

Handling Foals

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Do not put your head above the foals head as shown in this picture. It is not uncommon for foals to throw their head up reactively.

At birth a foal is fully developed, nourished, and neurologically mature, to soon be on its feet and run from danger. Their senses are fully functional. Some horse handlers believe foals to be frail, and are concerned about handling the foal at birth. There are proven advantages to the technique of imprinting, where the foal is handled at birth and desensitized. Early imprinting facilitates easier handling of foals, yearlings, and later for training under saddle. Imprinting can only occur within the first few hours after birth. Any handling that occurs after the first few hours is considered training.

Generally when using the technique of imprinting, at three days of age, foals are halter broke, able to handle, and pick up their feet. ***It is important that when you are imprinting you do not come between the mare and the foal.*** We allow the mare to smell and lick her foal

throughout the entire process we are imprinting. A common concern is that the mare will be aggressive towards the handler. This can be true in some cases; therefore, it is important that the owner has established an understanding of trust and respect with the mare prior to breeding and foaling.

Always be aware of the mare and her body language. If you are present at the birth, the mare likely accepts you as you have the scent of the foal, afterbirth, etc. It is not uncommon for the mare to be somewhat “pinny eared”. This is not always a sign of aggression. Horses also pin their ears when they are feeling unconfident or unsure.

Read the mare’s body language. This allows you to handle the foal safely and effectively. Always let the mare see and smell the foal. As Veterinary Technicians, unfortunately you do not have the opportunity to establish this trust and respect with the mare. It is important to enter the pen as though you are not on a mission. Give the mare a chance to relax with you present. Avoid consistent, direct eye contact. Keep your body language quiet. Listen to and read the mare’s body language. Ask the owner if the mare is accepting and respectful before approaching the foal. If you are unsure, it is not incorrect to ask the han-



Rub in the area you are asking the foal to pick up their foot. Then begin with phase one applying fingertip pressure.

dlar to first halter the mare. If possible allow the mare to be present, rather than tying her up. I encourage you to introduce yourself to the mare and allow her to smell you.

Once handling the foal, periodically continue to allow the mare to smell you. If it is comforting to the mare, give her some attention and rub her. This will give her more confidence as you now have the scent of the foal on you. If the foal is difficult to catch, avoid cornering and trapping. If time allows, wait for the foal to nurse and then approach and firmly catch the foal. Do not use the “gotcha” approach. If time is of the essence and you must catch the foal, avoid grabbing too hard. Place one hand at the chest area to prevent forward movement and place the other behind to prevent the foal from backing away. Only be present with your hands; apply pressure only when the foal attempts to move away. When the foal relaxes be sure to release the pressure. Using this technique, the foal quickly learns to avoid pressure he/she must relax.

Do not take the foal immediately away from the mare. Handle the foal as closely to the mare as possible. This keeps both the mare and foal more relaxed and confident with you in their space. Allow the foal to nurse periodically as they tire quickly. Allowing the foal to nurse brings the foal and mare back to a state of relaxation. If possible, these handling sessions should be frequent and short.

For your safety, consider your body position. Remember the horse’s blind spots directly in front and behind the horse. Avoid having your head above their head as it is common for foals to quickly and



When the foal lifts the foot, let the foot rest in your hand. In time ask the foal to keep the foot in your hand for longer periods of time.



Stand off to the side, rather than directly in front of the horse. Comb the rope through your hands slowly applying more tension on the rope. The second the foal moves forward, release rewarding the slightest try. Notice I use the horseman string rather than a lead shank which may be too heavy for a young foal.

reactively bring their heads up. Rub; do not pat. When handling foals, your hands are present, not grabbing or holding. The foal quickly learns to not lean into pressure. This is important to horse owners and handlers, as foals are very responsive and light. Rough or inexperienced handling can create heavy, non-responsive, and more reactive horses. Early learning is very powerful, and has a lifelong impact on the foal.

Leading

When teaching horses to lead, have slow hands to ask and quick to release. Offer support with your hand behind the foal's butt, slowly increasing the pressure. The instant the foal responds, release! You



A foal at birth is neurologically mature enough to soon be on their feet.

can also use a butt rope. For safe and effective communication, the ropes should be on the same side you are on; that is, if leading on the left side, the lead shank (or horseman string) is in your left hand, the butt rope is in your right hand. Be sure to teach both the left and right side of the horse.

When the foal learns to give to pressure you no longer require the butt rope. You can then begin teaching the foal to lead from pressure with the halter and lead shank. Lead off from the side rather than straight in front, 'combing' the rope through your hands, slowly adding more pressure. Reward the slightest try. As the foal develops an understanding, you can increase the number of steps. There is a formula for teaching: first we want to develop an understanding, then quality, and then quantity.

Picking up Feet

Position yourself at a 45 degree angle from the front feet. Whether you are picking up the front or the hind feet, stay in close. Rub the area with open hands you will be applying fingertip pressure. Then begin applying pressure using phase 1 which is very light fingertip pressure. Slowly increase the pressure till the foal picks up the foot or shows a try. Immediately release the pressure, and rub again open handed. Build this understanding



Allow the foal to nurse throughout handling.



Be present with one hand on the butt if the foal backs, and the other in the chest area should the foal want to move forward.

to where the foal understands to pick up his foot. I do not ask at the chestnut, particularly with colts or stallions as this is the area that in play, they nip at one another. When the foal lifts his foot let it rest in your hand. If the foal resists and tries to take his foot back, remain present in your hold, but do not grab too tightly. Move along with the foot, trying not to give the foot back until the foal relaxes. Build an understanding where the foal can leave his foot up for longer periods.

Common Foal Handling Mistakes:

- Anthropomorphism (attributing human qualities to the foal).
- Starting too heavy.
- Not rewarding the slightest try.
- Too much excitement or noise. Keep your body language calm.
- Too fast.
- Not considering the mare being part of the process.
- Allowing other horses in the pen creating interference and confusion.
- Allowing too many people creating interference. Too many handlers.
- Do not have an agenda. Work with the horse rather than your agenda.
- Be flexible, be a lateral thinker. 🐾



Nettie Barr, Canadian Natural Horsemanship Inc. Canadian Natural Horsemanship Inc. has been developed to effectively reach the needs of equine enthusiasts. Its goals are to reach all levels of horsemen or horsewomen to develop safer, affordable, informative, step by step, user-friendly techniques that apply for all disciplines of horsemanship.

The personal approach of **Nettie Barr** takes into consideration the confidence and dignity of both horse and handler, creating a relaxed and positive atmosphere for learning. Setting people and horses up for success with lasting results has been the focal point and strength of her approach.

For more information, visit www.canadiannaturalhorsemanship.com