



Equine Science Series I (Horse Behaviour)

Article number: 1.4

Subject: Displacement part II

Displacement (part II)

Welcome to the fourth 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

Series I

Horse Behaviour

Article number: 1.4

Subject: Displacement (part II)

Displacement (part II)

Heather Simpson, Natural Animal Centre

In part I introduced the subject of displacement behaviours in horses – where a horse acts out a normal behaviour but in an inappropriate context, such as yawning when it is being loaded onto a trailer or pawing the ground when eating from a feed bowl. I suggested that although these behaviours may be quickly interpreted by horse owners as boredom or naughtiness in their horse, in reality often they are indications of stress in the horse

caused by one or all of: fear, frustration or confusion.

In part II we'll look at a common horse behavioural problem together and I shall point out ways you can go about resolving displacements when you see them in your horse. We'll take the common example of the horse that paws the ground whilst eating, but before we start, it is important to recognize that we need to look at many other issues in the horse's life as well as the immediate circumstances that surround the point at which the horse actually displaces. From a behavioural perspective, unless we analyse the "whole horse", we may lose sight of the true motivation of the behaviour.

So let's take a typical scenario. Every afternoon at around 4 pm Monty is brought into his stable from the field. By 4:15 all the other horses are in and the head girl starts mixing the feeds in the feed room at the top of the stable block. Within minutes, Monty is kicking the front of his stable door. The kicking continues incessantly until his feed is finally brought into his stable. As the groom places the horse's bowl on the ground, he starts to paw the ground. At the same time, he snatches at his food, bolts it down as quickly as he can. The whole image is certainly not one of peaceful, happy munching we attribute to balanced horse behaviour.

How do many people react to such a situation? Unfortunately, in my experience, where we are at this point in time in trying to spread the word about a scientific understanding of horse behaviour, information about finding a right and fair solution for the horse is not always easily accessible to horse owners. By contrast, information and advice from many trainers and the multitude of books

that are sold in equestrian bookshops, abound with suggestions that are invariably punishment-based and unfair on the horse.

When it comes to solving behavioural problems in horses, the horse world is about 50 years behind the dog training world. Nowadays most people would not contemplate taking punishment-oriented corrective action on a dog of a type that is routinely accepted treatment for horses. This is not to say that owners do not care about their horses – it is just that it is so difficult to find help that does not rely on a person having to resort to intimidating tactics which may include shouting at the horse as it kicks the door, tying it up so it has no access to the door and even placing unpleasant objects on the inside of the door such as plants with thick thorns designed to hurt the horse and so presumably discourage him from making contact with the door.

So let's take a different perspective on this behaviour
and see if we can come up with
a fairer solution ... which makes sense to the horse.

Essentially there are two issues occurring here:

- because of the relentlessly repetitive routine of the yard, the horse has learnt to kick the door in an attention-seeking manner. Although the groom probably does not realize it, everyday she is actually rewarding the horse's "bad" behaviour because she always gives him positive reinforcement (a reward) for his behaviour – namely, the bowl of food. As a result, he continues to act out the behaviour over and over again in anticipation of the food reward;
- the horse displaces once he actually receives the food, perhaps because he is frustrated at having had to wait so long or because there is a more deep-seated psychological problem in the horse which is motivated by fear. For example, the horse may have been starved by a previous owner or may have had his food removed before his hunger had been satisfied. Previous experiences such as these can cause the horse to be stressed at feed times for the rest of his life unless his behaviour is modified.

There ARE options other than punishment available to you:

- Ensure your horse is fed in the afternoon at a time and in a place where he least expects it. So for example, if you usually bring your horse from the field, groom him and then feed him, vary that routine by bringing him to the yard and feeding him first before grooming him. Better still, feed him in a completely different place such as at the field gate or even in the field.

- Remember that horses are prey animals which do not habituate easily to confined small spaces such as stables – by choosing to feed the horse in a stable, you may have a horse that is already struggling to cope with the stable and where his previous experiences of feeding times have not been good, then the combination may be too much for him, so he begins to displace. Again, the easiest solution to this is to try the suggestions above and change the time and the context in which you provide food.

These techniques will work for most cases of mild stress but if you find you are still experiencing problems, then you may need the help of an

Natural Animal Centre qualified Equine Behaviourist
(call us on 01267 236 434 for a complete listing)

who will be able to assist you further. The advice they provide will be entirely based on the science of behaviour using positive reinforcement techniques.

The consequences of ongoing punishment ... some nasty & unexpected side effects

It's worth spending a moment on the punishment option. While it may be possible to suppress some of the undesirable behaviour through the use of punishment a number of problems arise. Firstly the suppression only lasts as long as the person applying the punishment is present and more ominously, ongoing punishment is likely lead to a state of **conditioned suppression**.

Conditioned suppression has a number of serious downsides one of which is the suppression your horse's immune system. A suppressed immune system implies a compromised ability to fight illness ... inability to recover from injury and ultimately chronic illness.

You do not need to use punishment

The sequence of dealing with displacements is simple:

1. Understand that it is a displacement
2. Remember that displacements are caused by fear, frustration or confusion
3. Look for the logical solution by removing the primary cause of the above
4. Look at other potential causes of stress & take action to remove them
5. If you need help ask a qualified behaviourist (call 01267 236 434 for a listing)

So if this is interesting have you thought about getting it all in one package ... we have the 3 day course which would be perfect for you ...

Heather Simpson, Natural Animal Centre

Heather Simpson.
www.NaturalAnimalCentre.com

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