

# “This Sweet Connection”: A Phenomenological Study of Parents’ Stories about the Meaning of Horses in their Children’s Lives

Natalie Schmidt (nschmid@bgsu.edu)  
Department of Sociology  
Bowling Green State University

## The Purpose

To better understand the cultural, social, and personal meanings of horses in families’ lives.

To make a social-psychological interpretation of the underlying meaning of the stories parents tell about their children’s connection to horses.



## Literature Review

- As a family moves through a life cycle, the pet’s role evolves in tandem.
  - Stage 1: Pet as companion.
  - Stage 2: Pet as “child.”
  - Stage 3: Pet as peer to human child. Usually the first time child experiences death.
  - Stage 4: Adolescent has responsibility for pet care.
  - Stage 5: Pet becomes substitute companion for “empty nests.”
  - Stage 6: Pet has health and physical benefits
- Humans consider horses to be family members.

- Pets provide nurturance and help owners through difficult times.
- Pets are non-judgmental, provide self-cohesion to family’s structure, and improve self-esteem.
- A companion animal can have soothing and calming capabilities.
- Caring for animals teaches children responsibility.



## Sample

- 30 families were previously recruited from a boarding and lessons stable and interviewed.
  - Various family dynamics, socioeconomic and demographics, as well as horse-relationships.
- 10 parent interviews were selected:
  - 9 individual mother interviews, 1 joint parent interview.
  - Focal daughter between the ages of 10-23.

## Methods

- I chose parent interviews for their views of the child’s development and personality.
- I open and selective coded the parent interviews from the 30 families.
- This analysis focuses on 10 parent interviews that told pivotal stories of “firsts.”
- I present findings from axial coding of these 10 interviews with a focus on the meanings and types of “firsts.”

## Results

- Each parent was asked, “Please tell me one story about your daughter’s life with horses.” and, “What is the meaning of that story to you?”
- A key theme was that parents often told stories of a “first time” event.
- The “first time” stories coded into 4 main sub-themes.



## “Firsts”

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. First time buying horse, Midas               | 6. First time daughter rode horse, Harvey        |
| 2. First time a family bought daughter a horse  | 7. First time mother saw daughter fall off horse |
| 3. First time daughter cantered                 | 8. First time daughter fell off horse, Lance     |
| 4. First time daughter loped                    | 9. First time horse died                         |
| 5. First time daughter cantered around the ring | 10. First time daughter won Versatility award    |

## Four Major Themes

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>1. Overcame Barrier</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>“Everybody can accomplish, every single person no matter what your disability, you can accomplish something.”</li><li>Her daughter was able to overcome her mental disability and canter around the ring.</li></ul> | <b>2. Achievement</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>“Year after year you watch these people win versatility and she finally did it. With a horse that no one really thought could.”</li><li>Her daughter won versatility for the first time.</li></ul> |
| <b>3. Mother/Daughter Bonding</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>“All three of us would go out to the barn together and we would share that bonding experience and the horsemanship and our relationship with horses together.”</li><li>First time horse died.</li></ul>      | <b>4. Fun/Funny</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>“He threw her off. And she actually got right up on her knees and was like, ‘Yes!’”</li><li>First time daughter fell off horse, Lance.</li></ul>   |

## Conclusion

- These firsts experienced:
  - Love, determination, pride, connection, fear, joy, worrisome, and sadness.
- The parents described “firsts” as monumental moments within the family.
- Parents perceive that horses nurture character development in their daughters, often referring to them working hard.

## Implications

- “Firsts” are stories about brief moments in the development of a family through their life cycle.
- “Firsts” illuminate the processes by which their daughters mature and the family grows.
- This research will help me become a better therapist in the future. Understanding various family dynamics is important in family counseling. As a therapist, I’ll listen to stories on a daily basis and make sense of their emotional meaning.

## Future Research

- Interview more father figures and sons. This study was mostly mothers, except for one father interview, and included no sons.
- Analyze the other 20 families’ interviews.
- Compare parent interviews with their children’s interviews to see if they share the same “firsts” and meaning of those “firsts.”

## References

Fawcett, N.R., & Gullone, E. (2001). Cute and cuddly and a whole lot more? A call for empirical investigation into the therapeutic benefits of human-animal interaction for children. *Behavior Change*, 18(2), 124-133.

Turner, W.G. (2005). The role of companion animals throughout the family life cycle. *Journal of Family Social Work*, 9(4), 11-21.

Waslch, F. (2009). Human-animal bonds I: The relational significance of companion animals: animals and families (English). *Family Process*, 48(4), 462-480.