



# Positive Attitudes and Youth Horse Programs

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All of us who play leadership roles in youth horse programs need to think about positive attitudes. Some people feel that working with “horse people” is a difficult job or that the parents of “horse kids” are the most difficult to deal with. How can we help change the negative attitudes that seem to permeate many youth horse activities?

## Expectations

Believe it or not, most people live up to expectations if they are clearly defined and understood by everyone, including adults. It is heartwarming to hear youth remind adults to be positive. Sometimes a simple statement such as the following can be worth a million words:



Many youth in the New York State 4-H program have put this statement on red paper and framed it. When adults or other youth forget and become negative at a horse event, the youth have been encouraged to hold up the sign and remind the others why they are there.

Have someone take the leadership role at your next event and clearly state expectations and set a positive tone for the day.

## Positive Attitude

Everyone wants to feel good and feel special. Wouldn't it be nice to know that everyone felt this way at the end of each day at a youth horse event—not just the kids but the parents and volunteers as well? Consider the following helpful statements:

**Smile, Be Nice, Be Friendly!** It works, doesn't cost anything and doesn't hurt, I promise!

**Youth Development through Positive Life Experiences.** This statement helps bring us back to reality and demonstrates that we are involved for the youth and not for ourselves. As youth leaders, we need to take the responsibility to ensure this is the case in our youth horse programs.

**Learning Should Be Fun!** Are you having fun at youth horse events? If you are not having a good time, then probably the youth aren't either. Try not to make youth educational events just about learning, but attempt to be creative and include at least one activity just for fun. If you are not creative, seek out creative people to help you. Don't forget that youth are the most creative people on earth. Get them involved.

**Learning + Fun = Positive Self-Esteem.** Use this motto in your educational program and you will be sure to succeed.

## Focus on Life

Have you ever noticed that two people who experience the same set of circumstances may react in totally different ways? Do you ever wonder why that might be? Sure, some of it might be a result of past experiences, but most of the difference in the way people react is based on their focus on life.

As we make our way through each day, things happen. The way we react to them is our choice. That is not to say that we shouldn't get upset over certain circum-

stances. What matters is *which* circumstances we allow to upset us.

People who have a *narrow focus on life* allow little everyday happenings to affect them negatively. Ask yourself: will this make a difference 20 years from now? If the answer is "no," then forget about it.

People with a *broad focus on life* have the right perspective. Ask yourself: will it make a difference 20 years from now? If the answer is "yes," fix it and then get on with your life. Because we are all human, we cannot always have a positive, broad outlook. But the broader our focus, the more positive our attitude will be.

## Conflict

This is not to say that conflict never should or will not occur. What is important is handling conflict so as to produce some positive effect. When conflict does arise, deal with it. I encourage you to step back from the situation and ask the question: What is best for the youth?

It is also helpful to establish a committee of three to make decisions if a question should arise at a horse event. Announce the names of the committee members before the start of the event. This really *does* work.

## "You Are Good Stuff"

The videotape *Lighten Up*, performed by Sandy Queen, sends the message that we all take ourselves, our lives, and our jobs too seriously. Here are some wonderful quotes from this video that will help you appreciate your life more:

"You Are Good Stuff"

"Don't Sweat the Small Stuff"

"If It's Not Life or Death, Then It's All Small Stuff"

This video is not for youth audiences, but I highly recommend that you use it with adults who need to lighten up their attitudes.\*

## Anecdotes

*A funny story.* Just before I left for Chicago to go to the 1994 American Youth Horse Council National Youth Horse Leader Symposium and talk about positive attitudes, a curious set of circumstances seemed to surround me. We were in the process of trying to sell our house and were trying to keep it as shipshape as possible given that it is a farmhouse, that it was the dead of winter, and that we had two golden retrievers living with us. Unfortunately, our old dog got sick all over the mauve carpets, so we rented rug shampooers and

cleaned the rugs. I locked the old dog in the laundry room the next day to prevent further problems. But my husband phoned to say that I had locked the wrong dog in the laundry room. It now seemed that the other dog had become ill also. So we had to rent the rug shampooers a second time. In the meantime, the fuel pump, starter, timing chain, and radiator in the truck broke. The "frost-free" water spigot in the barn froze. The windshield in the car cracked. The microwave stopped working. All of this happened within four days, right before I had to pack my bags for Chicago! How *positive* do you think my attitude was? I asked my wonderful secretary, Judy, "How can I go to Chicago and talk about positive attitudes?" We both just laughed and away I went.

*A not so funny story.* Three weeks after I got back from the symposium in Chicago, my very special show mare broke her leg playing in the pasture. It was a horrifying experience for the whole family. Is it going to make a difference in 20 years? Yes! Did I get upset about it? Yes I did! I cried for a whole week until my eyes hurt. And then I cried some more.

*Are you starting to see the whole picture?*

## You Can Make a Difference

Each of you who is in a youth leadership role has an obligation to lead in a positive way and set expectations for those involved. Working with kids and horses should be enjoyable, and each of you can help make it happen.

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\*The videotape can be purchased from LIFEWORKS, telephone 410-992-7665.