

Behaviour



Teaching Notes for Slides

SLIDE #2 BODY LANGUAGE

By watching how horses interact you will soon learn to read their body language.

Although horses communicate vocally, their verbal language is limited. It ranges from squeals and grunts (aggression or excitement), through snorts of interest or fear, to whinnying to attract attention from separated companions or humans, to the soft whicker of a mare to her foal. They mostly rely on body language to convey their feelings, and their signals are easily understood.

A horse signals unease by snorting or blowing loudly through his nose. This is ALWAYS a danger signal: flight or fight reaction is imminent. Squealing and ears laid back against the head are signs of aggression – also a danger signal.

SLIDE #3 HEAD POSITIONS

A horse will carry his head fairly low when relaxed; carried high is a sign of tension. Chewing, on the other hand, denotes relaxation. Watch the jaw and facial muscles for tenseness when anxious; the lips for softness when relaxed.

Check the horse's mouth area for clues to his mood. Do the muscles around his lips look tensed or relaxed? Is he chewing? Chewing denotes relaxation since a horse has to be somewhat relaxed to eat. You can help a tense horse relax by sticking your finger in the side of his mouth and tickling his tongue until he chews. Make sure you don't give him fingers to chew on!

Watch the whole head. Are the eyes “soft”? Are the muscles bunched? Mouth tense? Lower lip loose and open? Carried low with a “soft” face and jaw when relaxed?

SLIDE #4**HIGH HEAD**

The horse in the picture appears to be ready to reverse direction. The ears are tense; the face is tense; the neck is pulled back.

SLIDE #5**LOW HEAD**

A low head may show relaxation, sleep, or illness. Or it may show anger. Read the rest of the body to confirm.

SLIDE #6**BODY**

The attitude of the horse's body will send you a clear message of his mood. A relaxed horse carries his head fairly low, his tail swishes at flies, and he may stand with one foot resting on the tip of the hoof and will shift from one back foot to the other. By contrast, an angry horse may also carry his head low, but it will be snaked forward, the muscles in his face will be tense, the tail slashing the air. An injured or sick horse will also carry his head low, but will look hunched up and sunken. A fearful horse cowers down, trying to look small, with his tail between his legs. An alert horse looks very tall, head up, ears pricked forward, nostrils wide, tail carried high.

A dozing horse will often stand with one hoof cocked. This relieves the “check ligaments” – the mechanism that allows the horse to sleep standing up.

SLIDE #7**TAIL**

The tail is part of the whole picture of body language. Horses with a devilish sense of humor will often flick nearby humans for fun.

A tail clamped between a horse's legs indicates he feels his life is being threatened. Use extreme caution, as he may feel trapped. A tail that is raised and held up off the body is a sign of alertness and excitement; lashing usually means anger (or biting insects). For simple fly swishing, the tail is relaxed and swishes slowly. Back up your observations by checking other body parts.

SLIDE #8 **FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE**

The first line of defense for a prey animal is flight. There is safety in herds. The horse's second defense is to bite, kick, or strike with their front feet. They have lightning reflexes and can go from standing still to connecting a powerful kick in about .3 seconds. By contrast, human reaction time is 1.6 seconds. Their predators are big cats and man.

No amount of rational thought or cajoling on your part will "calm" a horse in panic mode. Six thousand years of domestication hasn't made much of a dent in six million years of evolution as a prey animal.

Stay at least 15 feet behind a horse for safety.

Traditionally, recreational riding horses known to kick wear a red ribbon attached to their tails. If you notice a red ribbon tied on a horse's tail, be extra cautious.

SLIDE #9 **OTHER CREATIVE ATTACKS**

Some horses like to rear up and strike with their front feet, while some horses like to run over the top of you. Others will "body slam" you with their hindquarters, shoulders, or heads. An average adult horse's head weighs about seventy pounds. If you are in the way of a swinging horse head, it can break your jaw. Beware! Horses are also very good biters!

SLIDE #10 **HOW DOES A HORSE KICK?**

When a horse kicks his back legs, the power comes from his hip area and drives outward, either to the back or side. If you are within kicking range, the safest place to be is close in to his body. Otherwise, stay out of kicking range – about 15 feet.

