

Questioning Our Actions Towards Animals:
Animal-Related Ethical Dilemmas for Young People



A Commitment to Care: Thinking Through the Decision to Adopt a Horse

As the car pulled into the parking lot, fourteen year-old Jackie quickly pulled on her riding boots and helmet and, just as the car came to a screeching halt, she hopped out and ran toward the stable. She glanced at her watch as she ran; it was already 3:45 and she was fifteen minutes late for her riding lesson. Now that she was a freshman in high school she seemed to be busier than ever.

After checking in and apologizing for being late two weeks in a row, Jackie ran to her favorite horse, Cedar's, stall. Cedar was sulking near the metal-barred opening in the door, but immediately perked up when he saw Jackie. She slid open the door and quickly grabbed the horse's brushes and hoof pick.

After rushing her way through Cedar's grooming, Jackie led the horse outside into the corral. The horse pranced on his heavy feet, happy to finally be outside and eager to run. But Jackie did not feel the same way. All she could think about was how much easier it would be to have a horse of her own at home. There would be no speeding down the highway as soon as school ended, no rushing through grooming, no worrying about anything. But Jackie's mom had replied with a simple no.

When she reached the corral, Jackie's instructor Paula examined Cedar's hair and hooves.

"Jackie, you really must be sure to brush gently through his tail. I can tell that these knots were pulled at, which could be painful for Cedar," Paula said. Jackie knew it was going to be a long two hours. When she finally got back in the car, still ashamed and distraught over how she groomed Cedar, she was surprised to find her mom smiling from ear to ear.

"What is it, Mom?" Jackie inquired.

"You'll never believe it!" her mom exclaimed. "Your father and I have been discussing that horse you've always asked for, and we finally decided that, because you're older now and you've stuck with your lessons, you might be ready. And I just got off the phone with a horse breeder who says he has a young horse that would fit exactly what we're looking for! So, I made an appointment to go look at him tomorrow!"

At first, Jackie's heart was racing with excitement. Finally, her parents had agreed to buy her a horse! But when she remembered Cedar's joy as he had trotted through the field at the end of the day, she began to question herself. Jackie knew her yard was tiny compared with the acreage the stable owned. And, although the horse would be more accessible whenever she wanted to ride, she knew that the amount of maintenance the barn required far exceeded the small amount she was asked to perform before her lesson. Should Jackie take advantage of her parents' change of heart and finally get the horse of her dreams or stick with her lessons with Cedar and Paula?



Finally, after years of waiting for a horse, Jackie's wishes have been answered! While it is easy to get all caught up in the excitement of the moment, Jackie needs to take time to think through this big decision, carefully and thoroughly. She knows first-hand all that is required of taking proper care of a horse.

The MSPCA believes that a responsible pet owner provides for the physical, behavioral, and psychological needs of a pet for his lifetime. For horses, this means appropriate food, shelter and bedding, exercise, veterinary care, and socialization. Few companion animals require as much time and expense as horses. Additionally, healthy horses can live 35 to 40 years, so ownership is a very long-term commitment.

After showering her parents with gratitude for their generosity and confidence in her, Jackie can ask them for a little time to make sure that the timing to get her horse is right for her. After all, she is just starting high school, and getting used to a longer school day and more homework. She knows that she wants a horse more than anything, but she doesn't want her pet to suffer from any neglect because of her other time commitments. For the past two weeks, she felt horrible knowing she disappointed her instructor and Cedar because she was late to the stable. However, at least she knows that another lucky rider will be along after her lesson to give Cedar more attention and love. With a horse of her own, Jackie would likely feel more pressure as she would be the only caregiver.

Jackie also knows she wants to go away to college in a few years. Although she is not yet sure what she will study, she feels confident that she wants to experience college life on a campus. If she had a horse at home, she would either have to find someone else to care for it, or stay home and commute to a local school.

If Jackie decides that her life is too busy for her to care for her own horse right now, she might ask her parents to revisit the idea a little later when either her schedule lightens or she has graduated from college. Demonstrating her mature thought process and unselfishness will likely solidify her parents' decision to allow her to have her own horse. For now, she can continue to ride Cedar, perhaps scheduling her riding lesson a bit later in the day or on the weekend to help her arrive on time. And when she is ready, Jackie might consider adopting a shelter horse who is looking for a second chance for a happy life, and maybe an older horse who can live his last few years with a wonderful guardian.