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Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service • Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources

Horses and Kids: Safety on the Ground

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This fact sheet provides information that will help children and adults enjoy many exciting experiences with horses by routinely practicing safe horse handling.

Horse Behavior

An understanding of the horse's natural behavior patterns and learning process is an essential key to safe and effective management of horses. The horse is a strong and powerful animal that is capable of great speed and quick reactions. The instinctive ability to flee from danger is a primary reason why horses have survived in the wild. This behavior is called the "flight instinct" and may cause horses to run or spook from unfamiliar objects or circumstances.

The horse is also a sensitive creature that has a tremendous ability to adapt to unfamiliar situations. Many things we ask of horses are strange to their nature. Therefore, in order to coexist with man, the horse must learn to accept many circumstances and surroundings from which he would naturally flee if living in the wild.

Horses monitor their surroundings and detect danger through their sense of vision, smell, hearing, and touch.

Vision

Horses see much differently than humans and are generally considered to have poor vision. In the wild, horses are animals of prey. Their eyes are set far apart on the sides of their head where they can monitor their surroundings for signs of danger. This gives the horse monocular vision or the ability to see separate objects with each eye at the same time. This arrangement also gives the horse a 340 degree field of vision. Horses cannot see directly in front of them or objects behind them that are more narrow than their body.

Due to the shape of their retina, horses must position their head to focus their vision. For example, when they lift their heads, they are focusing on something far away. Whereas, a horse lowers his head when focusing on low, close objects.

This visual arrangement is most suitable for grazing and watching for danger at the same time. However, this causes horses to have trouble with depth perception. This

is partly why horses may be frightened when crossing shallow water and ditches. Also, horses, like humans, may suffer from faulty vision and may be more prone to shy at unfamiliar objects.

Smell

The sense of smell is highly developed in the horse and serves primarily as a tool of recognition and to satisfy their curiosity.

Hearing

The horse has an acute sense of hearing. A horse's ears are good indicators of their current behavior. Their ears can rotate 180 degrees and will generally point in the direction their attention is focused. Ears that are "laidback," or flattened backward, may be a warning that the horse is getting ready to kick or bite. Knowing the difference between ears that are laid back and ears that simply indicate a resting or listening horse is a valuable recognition signal for safety.

Touch

The horse's sense of touch is often used during gentling and training procedures. Horses are sensitive to pressure, pain, and temperature, especially around the head, leg, and belly regions.

Approaching and Catching a Horse

Trust is essential when working with and around horses. Establish a relaxed and confident relationship with the horse. A horse should willingly accept a person's presence. It is important to have confidence in the horse's manners and behavior. However, never take an animal for granted and always be alert when working with any horse.

There are several considerations to keep in mind when catching a loose horse. Be familiar with the horse's field of vision and never approach from a horse's blind spot. Consider other animals and their position and possible reactions in the pen. Read the horse's attitude by watching his body language. Be prepared to catch the horse before approaching him by unbuckling the halter and placing the buckle and crown piece in the left hand. Speak calmly and confidently. Approach the horse's shoulder to limit the horse's ability to move away. From this position, the handler is able to step toward the head or tail to prevent the horse's escape. This

angle also helps a handler avoid contact with both the front and hind feet.

Haltering

Once contact is made, the horse can be safely haltered. First, reach over the neck with the right hand. Hand the crown piece under the neck and grasp it with the right hand. Hold the buckle in the left hand and slip the noseband over the nose with both hands. Be careful to keep hands away from the eyes and from in front of the face. Once the noseband is in place, fasten the buckle. A properly adjusted halter fits snug behind the horse's jaw, while allowing for a small amount of release space between the halter and the horse's throatlatch and jaw. Enough space to allow a hand to slip under the halter and between the horse's throatlatch and jaw should be adequate.



When catching a horse, always consider the other animals in the pen.

Leading

The right hand should be carried 14 to 16 inches away from the horse's head, and approximately six to eight inches down from the snap on the lead rope. Hold the end of the lead line in the left hand near the waistline. Always allow for a "safety zone" when using a lead rope. This prevents a hand from getting caught in the halter, or a foot from getting stepped on while leading. The lead shank should be folded or coiled in large loops to be sure the free hand does not become entangled if the horse were to spook or try to jerk away.

