4-H Equestrian Helmets Make a Difference

The Situation
Within Kootenai County, the 4-H Horse program continues to grow. In 2004 membership reached 187 youth, the largest number of project participants in the county. Because of the risk factors involved with the horse-related activities, a national survey was conducted by the American Medical Equestrian Association to assess the value of helmets in reducing serious injuries. Their findings revealed that equestrian helmets significantly reduced the risk of all riding-related head injuries by 30% and serious head injuries by 50%. However, local parents and leaders were reluctant to require youth to wear helmets whenever they were riding at 4-H activities and events. Adults felt that youth wearing helmets would “look out-of-place, especially with their western attire,” and members expressed concern that helmets would be hot, heavy and not look “cool.”

Our Response
Working with local health care professionals and the North Idaho Brain Injury Coalition, Extension educators, program assistants and volunteer leaders developed a two-hour interactive clinic focused on equestrian safety for 4-H youth.

Throughout each clinic we emphasized a variety of safety considerations whenever individuals work around horses. We taught workshop participants how to safely catch, tie and groom horses, with special attention to recognizing the horse’s “blind spots” and learning how to read the horse’s disposition. We then taught participants appropriate techniques in saddling and bridling, and doing a safety inspection of all equipment to avoid potential accidents. The live animal portion of the clinic ended with safety when mounting and dismounting and stressed the rider’s responsibility for insuring the safety of their horse, themselves, and others around them whenever mounted.

The second segment of the clinic utilized a videotape entitled “Every Time, Every Ride.” It provided an excellent overview on how helmets could prevent serious head injuries, and also helped to appropriately dispel the sense of invincibility that many youth possess; they realized that accidents can happen regardless of how experienced a rider they might be. This message was reinforced with a brief presentation by a local neurosurgeon or nurse.

We concluded the clinic by distributing the ASTM-SEI approved equestrian helmets to participants who made a commitment to wear an approved helmet whenever they were on their horses. Trained adults were present to assist each member to assure that the helmet was properly adjusted and to answer any questions youth might have about the care and use of their helmets.

During the first two years of the program our team secured financial support that enabled us to provide each of the 111 clinic participants with a helmet at no cost. Our team felt this was essential in getting an initial group of 4-H Horse members to begin wearing helmets and dispel the myth that helmets were hot and heavy. We negotiated with a local supplier to provide the helmets to our 4-H program participants at cost, enabling us to provide more individuals with helmets. From 1999 to 2001 we shifted to providing helmets to clinic participants on a 50:50 cost share, and since 2002 have simply been providing them at wholesale cost.
In 1997 we also worked with the District 1 4-H Horse Leaders to revise their horse show rules to permit the use of helmets instead of cowboy hats in all western and gaming classes.

**Program Outcomes**

- To date, we have distributed 324 helmets to local 4-H Horse members.
- In 2002 Kootenai County began requiring that all 4-H Horse members wear an ASTM-SEI approved equestrian helmet whenever they are on horseback, or while driving a horse that is pulling a cart or wagon. The District 1 4-H Horse Leaders have recently moved to implement this same requirement throughout the 10 northern counties of Idaho.
- As a result of several statewide and western regional presentations regarding the Kootenai County 4-H Helmet program, copies of the power point presentations and supporting materials have been requested by the Montana State 4-H Program for use in developing an equestrian helmet program throughout Montana.
- Since this program began we have had 17 reported incidents where 4-H members have fallen or been thrown from a horse while riding at 4-H events, club meetings or at home—none of these youth sustained serious head injuries.
- The greatest testimony related to the value of equestrian helmets has come from two families who were initially opposed to this program, both of whom have stated that had their children not been wearing helmets at the time of their accidents they would have undoubtedly sustained serious, if not fatal, head injuries.

**The Future**

Recognizing the difference that equestrian helmets have already made in the lives of local 4-H members and their families, this program will continue into the future reaching new youth as they join the 4-H program. We still receive invitations to deliver presentations about our helmet program at a variety of state and regional 4-H leadership events.

Our ultimate goal is to providing a safe environment within the 4-H Horse Program that enables youth to learn and grow. Preventing serious head injuries or fatalities through the use of ASTM-SEI approved equestrian helmets is a critical element in achieving that goal.

**For More Information**

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