

# Horse & Rider

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MARCH 2007

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Roberta McCarty and Shine All The Chex

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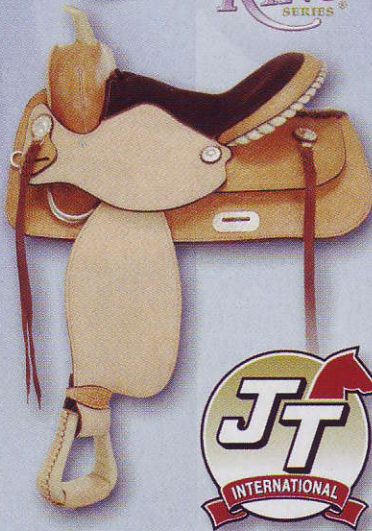


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Royal



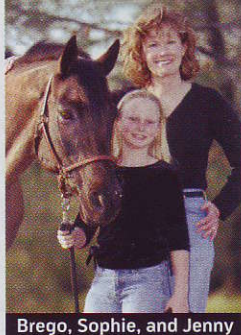
Royal  
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KING  
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# ONE GREAT SOURCE

Email [JTIsales1@sbcglobal.net](mailto:JTIsales1@sbcglobal.net)  
for a JTI dealer near you



Brego, Sophie, and Jenny

## THE RIDING FAMILY

### WHEN A HORSE DIES

BY JENNY MEYER

**I**N DECEMBER, *H&R* EXECUTIVE Editor Debbie Moors had to have Dasher, her youngest daughter's 9-hand Mini, put down. The 17-year-old chocolate-silver-dapple gelding had been suffering kidney problems, and was struggling to get up off the ground. The Moors live in Colorado, too, where winters are unforgiving.

It was clear what needed to be done for the little horse. Less clear was how to handle the situation with Lydia, Dasher's 6-year-old owner. How and when should she be brought into it?

Ultimately, Debbie and her husband, Kirk, decided to tell Lydia clearly what had happened, but after the fact. Because it all occurred near Christmastime, there were distractions that helped somewhat. Still, the sensitive, outspoken first-grader took it hard, says her mom.

"I asked if she wanted to make cookies, and she said, in typical Lydia fashion, 'I'd like to, but I just don't think I can. My tears would make the cookies too salty.'"

Dealing with kids and the death of a cherished horse is hard. Though each child and each situation is different, experts do have some recommendations to guide you through this wrenching time. They are:

- **Be honest.** Using detail appropriate for the age of your child, tell her truthfully what has happened or is about to happen. "Most helpful is a non-rushed, full account, but one without unnecessary or disturbing details," says licensed clinical psychologist Janet Edgette, author of *Heads Up: Practical Sports Psychology for Riders, Their Families, and Their Trainers* ([www.headsup-sport.com](http://www.headsup-sport.com)). "This allows your child to think, wonder, ask, clarify, and ask again. Also watch your child for non-

verbal cues that she wants to know more but thinks she's not supposed to."

- **Avoid euphemisms.** Even if your child is quite young, she needs to understand her horse or pony is permanently gone. The common expression "put to sleep" is especially problematic—and possibly frightening—as youngsters are "put to sleep" every evening at bedtime. "Explain what death is," urges Jessica Jahiel in *The Parent's Guide to Horseback Riding* ([www.HorseBooksEtc.com](http://www.HorseBooksEtc.com)). "Asleep, taking a nap, lying down, and dead are all the same to a preschooler, and your young child may go on expecting to see the horse again at any moment." Be clear.

- **Deal with guilt.** This is critical regardless of your child's age. Her horse was *her* responsibility, so she may also feel responsible for his death. "You'll need to explain, patiently and probably often, that nothing your child did or neglected to do caused the horse's death," cautions Jessica, who adds it's important to watch preteens and teens for signs of depression over the loss.

- **Beware the visuals.** Debbie was no doubt right to keep her 6-year-old from witnessing the euthanasia, as young children, especially, can be traumatized by disturbing images. With older children, use discretion. "Euthanasia is not always peaceful, and that can be terribly upsetting for a child," observes Janet, herself a horsewoman and mother of three.

- **Celebrate, memorialize.** Honor the specialness of the horse or pony with a simple ceremony or shared remembrances. Help your child create a memory album, write the animal's life story, or compose a song or poem. Commission a portrait. Plant a tree, make a donation to a veterinary school, or sponsor a trophy in the animal's name. Encourage your child's creativity in memorializing her friend.

- **Don't rush to replace.** Let your child tell you when it's time to move on. At the same time, advises Janet, "you may need to help a child who may think getting a new horse is a betrayal of the old one."

For more resources on dealing with a child's grief in this matter, go to [HorseandRider.com](http://HorseandRider.com). And if you have your own stories to share, we'd love to hear them. ■

Forward your insights to Editorial Director Jenny Meyer at [jfmfeedback@earthlink.net](mailto:jfmfeedback@earthlink.net).