

# IMPACT

University of Idaho  
Extension

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## 4-H equestrian helmets – Overcoming cultural stereotypes to promote safety

### AT A GLANCE

Youth participating in 4-H programs demonstrate physical, emotional and financial accountability and reduce the potential for debilitating brain injuries or deaths.

### The Situation

Idaho has a long history, steeped in rugged individualism. Throughout the rural reaches of our state, the cowboy culture is clearly evident. It is a rightfully proud heritage, where one's word is just as binding as any legal contract. A setting where you are more likely to see a pair of western boots and cowboy hat than a business suit and tie. And let's not forget about the horse.

For over a century, a cowboy with a western hat and sitting astride his horse has become the stereotypical image of the western lifestyle for most Americans. Whether it be out on a ranch, in the rodeo arena or at a multitude of horse shows, the cowboy hat has been a visual link to the treasured western way of life.

Within 4-H, the horse program consistently has one of largest enrollments. Besides developing essential life skills and learning proper horse management practices, many youth enjoy demonstrating what they've learned at various horse shows. While approved safety helmets have been required of those riding in English classes, for all other classes western cowboy hats have been the standard attire.

While extensive research exists substantiating that the use of ASTM-SEI approved equestrian helmets can significantly reduce serious or fatal head injuries, parents and leaders in some areas throughout Idaho were strongly opposed to requiring all 4-H horse



members to wear approved equestrian helmets whenever mounted or driving their horses.

The most common objections stemmed from those thinking that helmets really did not provide any additional protection, to those who felt that helmets did not fit the true image of a cowboy or cowgirl.

### Our Response

Recognizing that for numerous reasons the University of Idaho needed to implement a 4-H equestrian helmet policy, but acknowledging clientele concerns, it was evident to State 4-H leadership that additional educational trainings were needed.

Drawing upon the experience of Kootenai County who had established a 4-H equestrian helmet program in 1997, in cooperation with the North Idaho Brain Injury Coalition, Extension Educator Jim Wilson was called upon to address this sensitive issue.