

The Behavior of Horses

Instinctual Behaviors

Social structure- A herd is made up by breeding groups typically one or two stallions with several mares & their foals (and occasionally other stallions from casual bachelor groups). At times a bachelor stallion will follow a specific breeding group for a few months to several years. This bachelor is then referred to as an outsider or a peripheral stallion & is accepted by the group's stallions but is not permitted to interact with adult mares in the group. The outsider plays an important part in the group stability & cohesion acting as a barrier & protecting the group from other bachelor stallions.

Reproduction- Females begin the reproductive process by raising her tail & revealing her vulva. A stallion will approach the female with his head high & tail & ears drooped backwards. He will nicker, nip, & nudge her, as well as sniff her urine to find out her puberty.

Mothering- After foaling, the mare licks the foal to clean, stimulate & bond with it. Within a couple of hours the foal is standing & walking around (so that they can get away from dangers). As soon as it is standing it will take its first important drink from its mother's milk (colostrum). Mares will stay by her foal always during the first few months. Some mares are very protective & will stand & fight if they feel their foal is threatened or in trouble. Around six weeks the foal will start to copy the mare, trying grass & other things. In the wild, the mare will naturally wean her foal & push it away, but in captivity the owner usually weans the foal at about six months.

Feeding- Horses eat a lot of hay & grass. In fact, horses should eat about 15-20 pounds or 1-2% of their body weight in hay every day. Make sure that the hay you feed your horse is free of mold & dust.

Communication- Horses will talk to each other with their ears. They can tell another horse where to direct its attention, locate food, & evade predators. Horses also convey their emotions through their vocal communication (whinnying & neighing).

Learned Behavior

Imprinting- As soon as the horse is born, a handler starts wiping the newborn dry with a towel & runs his hands gently over its body. Imprinting is getting the horse attached & socialized to people from the start of its life. Imprinting makes it easier to work with & train the horse later on.

Conditioning- Horses can easily be conditioned to stimuli. When a horse is shocked by an electric fence, the horse gets conditioned to not touch the electric fence. Also, they learn quickly when & where food is located. These repeated consequences can reinforce desired behaviors.

Habituation- Horses can be taught to ignore specific stimuli & ignore it. One way to train a horse is to wave a plastic bag near their face until the plastic bag can touch the horse. That way the horse will get used to things that fly by like a leaf. They can also be taught to ignore loud noises.

Intelligence- Horses can work things out on their own like opening stable bolts & getting out of accidents in the field. Horses are quick learners & learn quickly when it is time to eat. Horses can be upset easily, but training can help get rid of that problem.

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Safe handling & restraint procedures

Flight zones- The flight zone is the horse's personal space. The size of the flight zone depends on the tameness or familiarity of the horse with the handler. Movement into the flight zone will cause the animal to move away. The edge of the flight zone can be determined by how slowly walking up to the horse. If the handler enters the flight zone too deeply & quickly, the horse will either bolt & run away or turn back & run over the person. It is important to be aware of the flight zone & the horse's response of the handler within & near the flight zone. This will help to ensure your safety at all times for the handler.

Temperament- A lot of people have their own opinion about temperament of certain breeds. It depends sometimes on what the horse's gender is on what their temperament is. Genetics has a lot to do with horses temperament & their behavioral characteristics.

Vision- A horse can use binocular vision to focus on distant objects by raising its head. A horse with her head held upright will have binocular focus on objects near their feet. The horse's eyes are set on the sides of its head allowing it close to a 350° range of monocular vision.

Noise- Horses have a good sense of hearing. They hear all the sounds we hear, plus about another half octave higher. Their ears can swivel 180 degrees, independently of each other.

Restraint Devices- Blinders, which is a piece of horse tack that prevents the horse seeing to the rear & to the side. Halters & lead ropes will help secure horses. Sometimes a chain is used across the nose. Twitching, or pinching, can be used to stop an animal from moving.

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