SLIDE #11 **HOW DOES HE GET UP?**

A horse gets up by first swinging his head and neck upward. As his head moves up he brings his front legs forward. At this point his front end will be upright. He then lunges forward and the back end comes up and he's in a standing position. This is the opposite of a cow who raises the back end first, then stands up with his front legs.

Be sure you're not standing in front of him!

SLIDE #12

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL HORSE

Above all else, the most important thing to remember about the horse is that he is a prey animal. He is safest in a herd, and his first reaction to danger, whether real or imagined, is to run. If he cannot run, his next line of defense is to strike out, either with front feet or rear, and then to bite.

Unlike the eyes of a predator, which need to distinguish exact information about their prey, prey animals do not need to see the specifics. They see shapes and movement really well but do not necessarily see distant objects very clearly. When a horse sees a movement in the distance, he is aware but relaxed. As the movement closes in, he becomes alert. When the movement gets to the edge of his safety space, the horse will move. This knowledge is important to us when we are first training a horse. If an object suddenly appears inside the horse's safety space he may panic.

The predators most common to horses are the big cats, man, and to a lesser degree, wolves. When big cats attack a full-grown, healthy horse, it is usually from above -- out of a tree or off a ledge. Knowing all this, it's really amazing that horses let us ride them at all!

Close your eyes and picture yourself as a wild horse in a herd. Remember, you are a prey animal. You choose whether you are a mare or a stallion!

See yourself on the plains of the west; the ground is fairly level, there are mountains in the distance. The sun is shining, it is warm and there is a moderate amount of grass to eat.

As you and your herd mates graze along, your ears will always be revolving, tuned into the sounds around you. You are aware of the horses around you. You are scanning the horizon as you eat. In the distance you see movement -- nothing specific, just shapes. You are never fully relaxed. During the hottest part of the day you may doze off for awhile, but you will remain standing. A check ligament will lock your legs so you can sleep standing up.

Your sleeping state will be similar to a drug stupor -- your mind and body will be on "automatic pilot" and you will be in a trance-like state, neither asleep nor awake. If you are in a safe place you can lie down, either curled up for a nap, or stretched out flat on the ground for really deep, REM sleep.

Some of the older horses will act as sentries because they need less REM sleep than the younger horses. Mares will guard babies in a group, grazing around them as they sleep, for the little ones require a lot of naptime, just like human babies. After your nap, you will stand up, stretch and shake, and then you will become a sentry. Or perhaps one of the sentries will be too tired to stand guard and will wake you up for your turn.

Interesting being a horse, isn't it? Walking in their shoes, even mentally, gives us a little more insight into how they operate and why.

Because the horse is a herd animal, he lives by rules of social structure or "pecking order" in which each animal in the herd assumes a position of relative dominance. This structure is maintained by body language such as pinned ears, snaked head, staring, kicking, biting and squealing, and keeps fighting amongst members of the herd to a minimum. Because the herd structure is complex, the role of dominant animal changes according to the needs of the herd.

For instance, in an attack situation, either from a predator or another horse, the stallion is dominant, sending the herd into flight, guarding the rear of the fleeing herd, or rounding up the herd and then standing between them and the enemy. Where the search for food or shelter is concerned, the dominant mare usually makes the decisions for the herd. She seeks out and remembers the best grazing, the safest watering hole, and the sheltered valleys in winter. Dominance in stallions is survival of the fittest. Dominance in mares is survival of the smartest.

Like most prey animals, horses are meant to live in herds. There is strength in numbers in the four-legged animal world, as in ours. In the wild, a single horse is at the mercy of marauding carnivores. In a safe environment, the herd will spread out over a large area, allowing everyone plenty to eat. The babies, being all-important from the standpoint of survival of the herd, will always be in the center, surrounded by the mares and guarded by the dominant stallion. Young stallions, being dispensable, serve as sentries on the outskirts of the herd. At the first hint of danger, a sentry stallion will

trumpet an alarm and the whole herd will gallop away, usually running about a quarter of a mile before stopping.

As with all prey animals, baby horses are highly developed at birth. They need to be able to keep up with the herd very soon after they are born or they will not survive.

End of Section