



EARLY LEARNING...

Beyond Imprinting in Horses

WRITTEN BY NANCY HARM OF HARMONY ACRES ARABIANS

Part 1: How We Train Our Parade Horses from Foals to Yearlings

About the author: Nancy Harm grew up on a Brown Swiss dairy farm with draft horses and a Welsh pony that was ridden western and also pulled a sleigh and buggy. She has a B.S. degree in Education from the University of New Hampshire, M.S. in Educational Psychology of Child Development from the University of Michigan, and an ED.S. Degree in Educational Psychology of Early Childhood from the University of Michigan. Recently retired from teaching Psychology at Schoolcraft College, Harm has applied her educational background to the way she raises and trains her Arabian horses.

Early childhood programs such as Head Start and Sesame Street developed out of psychological research done on enriched environments and early stimulations in young rat pups. Rats raised in the enriched and changing environments with stimulating activities developed larger, heavier brains, more brain neurons, more dendrite connections between brain neurons and were faster, more efficient learners. They were also better at solving problems (such as mazes) than were the rats that were well fed but raised in standard rat cages lacking the interesting extra stimulation.

Based on that research, Harm's horses have been raised in an enriched environment and presented with interesting positive tasks and experiences from their earliest days. Harmony Acres' Arabian horses have been ridden in more than 500 of the Midwest's largest parades for the past twenty one years, encountering scores of TV cameras, flags, bands, bag pipes, sirens, muskets shooting off behind them, floats with bubble trails, elephants, circus animals, huge balloons, lighted floats and costumes. Since the farm has young girls from six to high school age helping her train and ride in parades, she feels the program is very successful for producing safer more confident mounts. Harmony Acres Arabian Horses have also served as Therapy Riding Programs competition mounts, been trained for search and rescue, and love to go trail riding.

In addition, her mount Tarifa has learned an extraordinary number of 60 tricks. Harm believes that her applied methods have resulted in faster, more efficient learning with her horses.

In 2010 Harmony Acres adopted five horses needing a permanent home. Among them were a Paint mare with a badly healed broken leg in foal to an Egyptian Arabian stallion and three rescue Arabians including a three year old mare, a newborn filly and her dam, age ten. Our usual methods of leading parade dams over obstacles to teach their following foals did not work with these horses that did not grow up in our environment. I felt the rescue horses had all been stressed too much in their recent life to add more from my training while they were still getting acclimated to a new home and nursing foals. Therefore, for the first month here, all the adopted horses were simply fed, groomed, petted, talked to and the young foals received imprint handling and basic leading. The adopted Arabians are highly bred individuals that have close relatives with national and top ten champion titles in dressage, stallion halter, and western pleasure.

Part 1: Goals for training foals and weanlings:

Accept a halter.

Walk, back, and whoa with halter and lead line and walk around and

over obstacles.

Walk, back and whoa at liberty and walk around and over obstacles.

Turn on the forehand on lead line.

Turn on haunches on lead line.

Vertical Flexion (raises and lower head on cue).

Lateral flexion (touch nose to each side on cue).

Desensitize to horseman stick and string.

Tie (with Aussie Tie Ring).

Step up onto large equipment tire filled with sand, turn in a circle, back off, and step down.

Walk over wooden bridge, different colored tarps, foam cushions, hose cut in various lengths, thin tires, poles, and water in different locations.

Walk through or under flags, tarps, wind socks, foam noodles, automatic bubble output.

Touch nose to plastic balls, tarps, inflatable balloons and holiday plastic statues.

Accept putting on and wearing a blanket.

Body clipping.

Picking up feet and trimming.

Accepting worming medications and shots without a fuss.

Desensitizing to a cinch and rider (with a bareback pad and inflatable 3 foot tall bunny rabbit rider attached with Velcro to providing flapping bulk with very little weight).

Learn trick to smile.

Learn trick to play a keyboard.

By the time the foals were less than two months old, they were removed from their dams' paddock to the adjacent arena for grain feeding twice a day. This was necessary because the creep feeder dividers we had used in the past were not narrow enough to keep out the rescue adult Arabians. The foals adjusted quickly to this procedure and were able to gaze at my parade training obstacle course placed down the center of the arena. Gradually, items such as tall orange cones were placed beside their feeding tubs and held items such as training sticks displaying plastic bags, yellow caution tape, pom poms, wind socks, and other items that blew in the breeze. The procedure of pairing a pleasant experience (such as eating grain) with something unusual or scary is called Counter Conditioning and is used to help the learner (person or horse) to become acclimated and comfortable to strange or scary experiences and to view them positively due to the pairing. Later, an automatic bubble machine and playing



the Spookless Sound Conditioning CDs were added to the Counter Conditioning Experience. The feeding tubs were then moved closer to the first obstacle they would be asked to walk on... a black plastic stall mat with a large clown face painted on it. Later the feed tubs were placed on the mat edge and then moved gradually towards the center. Gradually the foals began to eat from their feed tubs placed on the mat, bridge, and other walk on obstacles.

Also, during this period the foals and rescue horses were able to observe (Observational Learning) our troop of Parade Veteran horses who walked over and through the obstacle course with no apprehension. In fact, for the benefit of the new spectator horses, my parade horses were actually clicked and given a treat (which they no longer needed) for the benefit of introducing the clicker to the new horse observers/learners. The new horses could see relaxed parade horses walking over and through scary objects and not only living through the experience, but actually enjoying it and experience the consequence of getting a treat and praise.

