

HORSE SAFETY

- *Know and discuss safety rules for barn, arena, and pasture.*

OBJECTIVE: These are the **skills that every student must practice from the moment they first set foot in the barn**—rules that you must enforce in order to make safety-consciousness the cornerstone of your program. We expect our Red Level students to be able to **discuss these basic rules** well enough that they could safely introduce a friend or family member to the barn.

Students who take mounted lessons will likely absorb a lot of these skills during their introductory classes, and get plenty of **hands-on practice**. For students enrolled in an unmounted program, you'll want to allow as much time as possible for actual leading, tying, approaching horses and moving around them, handling hooves, maneuvering gates, clearing the barn aisle, and absorbing the hundreds of little safety practices that conscientious equestrians do without thinking about it. The more time your students spend in the barn, the more the reasons for the rules will start to make sense!

CHECKING IT OFF: There is a lot of information to cover in this section. Students need to learn safety practices for all three of the environments they will be working in, and rote memorization isn't really enough. They need to **understand the rationale behind each barn rule**, so that they start developing the critically important ability to **think like a horse**.

If you are teaching a summer camp program or clinic, horse safety can and should be the focus of your entire first day, giving you plenty of time to break things down into bite-sized chunks. The more interactive you can make your lessons, the better! Regular riding students can discuss topics as they warm up or cool down at the walk.

You'll know they've got it: if they can articulate safety rules well enough to explain them to a non-horsey friend or family member.

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT:

"How do prey animals think differently than humans? What are some normal human activities that might startle a horse?"

"Horses are experts at getting into trouble! Imagine you left a halter hanging near your horse's legs. What might happen?"

*"You have a friend coming to visit your favorite horse. What are you going to tell them they absolutely **MUST NOT** do? What are things they **SHOULD** do?"*

"You are working in the arena and another student falls off or loses control of their horse. What is your action plan?"



SAFETY
FIRST!

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE?

Horses are like small children—if there is the slightest possibility for trouble in their environment, they will find it.

Preventing equine accidents involves being able to look critically at a workspace and ask, “**What could possibly go wrong?**”

Invite your students to go on a hunt for hazards by **staging a scene** in your barn aisle, stall, arena and/or pasture. (With the horses are out of harm’s way, of course!) Pitchforks can be left haphazardly in the aisle; drop hay twine or plastic peppermint wrappers in your stall; hang buckets too low; leave stall guards dangling, latches unfastened, glass bottles sitting out, etc. Some of the errors can be **missing items**: hide your salt blocks, fire extinguisher, and first aid kits. Set your jump standards with empty metal cups and leave other cups lying on the track where a horse may step on them. Your imagination is the limit as long as it doesn’t put anyone—human or equine— in danger.



On a rainy day... set up a booby-trapped **model horse barn**, using a table or another sturdy surface your students can gather around. If you don’t have Breyer models and a model barn of your own, ask around, as students often come equipped with large collections and are happy to lend pieces. Assign a time limit (just a minute or two if you want to make things exciting!) and challenge students as a team or individually to see how many problems they recognize. You can also turn the tables and have them set up the barn, planting hazards for you to find.

MY BARN, MY RULES

Do you have **posted barn rules** on your farm? Do your students know where they are? Hold a **horsey scavenger hunt**—always popular at summer camps—and include a reference to several of the written rules without context.

This list of horsey commandments can become a lesson on their own if you turn them into a **skit**. Discuss rules one by one before asking students to act out—in pairs, if you need both a horse and handler—what can happen if a rule is broken. You may wish to turn this into a camp presentation, allowing preparation time for students to think of creative new ways to explain the rule or assemble creative spots. This is also a great rainy day activity, but watch your noise level if you are doing this one in the barn, as hilarity may ensue!

Have your students take charge by asking them to **write their own list of barn rules**, or to create a **poster** as a visual aid. Most of us have back issues of equine periodicals piling up, so give your students a stack along with posterboard, scissors, stickers (bonus points if you can find some with warning signs, exclamation points and other relevant symbols!) and plenty of tape and markers. You can divide students into pairs or teams and assign each of them an area of the farm to focus on, or make the whole thing a collaborative group exercise. Display the finished posters in a prominent place, particularly during end-of-camp showcases for parents.



A PICTURE WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS

As a variation on the barn rule skit, play a round of **Pony Pictionary**. Each team takes turns designating an artist; the artist draws on a whiteboard with the goal of prompting the rest of the team to guess the barn rule represented within the allotted time. No numbers, letters, or verbalizing allowed! You can make up prompt cards ahead of time or allow artists to choose their own safety practice to draw. The team with the highest number of points wins a prize.



Pony Pictionary is one of the most popular activities at HorseSense day camps.

On the rare occasion we don't include it in the schedule, students will ask if they can play for fun! This game can also be used to test basic terminology, recognition of tack and equipment and parts of the horse. As a bonus, you can adjust the length of the game to fill your time slot, and need only a whiteboard and a pack of dry erase markers.