A handler should walk beside the horse so that he/she is even with the horse's throatlatch. The horse should maintain this body position while walking, trotting, backing, and chang-

ing directions. Never allow the horse to walk too far in front or behind. When changing direction more than 90 degrees, turn to the right to lessen the chance of getting stepped on. Read Oklahoma 4-H member fact sheet no. 623, Showmanship at Halter, for more information on safely leading a horse.



When leading a horse walk even with his throatlatch.

Tying

There are several factors to consider when tying any age of horse. Always tie in a safe area that is free of obstructions. Always tie with a halter and lead rope, never use a bridle and reins. Tie the horse at or above the level of his withers and to a solid, secure object. Tie the horse close to the object, approximately 18 to 24 inches, so that the horse cannot lower his head and get a foot over the lead. Always tie a quick release knot in case of an accident.

Never tie a foal before it has learned to respond and give to halter pressure. Once a young horse is responding well to halter pressure, he can be tied to something that will give but not break such as a strong inner tube attached to a post.

There are two safe ways to move from one side of a tied horse to the other. Either move up close to the horse's hindquarters with one hand on him at all times or walk 15 to 20 feet around out of kicking range. Never cross under the neck of a tied horse.

Always untie the horse before removing the halter. When turning a horse loose, lead him through the gate and turn to face the direction from which you entered. It is safest to remove the halter, but if a halter must be left on, always use a leather halter because it will break more easily than nylon if the horse becomes entangled.



The horse should be tied at or above the level of his withers.

Grooming

Daily grooming is important to the horse's health and training. Grooming can serve as an excellent means of gentling young horses. The daily attention and hands on care helps develop a trusting and confident relationship between a horse and handler. Also, daily grooming provides the opportunity to observe the entire horse for injuries or health related problems that can easily be overlooked.

Prior to grooming, it is a good idea to tie the horse. Always keep the inside hand on the horse at all times and never cross under the horse's neck.

Body

Each basic grooming tool has a specific purpose and correct usage is essential for effectiveness and comfort. A rubber curry comb is used first to remove dirt and debris from the horse's coat on the fleshy areas of the body. A circular motion works best to bring dirt to the surface. A stiff brush is then used around the face. This is followed by a soft brush that serves to remove light dirt and dust. Brushes should be powered by the wrist. Flicking the dust away works much better than long sweeping strokes.

Mane and Tail

Using fingers to pick or comb through the mane and tail helps to remove tangles and debris. Be careful not to pull the hair out with excessive force unless shortening a mane.

Remember, the mane and tail are part of the horse's natural defense against flies and biting insects, so shortening them may be undesirable when pasturing horses.

Feet

In order to safely handle a horse's feet, make it a habit to follow a set procedure — even when handling a mature horse that is well broke. To pick up a front foot, stand facing the rear. Keep the hand closest to the horse on his shoulder. This helps to shift the horse's weight to the opposite leg and serves to push the handler out of the way if the horse moves or jumps. Run the other hand down the front of the horse's leg and lift when the horse gives to pressure. To free both hands, the handler should place the horse's pastern between his/her knees while pointing toes inward for support.

To pick up a hind leg, stand facing the rear with the inside hand on the horse's hip. Run a hand down the back of the hip and hock and down to the fetlock. Pull the leg forward under the horse's belly. Step under the hind leg, laying it across your thighs so that the cannon remains perpendicular to the ground.

Once the leg is lifted into position and the horse is comfortable, remove all dirt and debris from the bottom of the hoof. The hoof should be cleaned with a hoof pick before and after riding to prevent bruises and thrush. Always remember to run the pick from heel to toe. Never pull a leg out to the side and do not keep a leg up for too long because the horse will become uncomfortable and frustrated.

The correct way to place a foot back down on the ground is simply to reverse the procedure for lifting the foot. Never drop the foot or allow the horse to snatch it away.

Summary

- Horses and handlers should have respect for one another while interacting during catching, leading, and grooming.
- An understanding of the horse's natural patterns and learning process is essential to safe and effective management of horses.
- Procedures for catching and leading require consistent, well thought-out actions to ensure horse and handler safety.
- Daily grooming will gentle a horse while aiding to ensure a healthy horse.

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Samuel E. Curl, Director of Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma. This publication is printed and issued by Oklahoma State University as authorized by the Dean of the Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources and has been prepared and distributed at a cost of \$.20 per copy.0404.