

Disciplining Your Horse-

What works and what doesn't

By: Rebecca Sweat

Sooner or later, your horse is bound to do something he shouldn't. Perhaps he nips at you when you saddle him up, focuses on his pasture mates rather than on you, or tries to run you over when you're working with him on the ground. Maybe you've been struggling with your horse's bad habits for weeks, months or even years.

If this is the case, chances are you're not using effective correction techniques. Discipline that is harsh, inconsistent or after the fact doesn't solve behavior problems. Rather than improve a situation, inappropriate discipline usually reinforces the bad behavior or creates new problems. Your horse will become confused about what is expected of him, he may decide you're someone who either can be bullied or is a bully and the relationship between you and your horse will suffer.

The truth is, you don't have to make your horse feel bad to teach him a lesson. When you discipline him properly, both you and your horse come away winners.

Here are seven suggestions for disciplining your horse:

Interrupt the Behavior

When you notice your horse getting ready to do something he shouldn't, your best strategy is to interrupt the behavior. "You might simply let your horse run into your elbow as he is attempting to bite you, by simply meeting him half way," says Steve Rother, a horse teacher and clinician in Medford, Ore. This correction is effective because the human does not appear as a "bully" to the horse. With the horse's poor

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depth perception, he will think he just misjudged the distance and not take it as a challenge from the human. This method of discipline, sometimes called blocking, simply involves lifting your elbow toward his head or neck at the moment the horse approaches you with his body.

More harsh methods only seem to disrupt the behavior momentarily, lacking long-term effects. For example, you can disrupt a bad behavior by blasting an air horn or making some other loud noise. This will make your horse stop what he was doing and refocus his attention on something else. However, you might need the horn again time to exert the same effect. As opposed to harsh interruptions, timely positive reinforcements are more effective and should be stressed in your regular training sessions.

Make your Corrections Timely

Corrections, defined here as any intervention to modify behavior, must be applied at the very instant your horse misbehaves. "If your horse bites you and then you hit him after the incident has occurred, you are too late and you will simply teach your horse to bite you quicker next time," Rother says.

Your horse won't understand that you're correcting him for something he did 15 seconds earlier. In addition, the hitting might be interpreted simply as pain inflicted for no reason at all.

Be Consistent

Respond to the same behavior in the same way every time. Consistent positive awards work best in a training program and when attempting to modify behavior. The use of carrots, candies, small amounts of grain, gentle rubbing, or simply easing the task at hand are examples of positive rewards. Soothing conversation may also help, but don't count on the horse understanding your tone. Whatever the mode, these rewards must be delivered in a consistent fashion, with the magnitude of the reward proportional to the achievement. Too much reward also nullifies the effect, of course.

Consistency also applies to punishment: "if you let a bad behavior slide, even just once, your horse will take note of it," says Dr. Dean Scoggins, Equine Extension Veterinarian at the University of Illinois. "You have to be consistent with your corrections and do it every time. If you're inconsistent, your horse will periodically challenge you to see if you're still in charge."

Avoid Harsh Punishments

Punishment such as slapping, poking, whipping, yelling and excessive jerking are rarely, if ever, effective, says Sandy Arledge, a horse trainer and breeder with American Quarter Horses in San Diego, Calif. You don't accomplish anything constructive when you're harsh with your horse; it just irritates or scares him, which only exacerbates an already bad situation. If you get mad at your horse and lose your temper, all your horse is going to think about is that he wants to get away from you; he's not going to be in the right frame of mind to learn.

Firecrackers, loud fog horns, whips and spurs are injurious and do not curb bad behavior in many cases.

Be Fair

Make sure you are meeting your horse's needs before you discipline him. For instance, "it would be unfair to punish a young horse for feeling good, if he's been locked up in his corral for a week, Arledge says. "That would be your fault, not his."

Don't Set Your Horse Up to Misbehave

If you know the particular circumstances that evoke bad behavior, try to avoid the scenario. For example, don't provoke a biter by playing with the shank of his mouth. If a horse is defensive about his food, don't startle him by barging into the stall at the start of feeding. If your horse is a biter, you shouldn't hand feed him or pet his nose or face. If you do, you will in effect, be setting him up to do something he shouldn't.