PROMPT BUCKET

How many times have you been asked a question that you know the answer to, but on the spot, your mind goes blank? It happens, especially with children who are anxious in anything they consider to be a "testing" moment. Using a physical object as a prompt allows students to discuss their knowledge more as a means of solving a puzzle and less as a recitation. Way more fun for everyone involved!

Prompts should be reasonably small, inexpensive, and easy to store in a bucket, bag or plastic storage box. The exact items used are up to you—the main thing is that they **clearly represent a safety rule** in some way. Students can choose a prompt to identify and discuss, or they can draw one randomly with eyes closed. To play at expert level, place the prompts in a pillowcase. Ask students to guess what their prompt is and what rule it suggests **before** they draw it out for everyone to see. If a student gets stumped, you can use a word bank or a printed list of barn rules available as a hint. Here are a few prompts we have used:



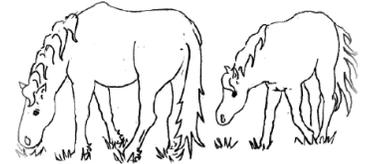
- 🐾 Bubble wrap (*personal space bubble*)
- 🐾 Candy wrapper (*no trash horses might eat*)
- 🐾 Tie ring (*tie in appropriate place*)
- 🐾 Glass bottle (*avoid glass containers*)
- 🐾 Flat nylon lead (*use rope that won't burn/jam*)
- 🐾 Model horse pitchfork (*put equipment away*)
- 🐾 Eye patch (*avoid blind spots*)
- 🐾 Bullhorn (*no loud noises!*)
- 🐾 Running shoe (*no running!*)
- 🐾 Flip-flop (*appropriate close-toed footwear!*)
- 🐾 Hay twine (*don't feed it!*)
- 🐾 Gate latch (*leave gates as you find them*)
- 🐾 Halter & lead rope (*don't handle loose horses; fit halters correctly*)

Download a full list of prompts, along with a handy checklist of horse safety rules, on the Learning Levels website. Search for Worksheets under Resource Type, or visit:
<https://horsesenselearninglevels.com/resource-center/resources-by-level/red-level-resources/>

OUT AND ABOUT

Take your students for a walk in an occupied pasture. Make sure all students are wearing appropriate footwear; helmets are strongly recommended. Brief students thoroughly ahead of time: **What should they do if a horse approaches them? What if the herd starts running? What kind of behavior is tolerated in the horse's living space?**

Just being in the field with the horses opens up all kinds of discussion topics. Here are a few you may cover:



-  **Herd behavior.** So much can be learned by watching horses interact in their natural environment. What does a horse do when he wants another horse to move out of his way? How do they apply pressure and release it? Who is the leader of the herd? How do the other horses act in the presence of this leader?
-  **How do the horses communicate with each other?** How can you tell if the horses look relaxed? Stressed? Angry? Frightened? What would you do if you were approaching a horse and he made any of these expressions?
-  **How does your body language influence the horse?** How would a predator approach? How can we walk up to a horse without triggering his flight or fight instinct?
-  **Bringing a treat for a horse** is fine, but what would happen if you walked out there with a bucket or a noisy plastic wrapper?
-  **What are a horse's basic needs?** How does this area provide forage, water, salt, shelter, exercise, companionship?
-  **What are some hazards** you might find in a pasture? Are there holes, poisonous plants, broken fence boards, surfacing debris? What makes a safe fence for a horse?
-  **If you take one horse out of a herd, the others may follow.** What is the best way to respond to a tailgating horse? How would you get in and out of the gate without letting the others escape?

STICK HORSE SAFETY

Before you turn your students loose in the arena, have them practice maintaining a safe environment by putting on a **mock lesson or flat class using hobbyhorses**. Discuss safe spacing, using the length of the stick to demonstrate "horse length" in all directions. Practice passing to the inside, circling, passing left shoulder to left shoulder, calling out intentions and obstacles, staying close to the rail, and stopping promptly at the words "Heads up!" Emphasize that **these are skills used by all horse handlers**, and are important even if students do not ride regularly in an arena.



Discuss **safe footing**, using circles to establish control, and the kinds of **hazards that may be found in the arena**, such as food containers, broken plastic, empty metal jump cups, dangling ropes or longe lines, etc. Tie a **red ribbon** onto one hobbyhorse's tail (or student's "tail"!) and remind everyone that you have a kicker in your midst. For fun, designate one or several of your horses to act up; just choose carefully or you may have a full-blown stampede on your hands!

When it comes to horses, stuff happens. At HorseSense, we create cards around this premise to teach safety concepts during a camp session, clinic, or rainy day lesson. Each card contains a hypothetical scenario—"Buttercup has broken his halter and is running loose down the barn aisle!"—for students to discuss and brainstorm a solution. You can create your own or download Stuff Happens cards from our website:

<https://horsesenselearninglevels.com/resource-center/challenges/stuff-happens/>