measured in *hands*—that is, the approximate 4-inch width of a man’s palm, including the thumb. A horse’s height is measured from the ground just beside a front leg to the top of the shoulders (*withers*). This is the one part of a horse that stays the same regardless of whether the horse is lowering or raising its head or arching its back. Today, measuring the height is usually done with a special equine measuring stick.

Introduce children to horses

The ideal way to introduce children to horses is a live experience that allows children to see how large they are, hear them whinnying, smell their environment, and touch their hides. One possibility is a field trip to a farm, ranch, or stable, as long as you address

safety issues. Children may be required to remain behind a fence and stay quiet. Mounting or riding a horse is probably not allowed.

Another possibility is to go where children can see horses and their riders, such as a parade. Or your program may be located in an area where mounted police patrol the streets. In any case, you will need to prepare for the children's safety.

Safety considerations:

- Explain limits beforehand. Many children have never been around horses. Explain, for example, that horses are generally friendly toward people, but that running and shouting can frighten them and endanger everyone. Explain that children may ask questions but will not be able to ride.

- Set the example. Stay at a safe distance, speak in a calm voice, and move slowly. Show respect to the horse and its attendants.
- Arrange for extra adult volunteers and communicate clearly about the limits you set.

If a live experience is not possible, arrange for a rancher, horse trainer, or stable hand to come to your program and show pictures or a video. The person may explain how horses help round up cattle or train riders for a rodeo, for example. A trainer is often an expert with a rope and may be able to do rope tricks. The visitor may also bring feed samples (hay and oats), grooming brushes, a saddle and bridle, and a horseshoe, for example.

You can provide a visual experience by showing videos or films. The website, shutterstock.com,

has video clips of horses as well as zebras and donkeys in various settings. Consider borrowing a film from your local library or buying one online. Older children will enjoy one example, *My Friend Flicka*, released in 1946. The story is still relevant to the present with its beautiful full-color scenes of horses on a Wyoming ranch. It tells the story of a 10-year-old boy who is given a filly to train, while encountering obstacles, including a stern father.

Activities

You probably already have farm animal activities for learning centers. The ones below are adapted to highlight horses.

Book/Library center

Read a book about horses at story time. Then leave the book in the center for children to look at on their own. Two examples:

Hubbell, Patricia. (2011). *Horses: Trotting! Prancing! Racing!* Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Corporation.

Colorful illustrations and rhyming text give an overview of different types of horses and the jobs they do (although pulling a plow and hauling a hay wagon are outdated tasks).

Murray, Julie. (2016). *Horses*. Minneapolis: Abdo Kids.

This book of color photographs is perfect for toddlers and younger children. Simple, straightforward text explains a horse's life. Two photos show a child feeding a horse, and a third shows a child sitting in the saddle.

After children have some understanding of horses, offer books to expand their knowledge and creativity. Here are suggestions.



Carle, Eric. (2011). *The artist who painted a horse*. New York: Philomel.

This simple book is not only a picture book for preschoolers but also an homage to Franz Marc, an expressionist German artist whose paintings of blue horses inspired Carle (author/illustrator of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and more than 70 other books) to paint boldly and freely. Illustrations depict not only a blue horse but also a red crocodile, a yellow cow, and other animals in brilliant, unexpected colors. It's a reminder to adults that all children are little artists who can see the world in unique ways.

Cowley, Joy. (2003). *Where horses run free: A dream for the American mustang*. Westminster, MD: Boyds Mills Press.

A cowboy (patterned after real-life Dayton O. Hyde) rescues mustangs corralled into Bureau of Land Management feedlots and takes them to his South Dakota sanctuary. Paintings by Layne Johnson capture the spirit of horses running free.

Ipczade, Catherine. (2010). *Zebras*. Mankato, MN: Capstone Press.

This book, part of a series on African animals, describes zebras, their habitat, food, and behavior. Color photographs are great for comparing with horses.

Yasuda, Anita. (2014). *Animales en la granja: Burros*. New York: AV2 Weigl.

This book, printed in Spanish, allows teachers to access an English version electronically, at no extra cost, offering a bilingual learning experience. Simple text, written from a donkey's point of view, and color photographs describe a donkey's life on the

farm, including food, physical characteristics, and behavior, especially its friendliness.

Dramatic play

Create an area indoors—or better, outdoors—to represent a farm or ranch. Set up the red barn, and hang the farm mural painted in the art activity. Add a bale of hay, a plastic tub for a water trough, and wheel toys for farm vehicles. Offer props such as stick horses, straw hats, sombreros, western shirts, chaps, work gloves, bandanas, suede vests, boots, and rope.

To stimulate play, suggest that children feed the animals and take the stick horses for a ride.