On the other hand, feeding by



hand "can be used to reduce aggression," says Dr. Nicholas Dodman, professor and animal behaviorist at Tufts University school of Veterinary Medicine. A bad behavior like biting is obviously complex, and you may have to try different approaches, depending on the response of the horse.

Use Timely Positive Reinforcement

We constantly apply pressure to our horses by asking them to work, sometimes at increasing difficulties. We are careful to plan the increments of pressure, but sometimes we neglect to stage the rewards carefully. The use of positive reinforcement can start to outweigh the need for negative reinforcement and modify bad behavior. This can be done by simply releasing your pressure on the horse at the moment you see real progress or by rewarding the horse with a treat at this very moment. A moment too long, and the positive reinforcement is ineffectual. The best riders and trainers have an excellent sense of when to back off and reward the smallest achievement.

Put your horse in situations where you know he will behave properly so that you can reward him with praise and an occasional treat. "You should be thought of by your horse as someone who provides stability and leadership," Scoggins

says, "not as being the source of something that is associated with pain and discomfort."

When These Principles Don't Work

Despite all efforts, some horses still do not respond to interruption (blocking) techniques, persuasion, fairness, consistency and positive reinforcement. If you think you are running into a brick wall and out of patience, you are not alone. In fact, behavioral oddities for many years have been a leading cause of relinquishment, sales and slaughter and many broken hearts.

Before giving up, however, you should consult a veterinary behaviorist and trainer to give you some tips. Haul your horse into some good clinics and get some outside opinions. Take a look at www.horsehelp.com, a very helpful website run by clinician Robert Reich, who also consults online.

Behavioral modification is one of the most challenging activities with animals. It is tremendously rewarding when good results are obtained because some of these "offbeat" horses are also the smartest and athletically the most talented. The key is to stay within the bounds of the horse's personality and not to expect too little, and to react appropriately to change in behavior, both good and bad, in a consistent fashion ■

Article extracted from the Internet by: **Nada El-Fekhy**

How Horses Learn...

"You get the best out of others when you give the best of yourself."

-Harry Firestone

Horses have strong instincts and, in training, it is an advantage to work with, rather than against, their natural behavior and responses. However, they are also very adaptable and quick to learn from their experiences. It is possible to teach a horse to respond to quite subtle signals, and even to overcome their natural instincts, such as fear from of unfamiliar object or sound. Given the right training, a horse can become a willing and responsive equestrian partner.

INSTINCTIVE AND LEARNED BEHAVIOUR

It is undoubtedly easier to teach a horse to respond to a signal when the desired behavior comes naturally. A horse will readily move forwards to a squeeze from the leg but he will be reluctant to respond to a signal to move backwards when he cannot see what is behind him. By understanding the natural behavior of the horse, we can use and develop his strengths, rather than work against them. Similarly, we should always work to develop the natural shape and paces of the horse, rather than attempting to force him into an unnatural gait or posture.

Although the horse will respond to situations instinctively, he can also learn responses based on his own observation and past experience. We can make

the most of his quickness to learn and his ability to remember how he successfully jumped a difficult fence on a previous occasion.

As well as learning through his own experience, he can be taught how to respond to particular signals. A conditioned response is one that is established by training to a stimulus that is not natural. When a young horse walks forwards of his own accord - perhaps following another horse - some trainers will make a clicking sound with their tongue. When this technique is repeated over a number of occasions, the horse will start to associate the clicking sound with going forwards. Soon, he will move forwards whenever he hears this sound.

Similarly, a horse learns that a response he makes will be followed by a particular consequence. For example, he learns that by kicking the stable door he will be fed, or that by halting to the pressure of the reins the pressure will be released. The feeding of the horse is a positive reinforcement to his initial act of kicking the door - the horse is therefore encouraged to continue with the bad habit because he gets food as a result.

The release of the reins is a negative reinforcement of the initial response of halting - the horse is encouraged to respond to the aids so that the pressure on his mouth will be released.