

Better Ways **By Pete Dillingham**

Have you ever had a horse go right and you went left? How about the time you set your weight to the back of the saddle, pulled lightly on the reins and your horse took off like a tornado -- and you became some sort of barn door ornament? We've all had rides like these where our horse knew what to do, but didn't want to do it, and we lost our cool. In our anger we probably said and did things we later regretted - and our horse didn't learn a thing. There are better ways to solve these problems.

Many similarities exist between child-rearing and developing horses. As a child, if I ignored a 9 p.m. curfew, I was grounded. Those were the consequences. After being grounded a couple of times, I kept a close eye on the clock. It was a simple decision. This same psychology can be used with horses. The rider provides his steed with several choices (curfew or be grounded) and then allows the horse to make their own choice. Eventually, the correct decision will be made.

This sounds really great, but how the heck do we apply it to real life? Let's pretend that we are riding our rebellious critter toward a fork in the trail. The left lane leads to some great riding area and the right path to the barn. As you signal your critter for a left turn, he pulls to the right -- what should we do?

First, horses are very systematic, therefore predictable. If your horse successfully outmaneuvers its rider once, then the rascal will try it again...usually at that same junction. Return to the scene of the crime and anticipate some mischief. Secondly, when the culprit tries to give you a barn tour, provide your horse with a passive consequence (backing up or making circles) whenever the misdemeanor occurs.

Timing is critical. Your response to his independent thinking (refusal to take the left fork) should occur within a second and a half. The sooner you act, the more impact you will have -- your horse will also think you are a mind-reader. Repeat this exercise until your horse willingly makes the choice you're asking for -- then pour on the love. Your steed deserves your affection—that's the "light at the end of the tunnel". Opportunities like this will help dissolve barriers and build bonds of friendship. Love is the bottom line.