How to make a stick horse

Here's what you need:

- ¾-inch dowel about 3 feet long
- hand saw or heavy-duty knife
- paint (optional)
- large adult sock
- stiff fabric for ears, such as Pellon® or heavy felt
- glue
- scissors
- fabric paint or markers
- polyester stuffing or cotton batting
- yarn or fringe
- heavy cord or leather strip for the reins
- string or rubber bands
- needle and thread

1. Use a saw or knife to cut a notch into the dowel about 9 inches from one end.
2. Paint or decorate the dowel if desired.
3. Cut out 2 ears from heavy fabric. Sew them to the sock heel.
4. Draw nose and mouth on the sock toe. Draw eyes near the ears.

5. Cut yarn in 6-inch lengths and sew behind the ears for the mane.
6. Stuff the sock.
7. Insert the dowel into the sock up to the ears. Tie the head to the dowel against the notch using string or rubber bands. Knot securely and glue.
8. Pull the cord or leather strip from the mouth and across the neck for the reins. Sew securely in place.

Variation: For a larger horse head, make a pattern and cut out the head from fabric.

For the best play experiences, provide several stick horses so children don't have to share or squabble over use.

Blocks

Invite children to create a farm in the block center, using wooden blocks, plastic cubes, connecting blocks like Lego® and Duplo blocks, or Lincoln logs. Children may build a barn, farm house, animal pens, and a corral. Provide people and animal figures. Commercial suppliers, like Lakeshore®, offer farm animal sets that include horses.

Caution: Some small blocks and figures pose a choking hazard to children 3 and younger. Look for jumbo farm animals, 3 to 5 inches long, for toddlers.

Sand and water play

Invite children to carve out an oval or circular racetrack in the sand. They may add a fence around the track using craft sticks and build a stable on the side using cardboard. Provide people and horse figures and a black-and-white checkered flag for the finish line. Three or four children

may each select a horse to race, and another child may ding a bell to start and wave the winner at the finish.

Art

Invite children to mold a horse out of play dough or clay. To make the project manageable for them, show how to roll the clay in sections—an oval for the head, a longer oval for the neck, a barrel shape for the body, and 4 stick-like shapes for the legs. Children can stick the pieces together and use a pencil or other pointed stick to carve eyes, mouth, and nostrils. Accept all attempts. Remember the goal is to encourage children's creative expression.

Some children may want to draw a horse and then paint or color it. Show photographs from books or online of various breeds

with different coloring, such as the Appaloosa (black coat with white spots) and the Palomino (gold coat with white mane and tail). Of course, children may choose other colors, as described in the Eric Carle book mentioned earlier.

Encourage a small group of children to paint a red barn on an extra-large cardboard box to use in dramatic play. Another group may paint a mural on butcher paper that contains a blue sky, green pasture with a wooden fence, trees, pig pen, pickup truck, tractor, and chicken coop. Let the paintings dry and then use as scenery for dramatic play.

Music

Sing "Old McDonald Had a Farm." Accompany the singing with a guitar or keyboard, or play a recording. Talk about how

horses greet people and other horses with a neigh or whinny.

Sing the traditional folk song "She'll Be Comin' Round the Mountain." Add an action for each verse—hand claps, foot stomps—and make up extra verses using other farm animals.

She'll be comin' round the mountain when she comes.

She'll be comin' round the mountain when she comes.

She'll be comin' round the mountain, she'll be comin' round the mountain,

She'll be comin' round the mountain when she comes.

She'll be drivin' six white horses when she comes.

She'll be drivin' six white horses when she comes.

She'll be drivin' six white horses, she'll be drivin' six white horses,

She'll be drivin' six white horses when she comes.

Note: The term *driving horses* usually means hitching horses to a wagon, carriage, or other vehicle, including a sleigh.

Sing the holiday song "Jingle Bells," which includes the line, "Oh what fun it is to ride in a one-horse open sleigh." Distribute bells from the rhythm instrument collection to accompany the song.

Math and manipulatives

An adult horse weighs 1,100 to 1,300 pounds and stands 15.2 hands high (about 5 feet), on average. A medium pony can range from 12 to 13 hands high, while a heavy draft horse, or workhorse, can be 16 to 17 hands high.



Using *hand* to measure

Here's what you need:

- typing or construction paper
- pencil
- ruler or measuring tape

1. Have children trace around one hand on paper. Encourage children to compare their tracings with those of other children.
2. Use a ruler to measure across the palm, including the thumb. Explain that the adult version of this measurement has long been used for measuring horses and is still widely used today. Ask why horsemen and traders might have used this measurement in olden times.
3. Ask why using the hand might have caused a problem. After discussing reasons, explain that some 500 years ago, people agreed that a *hand* would be

standard at 4 inches.

4. Have children expand their drawings so they measure 4 inches across the palm and thumb.
5. Encourage children to take their drawings home and measure the hands of adult family members. How do they compare?

How big is a horse?