Clicker Training is the Psychological Operant Conditioning procedure where each behavior is broken down into small steps or bits of behavior and then the correct behavior or close approximation is reinforced (rewarded) by a sound such as a clicker (which makes a click sound), whistle, or even snap of the fingers. The sound is called a bridging signal and lets the learner know in a fraction of a second that they made the correct response since it is quickly followed by reinforcement. The learner soon makes the connection that the sound signals that reinforcement has been earned and makes the behavior just preceding it more likely to be repeated. Clickers can be purchased at most pet stores for a couple dollars, as they are a favorite training device for many dog trainers.

Primary reinforcements (based on biological needs) for my horses are grain pellets, tiny slices of carrot about the size of a dime, small bits of apple, half a grape, small cubes of watermelon, and small pieces of horse treats held in a fanny pack. In the beginning, reinforcement should be given each time a behavior has been attempted or completed which is called fixed ratio reinforcement. Later after the behavior is well learned, reinforcement is not given every time, but after various completions of a desired behavior. This is called variable reinforcement and results in behavior that is longer lasting, as the learner never knows when the behavior is going to be reinforced. This is the method I used to train my trick horse Tarifa to do about 60 tricks such as playing basketball, bowling, roping a plastic calf head, ringing a bell, answering a phone, painting pictures, and playing a piano keyboard....just to name a few. These and other tricks Tarifa can do are on my website: www.harmonyacresparadehorses.com.

Some trainers and others I know are concerned that hand feeding horses treats for any reason may encourage nipping or mugging behavior. It could, if one gives reinforcement for that behavior. If a horse starts acting too pushy around treats, step back and give them a cue for stopping a behavior. I use the term "UT, UT" sternly for any behavior I do not approve of. I also keep my source of treats in a fanny pack on the side of my hip away from the horse. You should never start your training with a shirt pocket full of carrots if you have a pushy horse. They just may grab a mouthful and get you in the process. You can also shape the behavior of the horse turning its head or nose slightly away from you before the treat is given. My horses are trained to be gentle in taking their treats which are often administered by children, so I have not needed to shape the "nose away" position.

Horses prefer different treats just as people differ in taste preferences. Find out what your horse likes best and add a few others for variety. Most horses like grain and their normal feeding can be used in their training session. I would not give sugar cubes or peppermint hard candy as reinforcement treats, as they may encourage pushy behavior more than natural treats like carrots and apples.

At the same time the primary reinforcement (treat) is given, verbal

praise which is called secondary reinforcement is also given. Over time, the secondary reinforcement gains in power and should continue after the task is well learned and there is no longer a need for treats. Secondary reinforcement or reprimand, is more powerful when it comes from a source the horse/learner respects such as their leader/trainer. Praise from the horse's respected leader is more important to them than that which comes from a stranger on the sidelines.

During the period of Counter Conditioning while feeding grain, the foals were exposed at liberty to my parade obstacle course set up, consisting of a plastic stall mat painted with a big clown face similar to the one that bothers horses in America's Thanksgiving Day Parade in Detroit, a wooden bridge, blue, orange, and yellow plastic tarps to walk over, pieces of rubber hose, Styrofoam colored noodles hanging from a PVC pipe structure, a squishy foam sofa cushion, metallic shiny pom poms stuck in small rubber cones and the large equipment tire filled with sand. Later additional items were added such as revolving ball room mirror balls, convex security mirrors, revolving lights, umbrellas, flags, windsocks, balls with a flopping raccoon tail moving around a child's sliding saucer, and numerous inflatable pool toys and plastic holiday decorations which simulate the BIG parade balloons and shapes of floats they will encounter later. We even set up lighted decorations outside the arena and paddocks to habituate the horses to the sights and shapes that will be encountered in the lighted parades we ride in during the Christmas season. Our training props come from clearance sales, donated outgrown toys, and yard sales... so it is not necessary to spend a fortune on setting up such a training environment. We change these items regularly and move them in different locations. Safety and our imaginations are the only limitations.

The next step was to go through the natural horsemanship tasks to desensitizing to the horseman stick and string (equipment similar to a whip), vertical and lateral flexion, turning on the forehand and haunches, picking up and cleaning out their hooves. At our farm, we are all familiar with natural horsemen trainers such as Frank Bell, Pat Parelli, and Clinton Anderson and apply techniques from them all. I will not go into details of these techniques which are available elsewhere.

Anyone working with horses should remember there is always some danger involved in any horse training for both your horse and you. We all know that horses can cause serious injuries. Proper preparation and thinking through any activity can prevent problems that can take a long time to overcome. Any item that our horses pick up in their teeth is first wrapped in electrical tape or duct tape. Hula hoops are unfastened so that they will fall apart if needed. Velcro that is easily removed is a MUST for attaching props. We have not experienced a wreck in training babies and other horses by keeping this in mind. Picture in your mind the results you are looking for and keep a positive attitude. The term Self Fulfilling Prophecy is used in psychology to describe the phenomenon that we experience most often what our mind concentrates on, for better or worse! Use common sense and do not attempt any suggestions outside your experience and comfort level. While the examples in this article are young foals and horses, we have used the same techniques successfully with the adult horse.

Information in this article is intended to demonstrate training methods and helpful tips that work for us. You must be responsible for using it safely. If you are not comfortable with your abilities or experience, seek advice or assistance from a professional horse trainer. The last piece of advice I have is to do your preparation homework and have fun!

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The next installment is individual one on one weanling training for clipping, worming, giving shots, trimming feet, exposure to a cinch and parade obstacles.