Equine Science Series I
(Horse Behaviour)

Article number: 1.1
Subject: Horse Play

Horsin' Around

Welcome to the first in the series of free animal behaviour articles provided by the Natural Animal Centre on animal behaviour. Here's how you can benefit:

we have a very clear purpose in life …
to positively influence the wellbeing of animals worldwide
& we would love *you* to join us on this awesome path.

We're looking for those of you who share our passion to help animals.
If you have the passion we'll find a way for you to generate a positive impact.

So, have we tantalized you enough to keep reading?

How do you *want* to get involved? Even a few minutes would be great … here's some ideas …

- ✓ ***Pass the knowledge on*** – pass these articles onto others, publish them online, get people thinking about them (all we ask is our authorship & website address be clearly shown, so if others want to contact us they can)
- ✓ ***Animal Behaviour Inc*** – let people know about the new Facebook page
- ✓ ***Make one positive change*** – take 1 idea that occurs to you from this article & implement it right now – make one single change that enriches your animal's life
- ✓ ***Get qualified*** - as a behaviourist you can help animals in a really BIG way. And if you can't afford the course get your education free as a working student. We have solutions to get anyone who is passionate, qualified - whatever your circumstances.

We hope you enjoy the journey to greater knowledge … & we hope, even more, that all the animals you influence have an enriched life.

Warmest wishes from all of us at the Natural Animal Centre

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Horsin' Around!

Heather Simpson, Natural Animal Centre

Surprisingly, few of the findings of the scientific equine behavioural research have actually filtered down to those who can really make a difference – horse owners like yourself. As an animal behaviourist I know that once you understand the science of *natural behaviour*, & can take the appropriate actions to reduce the pressure that domestication puts on our horses, many everyday problems just evaporate. Through the series we will be looking at various aspects of the horses life, living alongside humans & how simple understanding can lead you to make a positive impact on their lives.

Paired bonded stallions - these stallions are part of the Comparative Equid Research Programme at our centre in South Africa.

It is now a scientifically accepted fact that horses seek out a partner to become a life long pair bond, a special relationship which potentially lasts throughout their lives. Play is one of the ways in which this social bond is enhanced &

strengthened. In this article we go beyond the basic benefits to look at other motivations for play.

Whilst pair bonded horses often seek each other out as preferred play partners, owners who allow their horses to live in a permanent, stable group can often be lucky enough to witness the entire herd enjoying a bout of play together. Often the game is initiated by a single horse (usually a youngster) but the rest then pick up the signal and readily join in. Scientists know that there are many factors which influence when a horse might feel motivated to initiate play, but at least two are important:

- *As a prey animal, your horse must feel safe enough to play* (compare this to seal pups where play is the highest cause of mortality in youngsters, who fail to pay attention to predators whilst they are playing);

- *The weather conditions need to be just right.* Horses generally do not play when it is raining or windy. This is because the weather adversely affects their sensory perception of their environment – simply, it is too dangerous to play if you can't hear, see or smell approaching predators properly & especially if the bulk of your attention is focused elsewhere.

Inter-species play at NAC (Africa).

Typically, when an entire herd decides environmental conditions are satisfactory for all to play at the same time, they choose a play pattern that is colloquially referred to as “chase and charge” – the whole herd runs flat out together in specific directions and in so doing, plays a game of simulating a fleeing response from a predator. This is a ritualized pattern with specific rules of conduct.

So some biologists believe that another function of play therefore, is practicing appropriate muscle movements to help prepare horses for dealing with dangerous events that may occur in the future. By contrast, in studies of cat play behaviour, it was found that, rather than conserve energy, as you might expect, hungry kittens played harder and for longer. The suggestion has been that if you are a starving predator like a kitten, it makes good sense to work harder at getting proficient in hunting behaviours so you get to eat sooner!

Similarly, as a young foal makes the first cautious attempts at movement, the purpose of solitary play in foals seems to be both exercise and practice. In the first few days and weeks, the mare provides food and protection for her baby, thereby allowing the foal to concentrate on the solitary business of perfecting locomotion. He does this in play displays of running, hopping, kicking, jumping and skipping around his mother, often in circles. At this early stage in a foal’s life, play seems also to be a major component in optimalising blood supply to different parts of the foal’s body. As far as scientists can tell, solitary play continues in foals until an equilibrium is achieved in vascularisation. It is only at this point, that foals are ready to test their muscles in play on other youngsters in the herd.

For a happier horse, three tips from Heather Simpson:

- Keep you horse turned out as much as possible and preferably with the same group. This will encourage bonding and more play in the herd. Their natural behaviour is to be together 24 hours per day.

Most of us would not even consider the concept of keeping zebras away from their herd. The domestic horse & the zebra have the vast majority of their evolutionary history in common.

- At night, if your horse is stabled put him next to his pair bond – preferably they should be able to nuzzle each other – but at the very least they should be able to see each other. Being able to touch, allows them to satisfy some play needs, including nipping each other.

- Do not keep your horse on his own – make sure he always has equine companionship. It is unnatural for a herd animal to spend extended periods alone & may lead to significant stress.

Heather Simpson.
www.NaturalAnimalCentre.com

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