

# TURNING RIDERS' LIFE GOALS INTO REALITY



*By Sandy Webster*

Riding instructors, how familiar does this sound? It is a new session and you have been assigned a new class to teach with four participants, all new to riding and to you. Two young boys have been diagnosed with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and can hold the reins, use their leg, hand and voice aids. One child has been diagnosed with fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) and is nonverbal, looking up to say “yes” and down to say “no.” One child has been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and can sign minimally. More often than not, these groups are scheduled around participant, horse, volunteer and instructor schedules rather than similar abilities and riding goals. Many times, arena availability, school transportation and weather can become scheduling factors as well.

▲ Learning to ride a bike relies on many skills that can be taught in a riding lesson, such as balance, coordination, weight shifting, focus and spatial awareness. Photo courtesy of Amy May.

Quite often, PATH Intl. Instructors are faced with the daunting challenge of teaching a specific objective to a seemingly infinitely diverse class. The reality of teaching quality group lessons takes an incredible amount of awareness, creativity, knowledge and flexibility when one considers the varied goals, objectives and steps needed to address all participants in a class. As professionals, PATH Intl. Instructors take on this challenge, week after week, because they know these lessons impact students' lives well beyond the time in the arena and at the barn. While we must understand and stay true to the profession's credentialed scope of practice—teaching riding and horsemanship skills to participants with different abilities to achieve measurable outcomes—we know that those students learn much more than riding skills from these lessons.

The following framework of lesson planning and implementation will begin by looking at participant life goals and matching them with appropriately selected riding skills practiced during fun activities in an environment that facilitates development of those life skills. The hope is that this information will inspire instructors to purposefully plan and teach lessons that richly impact participant life goals while remaining true to their scope of professional credentials.

## Riding Skills Target Life Goals

A riding skill is an equestrian term that describes the desired response from the horse created by the rider's natural aids (hands, legs, voice, seat and weight). Some examples are direct reining, upward and downward transitions, neck reining, opening rein, bending, leg yielding, two-point, turn-on-the-forehand and turn-on-the-haunches. In contrast, ring figures, such as a 20-meter circle, are not truly a riding skill as per our definition. The circle provides the measured location for the students to practice the skills of direct reining, neck reining, an opening rein or bending. However, performing walk-halt-walk transitions is a riding skill because this movement involves the application of the intended aids to communicate a request to the horse to perform a specific movement.

The explanation of the riding skill is planned for and clearly communicated through the teaching technique of what's, why's and how's to maximize the learning opportunity. The "what" is the description of the intended movement. The "how" is the task analysis of the movement incorporated with the intended aids to perform the riding skill. The "why" is the reason for the exercise and/or the effect of the aid on the horse.

The activity, or environment in which the skill is practiced, is also the physical point of reference to assist instructions, the visual aid for students and the place of opportunity for life-skill development. This environment



**Riding can help improve physical skills, such as core, arm and leg strength; hip flexibility and postural alignment, that can help students ride a bike, walk across a room and transfer from a wheelchair. Photo courtesy of Amy May.**

where walk-halt-walk transitions are practiced, for instance, might be at a set of vertical poles. The learning environment, or arena set-up, can be further enhanced by incorporating the skill of dexterity by placing a ring over a pole or having students identify their left hand from right hand after the halt is performed. In each case, a riding skill is used to target the accomplishment of life goals.

Participants should be encouraged to use the aids to the best of their ability related to the skill being taught. However, it is not uncommon to have a class of students of varying abilities, all needing different degrees of support from volunteers. Instructors need to be realistic, knowledgeable and optimistic about students' abilities and therefore teach to the highest level in the class while providing support where needed for everyone to be both challenged and successful.

