

Passing on the Passion of Safety

By Jerry Tindell
Horse & Mule Trainer
Oak Hills, CA

Most mule owners are passionate about their animals and the lifestyle that goes with it. We want to share that passion with others we meet, whether they are friends, family, or complete strangers who are interested in our mules. Therefore, it is our responsibility to demonstrate and communicate safety to others, especially to the next generation. Safety should always be our first concern at all times. We cannot assume or become lax when it comes to safety. By planning ahead, consciously developing lessons and skills to create good safety habits, we can help invest in the next generation to set them up for success.



Our first responsibility is to make sure we ourselves are educated to be safe around the stock. We need to make it a higher priority to remain aware at all times when we are around our mules and horses. We need to get out of the mindset that our animals are like lap dogs that give us a warm, fuzzy feeling and realize they are more like a loaded gun. If we think of them in terms of gun control, it means you use both hands, and pay attention to what you are doing, and what is going on around you at all times. Here are some general rules to follow:

- a.) All mules are loaded- they can run, jump, kick, and bite when you least expect it.
- b.) Never allow the animals (known or unknown) to be approached unannounced or from an unsafe position.
- c.) Don't do things that will cause the animal to respond in a negative manner, such as not announcing our approach or doing things that might scare them. Often kids will move quickly or do things that will unknowingly create fear in an animal. Make sure the stock is educated and don't have these responses.
- d.) It must be stressed that these general safety rules are not just designed for approaching and grooming, they are designed for anyone who handles or rides mules and horses.

If you are going to have children at the barn and around your animals you must be conscious of the fact that they will imitate EVERYTHING we do, even when you think they are not watching. We cannot afford to get into the habit of 'do as I say, not as I do'; it is too late after an accident has occurred. In the same way we must realize we cannot always trust the kids will do what we

tell them to do, or they may misunderstand a direction we give them. Therefore, children must always be supervised.

Picking the stock you want the kids on and around is critical. We must know beyond a shadow of a doubt the animal is as educated, controllable, and as safe to be around as possible. Children can be hurt or scared easily, which can ruin the experience we want them to have with our animals.



The type of things I look for in the stock for my grandchildren are ones with age on them that have had good experiences with riding, driving, or packing. They have proven themselves when mistakes were made and they didn't react in a negative way or panic. They should be familiar with the way humans behave and have adjusted. I like for them to have a little bit of a delayed feel and be somewhat thick skinned, meaning they are past the flighty

stage are mature, well seasoned, and have great temperaments. When kids poke, prod, and pull on them the animals need to be slower and more non-responsive. The stock should know their job so as to allow the kids to learn.

With this in mind, set up short lessons for the children ahead of time, depending upon their age, attention span, and maturity, that they can complete with success in order to build their confidence. Base their lessons on prior knowledge and responsibility with a specific goal in mind. Start with the basics of knowing how to approach the animal so they don't startle them. Teach them to stay out of the kick zone around the front & hind feet; to know where not touch the animal and how to position their body when working the stock. Teach them how to properly catch and lead the animal so as to not get run over or stepped on; how to properly tie stock so the animals are safe and so the kids don't accidentally get their hands caught in the rope.

Children should also know what their responsibilities are before going to the barn. They must be able to listen and follow directions, and follow the rules in order for everyone to be safe. They need to learn how to approach the barn in order to be safe around all the animals. They need to understand that even the ones that are safe can knock them around or step on them if they are not careful. Teach them to show respect for the animals and other people. Teach them the importance of caring for the animals and that riding is an earned privilege. Young children can learn to do things from a distance by taking care of dogs or cats at home, or feeding the chickens at the barn. Teach them about the body parts of the animals, the name of the tack they will be using, let them help with feeding and watering, etc. Balance the responsibility and fun, but be careful not to over-expose or overload them too quickly. Find new things to do to keep them interested. Pay attention to what the kids are interested in and encourage them in that direction, while teaching them overall responsibility in areas they might not be interested in.

When my grandkids were little we took them into a catch pen with our 30 year old mule and 28 year old ranch horse, which were trained to stop, stand, and lower their head to be caught when approached; the kids were taught to pack their halters, how to approach and halter them, which built their confidence. They were taught to lead, groom, pick up the animal's feet, and do the ground work while learning how to be safe. As they got older they were involved in the clinics here at the ranch, which offered them the opportunity to help set up, practice their good manners while mingling and socializing with the participants. They encouraged the participants as they demonstrated the lesson I was teaching and lead the way through the obstacle course. They had fun while using safe techniques.

I believe that by being responsible mule owners, who set a good example, and effectively communicate what expect we will maintain a high standard of safety for the next generation to follow. Find ways to motivate them and give them a hands-on experience with clearly defined goals and you will find them just as passionate about mules as you are.

For this and other great articles visit: <http://mulesandmore.com>