

Playful Rearing

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December 01 2000 Article # 91

We recently received an orphaned colt from a very reputable breeder friend who had neither the time nor facilities to raise the baby. We picked him up when he was five hours old, and he is now three weeks old. Health-wise he is doing fine. He drinks his milk from a bucket, is eating a little grain and gaining weight, and his muscle mass is developing very well. We imprinted him as soon as he got to the barn and do not play with him at all. We started halter breaking and that is going well; we just put him with a recently weaned three-month-old colt two days ago and again, no problems.

Now for the problem: This colt rears up at people constantly (but not under halter), not in anger, but in play. While we have raised orphaned babies in the past, this is our first colt that we intend to leave a stud. Right now all we do in the way of discipline when he rears up is hit him in the chest and tell him "no," but this doesn't seem to be working. Please help.

Missy, Oklahoma

I know exactly what you are talking about and how annoying and dangerous this behavior can be. I agree with you that it should be stopped, and the sooner the better. Most foals do not just grow out of this behavior, rather, they just grow to be more dangerously friendly. Interestingly, it can continue in geldings and also occurs in fillies. Together with nipping, rearing is certainly one of the more common problems with orphans interacting with people. But the same problem also can occur in non-orphan foals which are handled very early and/or often. As you said, it is probably that the people become the target of the enthusiastic greeting and play initiation behavior that would normally be directed toward herd mates. Among foals and yearlings in natural herds, this rearing you describe specifically occurs dozens of times a day, almost within every interaction of the youngster with its sire, dam, and herd mates.

The good news is that this rearing, just like nipping or charging up too enthusiastically to people, can be corrected very efficiently in young foals. And it can be done usually without adverse side-effects such as head-shyness or loss of trust in people. My usual tact is to do simple response-specific aversive conditioning. In other words, teach the foal that this rearing leads to an aversive consequence. It usually only takes about two or three well-executed trials for most foals to make the connection. Before I explain further, I have to say that this is one of the few times I ever recommend hitting a horse. I wish there were a better way.

The goal specifically is to punish just the undesirable response, in this case, the rearing. You want the foal to learn that the rearing is bad, but that he and his behavior in general are good. For me the most effective adverse consequence (punishment) is a well-timed whack on the delicate muzzle. What I like to do is to approach the foal, setting up the situation in which he has reared in the past so that I can anticipate and be prepared. Since I am right handed, I position myself with my right hip toward the head of the foal so that when he rears only my backside (naturally well-padded) is at risk. I make sure my right arm is free and ready to whack the muzzle with the little-finger side of my hand. (And I am certain it hurts my hand more than it hurts the foal.)

The trick is to remain relaxed and normally interactive until just as the foal nudges to begin rearing, then as swiftly and firmly as possible whack the muzzle, interrupting the rearing. Then immediately relax again as soon as he is on the ground. Remember the foal needs to learn that it is *only the rearing* that causes the whack. In fact, standing quietly near you is just great. So that he does not become fearful of you or your hand in general, he needs as clear a message as possible so that he associates the aversive outcome specifically with the rearing.

As the foal collects himself, I calmly step to behind his shoulder and reach over the withers to stroke his neck or shoulder on the off side, in the areas where horses tend to mutually groom one another. This will reward the good behavior of standing near you and reassure the foal of your generally kind nature. (I think that approaching from the side behind the head is important--it seems less likely to elicit fear of your hand that has just whacked his little muzzle.) From then on until the foal has been free of the rearing for several months, I continue to approach the foal in the same way, at an angle to the shoulder, with my right hip toward the foal so I can reach my hand over and rub the off side. Hopefully each time we can skip the rearing bit, but I'm ready to interrupt it if it should occur.

One way to look at the procedure is that you are not just teaching the foal that rearing is bad, but you are teaching the foal an alternate manner of approaching people and getting attention. Rather than rearing, he just has to stand, and you will come to him and scratch his neck.

Even with the best of timing, you can expect that after the first or second whack, there might be a phase in which the foal is fearful or shy in general of you. He might pull away so that you can't stroke him. In that case, just stand calmly and quietly and let him come back to you, then stroke him.

This training can be accomplished over the course of a few days of routine interactions, or can be done in special sessions devoted to the purpose. Either way, the total time is usually less than one-half hour to correct rearing. It is really important to try to correct these overfriendly behaviors (rearing, nipping, or charging up too enthusiastically) while the foal is small. The larger the foal gets, the higher the risks of getting hurt and the more difficult it becomes to effectively relax before and after delivery of the punishment of the specific undesirable response.

Now, you are probably wondering why this procedure is any better than what you have already tried. There is likely a small, but important difference of hitting the delicate muzzle as opposed to hitting the chest. There are at least two key features to delivering effective response-contingent punishment. First, it has to immediately hurt. Second, it can't be so disastrous that it distracts the animal from the specific association. I wonder if you can hit the chest hard enough to be hurt without knocking the foal over and so blurring the association. With the muzzle, it seems that most people can make it hurt without going too far. A second thought about why hitting the chest might not be working for you is that it might actually be interpreted by your colt as a play fighting response. There is a lot of chest and shoulder contact during play in young horses.

Good luck, and be sure to let us know how it goes.

**Readers are cautioned to seek the advice of a qualified veterinarian
before proceeding with any diagnosis, treatment, or therapy.**



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