## Developing Lesson Plans

The lesson objective and supporting lesson plan, the learning environment, teaching technique and support team need to align with the physical, cognitive, social and behavioral skills required to assist the student in



### Physical Life Goal and Affiliated Riding Skills

Skill Needed	Supporting Riding Skills	Skill Incorporated
Balance Coordination Left and right hand recognition Weight shift Core, arm and leg strength Hip flexibility	Croup mount Direct reining Walk-halt-walk transitions Walk-trot-walk transitions Canter departs Leg yield Two-point Posting	Balance Coordination Left and right hand recognition Weight shift Core, arm and leg strength Hip flexibility

### Social Life Goal and Affiliated Riding Skills

Skill Needed	Supporting Riding Skills	Skill Incorporated
Eye contact Verbalization Shaking hands Appropriate behavior Confidence Self-esteem Respect Focus	Mounting Walk-halt-walk transitions Direct reining Neck reining Walk-trot transitions Posting Two-point	Impulse control Verbalization Focus Following directions Left and right hand recognition Appropriate behavior Rider etiquette



Top: Photo courtesy of Amy May. Bottom: Photo courtesy of Saddle Up!

accomplishing life goals. Participants' life goals are the desired and achievable skills that enhance their quality of life, such as riding a bicycle, transferring from a wheelchair to a desk at school, making a friend, fixing dinner or walking across the stage to receive a diploma. The life goals of a person with special needs often include activities able-bodied people take for granted, such as making the bed, having the stamina to go for a walk in the park or the confidence to answer a question in class. In teaching riding and horsemanship, an instructor creates an auditory, visual and kinetic learning environment containing many of the same components needed to perform parallel skills in everyday life.

How can we know what our participants' realistic desires are in both the long and short term? A good way to incorporate this information is during the initial intake assessment. It is also important to issue ongoing parent/participant/instructor progress reports at the end of each session, schedule a meeting to discuss the documented measurable achievement made throughout the term and revisit any future life goals. This gives the instructor a

chance to highlight the participant's accomplishments and learn the impact this may have had on everyday life. Often, these interviews are as informative and inspiring for the instructor as they are for the parents and participants.

Part of the recipe for success is keeping the team motivated and on track while making an impact one step at a time. Ideally, the weekly progress report's outcomes should align with the progress made toward the participant's life goals. They can easily be turned into measurable outcomes by reflecting the participant's progress against the quantitative objective developed in the lesson plan.

While keeping these goals in mind, an instructor devises a quality lesson plan by selecting the most appropriate riding skill, teaching technique, arena set-up and order and type of mount for each participant to foster independence and safety. The lesson plan homework and resulting structure actually give the instructor greater freedom to see opportunities and incorporate further life skill experiences in the moment because he or she is better prepared and more aware.



### Lesson Objectives

The lesson objective is based on what the instructor expects a group of participants to achieve in the lesson while the lesson plan’s foundation is based on the riders’ goals, ages and abilities. The lesson objective is a one-sentence statement comprised of four components including:

- riding skill—the movement the horse will perform
- action verb—the expected demonstration, execution or attempt of the riding skill by the student
- quantitative measurement—the student’s measured ability to perform the movement
- condition—the circumstances under which the student practices, including the gait of the horse and amount of assistance needed from the volunteers

An example of the lesson objective might be, “The riders will perform direct reining through five cones two times in each direction at a walk with a spotter.” Therefore, the skill of direct reining is practiced 20 times at a walk with a spotter throughout the lesson to meet the objective. The lesson plan is built around the objective of the lesson while incorporating opportunities to support the life goals of the participants. For example, while teaching walk-halt-walk transitions to participants whose life goal is to make a friend or improve social skills, the instructor would plan to have them perform the halts side-by-side to provide for social interaction during the halt.

The opportunity to practice the skill while receiving specific praise, postural corrections and specific feedback improves the quality and understanding of the expected task for the participants. The physical, cognitive and emotional outcomes due to performing purposefully selected riding skills include but are not limited to improved:

- muscle memory
- focus
- balance
- self-esteem
- coordination
- confidence
- strength
- appropriate behaviors
- endurance



**Left: Teaching two-point can improve a rider's hip flexibility. Right: Left and right recognition can be taught to riders through gait transitions and turning. Photos courtesy of Amy May.**

In the progression of the lesson, the participants are further challenged by either increasing the difficulty of the movement or reducing the layers of support to promote independence.

The wrap-up summarizes key points of the lesson while encouraging participants to interactively participate. This is also a time for them to receive specific praise, feedback and postural reminders for the next lesson. The recipe for success involves purposeful lesson planning, one objective at a time, and basing a participant’s achievement of the objective on learning how to perform the riding skill under the instructor’s direction with the assistance of volunteers.

