

With the royal races kicking off at [Ascot](#) this week, we're giddy with horsey nostalgia. Ponies are magical creatures for children, whether they grew up going to pony club or watching videos of *Black Beauty*. The smell of horsehair and hay; the sound of hooves clip-clopping on cobbles...it's enough to take you right back. Here, keen rider and mummy of two Leonora Bamford explains how she helped her children into the saddle

How young is too young? My children started when they were 2. It sounds crazy as I write it, but they just sat while we kept a firm hand on their knee. It's much easier with a small pony that's used to riding with children.

A good hat and body protector is essential kit, even at the beginning. The correct boots are really important for grip, too; wellies can get stuck in stirrups and be extremely dangerous. Leggings or skinny jeans are fine to start with – it's important to wear trousers so their little legs don't rub.

Ponies are perfect. If your child is a little anxious about riding, start by visiting a stables and gently stroking one of the ponies. They are definitely less daunting than horses. My brother fell off a horse at an early age and now won't go near one – and he's in his late 30's!

Any child can learn to ride, but they need to listen and have respect for the animal and the teacher. They will learn how to sit with good posture and it helps with every aspect of coordination. I always make sure my children help with washing the bit and brushing the pony down – it gives them a taste of responsibility. They love 'mucking out'.

Riding has something for everyone. It's great to do as an only child having lessons, or as part of a group, being part of a team. Pony clubs and little competitions are a really fun way to spend a few hours on the weekend, it doesn't have to be too serious. It's best to start with a lesson or two and take it from there.

Take it at their pace. It's hard to know when to take it more seriously; I think you know very quickly if your child is interested or not. A weekly lesson is plenty to start with, otherwise you risk them getting bored. I make sure my children know that riding is a treat, not something they HAVE to do, but they're four and five now and seem to be loving it. My son just started cantering on his own and it's absolutely terrifying!

Feeling inspired? The best places to take your child riding in London

1. Hyde Park Stables

There's something almost illicit about trotting on horseback through one of London's most famous parks. Ponies are chosen for their temperament and no previous experience is necessary.

hydeparkstables.com

2. Dulwich Riding School

Take lessons from eventing champions at this family-run riding school. Catering for all ages and abilities, this stable is home to twenty horses and ponies.

dulwichridingschool.co.uk

3. Wimbledon Village Stables

Learn to ride in a day or join the Membership Scheme for discounts and personalised lessons to fulfil your riding ambitions.

wvstables.com

Leonora Bamford is the co-founder of parenting blog [My Baba](#) and mother to Caspian, 5, and Scarlett, 4

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