



Putting teens on horses is the best RX for surviving the high school years.

by Alice Chan

I've heard it said that parenting toddlers and parenting teens is not so different. Each age group is struggling for its independence. Each wants you, but needs to push you away for their own development. Each has a hard time regulating their emotions. And they are deep in their experimenting phases.

The other night I listened to my sophomore son's high school counselor explain that in the adolescent years the naturally-occurring levels of dopamine decline in the brain, essentially forcing teenagers to find ways to boost those levels manually.

In case you haven't studied biology and brain chemistry in a while, dopamine is one of the neurotransmitters typically associated with pleasure feelings and happiness.

Okay, I am butchering the pharmacological and physiological aspects of this, but it's believed that the reason that many teens turn to drugs, alcohol, and other risky behaviors, is because

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these substances target the dopamine receptors and stimulate the release of chemicals in the brain that make you feel good.



The counselor went on to say, that if we, as parents, can encourage positive and healthy ways for our teens to boost their dopamine levels, we stand a much greater chance of keeping them away from drugs and other brain-damaging activities.

At this point, a light bulb went off for me. There is an incredible role that horses and horseback riding can play in keeping our teens happy, excited and safe, among other things.

Rewind

Let me rewind. About six months ago, my 16 year old son decided, somewhat to my surprise (and delight), that he wanted to pursue riding competitively—in particular, eventing. He has been riding regularly for the last three years and having fun. Jumping, horseback archery, a few Pony Club games, Nothing too serious, and certainly not competitively.

Fast forward to this fall, and having spent months working hard in a hunter jumper program, participating in numerous schooling shows, joining an IEA team, and attending an eventing camp in

the summer, he finally completed his long-held goal and completed two Beginner Novice eventing shows.

Driving home from the Event at Woodside, he declared that this was it for him. He had found his “thing.” Cross-country in particular is his passion, but he gets pretty excited about show jumping

and dressage too. "I want to ride in college, and who knows, perhaps I'll even become a riding instructor," he declared. You could have knocked me down with a feather.

Witnessing the huge smiles and adrenaline rushes that these endeavors release in him, I realized that even if I needed to make some sacrifices (vacations, meals out, new clothes), this was worth investing in. So I plunged in headlong, and bought him his own horse. A talented eventer who could take him up the levels, and along the way, become his best friend.

Dopamine Discovery

Listening to that school counselor the other night, I suddenly realized what was going on: I had fortuitously and unwittingly stumbled upon a healthy way to help activate my son's dopamine levels. The thrills he gets from galloping across solid obstacles is doing the trick. And of course, this isn't the only benefit.

There's the connection with a beautiful, majestic living being, with a mind of its own. Having to be mindful and present around that beast is a wonderful antidote for our teens, who spend so much time lost in screens, poorly multi-tasking and beset by the overload of information that comes their way each day.

There's the fact that these young adults are responsible for meeting the horse's needs before their own. A priceless lesson for adolescents who are programmed to put themselves first. You come off the cross-country course, and you need to spend the next hour icing, watering, washing and feeding. Only then can you get a drink, take off your sweaty clothes, eat something and sit down.

There's the bond of friendship that builds between horse and rider. We all know how tumultuous teenage relationships are, platonic or otherwise. The ins and outs are dizzying, and so having a steady, ever-present, loyal companion in the shape of your equine partner, is a deeply rooting and dependable thing.

And in my case, there's the fact that my son and I now have a shared passion that gives us the

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chance to spend a lot of time together. I too have a horse, coincidentally a half-sibling to his gelding, and there is no better feeling than having both horses in my trailer, with my son riding alongside me. I have to pinch myself. I know he'll be flying the nest only too soon, and so I treasure this time together. When we arrive at shows he soon flits off to socialize with the kids (all girls!) his own age, but knowing we are in the same "zone" is an unbeatable feeling.

Of course, I could go on. And I write all this, knowing that horses and riding are about the most expensive sport any kid or adult could pursue. But if you can find a way to bring horses into your teen's life, and programs like the Compton Jr. Posse do amazing work to "Keep Kids on Horses and Off the Streets," you might just find you're onto a winner.