Now let’s address the real-life scenario of the four children with a diversity of life goals and abilities using this lesson framework. The common riding skill that would address the needs of all the children would be walk-halt-walk transitions. The objective would be to have the riders perform walk-halt-walk transitions “x” amount of times with the assistance as needed from a team of volunteers. The two boys diagnosed with ADHD would use their voices, hands and legs. The child with

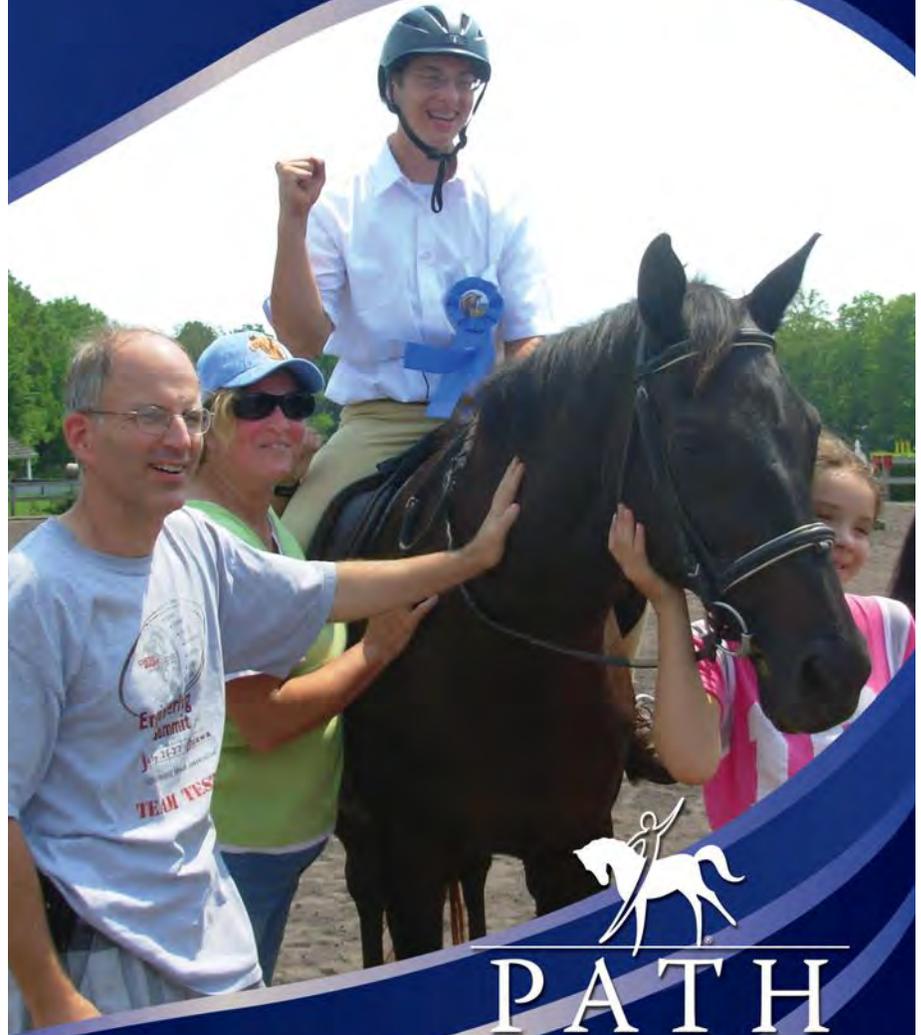
FAS would use her weight as an aid through looking up and down, and the child with ASD would sign and be encouraged to verbalize “walk on” and “whoa.”

Then, the arena set-up would incorporate life skills such as social interaction, recognition of colors, numbers, riding a bike, making a friend and the aspects of their individual life goals all in one well-planned package. The actual lesson might require participants to halt at a colored pole facing one another while performing the downward transition to halt, do a high-five with (make a friend) or warm up in two-point to parallel the skills needed to ride a bike. The lesson plan and thoughtful set-up gives the lesson structure but also frees up the instructor to use his or her wisdom to seize opportunities to encourage and incorporate teachable moments related to the development of the participant’s life skills.

Ultimately, its outcome will align and develop the skill set required in everyday life and hopefully enable participants with disabilities to successfully ride that bicycle, transfer from that wheelchair to a desk at school, make that friend, cook dinner or walk across that stage to receive their diploma.

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