Here's what you need:

- butcher paper
- tape
- marker
- cut-out drawing or photo of an adult's hand
- ruler or measuring tape

1. Tape butcher paper together to make a rectangle approximately 7 feet wide and 9 feet long.
2. Draw the outline of a life-size horse on the butcher paper.

Make it roughly 5 feet 6 inches high (from the bottom of the feet to the top of the shoulders) and roughly 5 feet 8 inches wide from the chest to the tail.

3. Mount the picture on a wall with the horse's feet at floor level.
4. Ask children to place a hand (fingers pointing sideways) at the bottom of the leg and count the hands needed to reach the top of the shoulders. Then use a drawing of an adult's hand to take the same measurement. How do the two measurements compare?
5. Invite children to lie on the paper inside the outline. How many children are needed to represent the head and neck? the chest and belly? the front legs and the back legs?
6. Discuss the horse's size. How does a horse compare with a dog or cat?

Pin the tail on the horse

This is the familiar pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey game often played at birthday parties. Personalize the game by having children draw the horse and make or decorate the individual tails.

Here's what you need:

- foam board or cork board, approximately 24" x 36"
- picture or diagram of a horse, with an "X" to mark the spot for a tail
- tails made of paper strips or yarn, one tail for each child
- tape or glue
- push pins
- bandana blindfold

1. Tape or glue the horse picture to the cork board. Hang the



- board at children's eye level.
2. Have children write their names or initials on their tails. Gather the children and explain that the goal is to attach the tail to the back end of the horse.
 3. Toddlers and young preschoolers will be challenged to attach the tail to the proper place. Older children may be ready for the traditional blindfold. Practice first with closed eyes and then invite the children to be blindfolded. Increase difficulty by gently turning the child in a circle two or three times before making the blindfolded attempt. Let the child pin the tail to the board, and leave it there.
 4. Repeat with the other children.
 5. Discuss the difficulty imposed by blindfolding and spinning around. Ask how they could have helped each other as a team (saying "cold" for off the mark and "warm" for close to

the target, for example). Invite children to play the game again—with eyes open, eyes closed, and eyes covered and compare the results.

Science

Use your classroom computer or tablet to display a site that shows a diagram of the body parts of a horse, such as https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Equine_anatomy. Have children identify head, ear, eye, nostrils, mane, withers, back, tail, leg, hoof, shoulders, chest, and belly.

On another day, share a site with images of different horse breeds, such as www.thesprucepets.com/most-popular-horse-breeds-1886146.

Print out or photocopy color pictures of a horse, zebra, and donkey. Invite children to compare them by color and size. How are the three animals alike? How are they different?

Outdoor game

Horseshoes, a lawn game centuries old, is played between 2 people or 2 teams. Actual horseshoes made of metal weigh about 2 pounds each and may be difficult for children to handle. You can find a rubber horseshoes set online for about \$15. (The rubber set may include a circular base for each stake that allows for playing the game indoors.)

Here's what you need:

- 2 stakes
- 4 horseshoes
- chalkboard and chalk (or pencil and paper)

1. Set the 2 stakes in the ground a few feet apart. Have children first try to toss a horseshoe toward a stake to determine a reasonable distance for their age and ability.
2. Children (or teams) stand at one stake and take turns tossing a horseshoe to the opposite stake. The object is to ring the horseshoe on the stake, which counts as a point.
3. Appoint a child as scorekeeper, who will mark points on the chalkboard (or paper). Determine in advance what constitutes a ringer or comes close to it—for example, a horseshoe that leans against the stake, a horseshoe that bounces off the stake, a horseshoe with only one end touching the stake.
4. Determine how many points it takes to win—say, 10 points—or whether the game ends when a child (or team) scores the most points.

Extended activity: Ask children to compare a horseshoe to letters in the alphabet. Which letter looks



like a horseshoe? Invite children to mold a horseshoe out of clay.

Teacher resources

Bluebonnet Equine Humane Society, www.bluebonnetequine.org, a nonprofit organization in College Station, Texas, rescues abused, neglected, and abandoned horses throughout Texas. The website has scores of photos of horses as well as links to articles and other equine websites.

Buck. (2011). This documentary film explores the life and work of Dan "Buck" Brannaman, the horse trainer who advised Robert Redford in making *The Horse Whisperer*, the 1998 fictional film that dramatizes a firm but gentle method of helping a horse overcome trauma. At one point in the film, a client says to the trainer (Redford): "I've heard you help people with horse problems." He replies, "Truth is, I help horses with people problems."

Equus "Story of the horse," Episode 1: Origins. (Jan. 16, 2019). "How horses read our expressions." Nature, PBS.org.

Flores, Nancy. (Sept. 15, 2019). Charro pride. Mexico's national pastime is now a growing sport across Texas and parts of the United States. Austin: *Austin American Statesman*. A video is available online.

The Spruce Pets, part of Dotdash publishing. www.thesprucepets.com offers information on common pets, from dogs and cats to birds and horses. ■