

IMPRINTING YOUR FOAL

By Jane Beall

Imprinting: *noun* *Animal Behavior, Psychology* . rapid learning that occurs during a brief receptive period, typically soon after birth or hatching, and establishes a long-lasting behavioral response to a specific individual or object, as attachment to parent, offspring, or site Dictionary.com

Why do mares always wait until you've left the barn for a quick cup of tea and a bathroom break before they give birth? It is just after midnight when I return and see my mare Annie, at the advanced age of 12, in labour with her first foal.

Nervous and excited, I run for the phone and alert my imprint training partner, my sister Wendy (teamwork is critical), and drag the large chalkboard I've covered with instructions out of the feed room into view of the birthing pen.

I've been preparing. I read and reread Dr. Robert Miller's Imprint Training of the Newborn Foal and gathered the various items needed for the next hour's work: clippers, a piece of crinkly white plastic, a spray bottle filled with warm water, a cloth to rub the foal down, and various other bits and pieces. I've slept in the barn the last few nights not to miss the decisive timing, the one to two hour window just after birth, the critical learning period when a foal's brain is highly receptive and permanently influenced.

As we know, horses are flight animals, prey for other species. Even as newborns, foals can see, hear and smell. Within hours they can, if necessary, run for their lives with their herd. To that end, nature gives them the ability to bond instantly with their mothers and other herd members who are moving above them. If you are there in this crucial time, they bond with you as well.

I have seen this happen with other creatures just after birth. We had a duck sitting on eggs in behind a stall when we brought home 25 newborn chicks from the Co-op store. When the duck heard the chicks peeping, she was off her own nest and scrambling to get into the chick stall. From then on, these chicks followed her everywhere, quite a sight.

Similarly, my husband Pat, minutes after the birth of baby donkey Puzzles, picked him up and carried him off for a picture. Puzzles adopted Pat, and Rosebud, a reluctant mom to begin with, was happy to give over responsibility. It was quite an amusing sight to see Pat chasing Rosebud down the field, dumping Puzzles beside her, and jumping the fence.

Dr. Robert Miller realized, over years in practice, that the more he handled foals right after birth, and even before birth in instances when he'd had to manipulate foals within the mares, the easier they were to deal with on follow-up visits. Eventually he put together his Imprint Training Manual and this training is now used successfully around the world.

There are goals with this training. The first is a lifetime bonding of the foal with the imprinter which happens because the human is there above the foal, along with the mare, during this critical period.

The second is a desensitizing of the foal to certain stimuli as well as sensitizing him to others. What in a mature horse takes many sessions, can be done in less than an hour, in a safe environment, with a newborn. The sensations of future saddling, shoeing, bridling, and of having his eyes, ears, nose, mouth, tongue and feet handled as might happen in a vetting situation in his future, are all experienced at this time.

You don't actually saddle, bridle or shoe him, but you get him used to being touched everywhere by constant repetitions (at least 30 and up to 100 times each is

absolutely necessary or the training is counterproductive) until he is relaxed with how it feels.

For example, one of the exercises is to tap the bottom of each hoof at least 50 times so that in future he will have no fear of having his feet worked on by the farrier. He will remember the sensation and feel no panic. As well as to feelings, he can become used to sounds, to the buzz of electric clippers and the whoosh of fly spray, for example, all before he's an hour old. If done properly, following the instructions illustrated by pictures in Dr. Miller's book, this is an incredible method, and it works.

Finally the foal can be made submissive to and respectful of humans by this imprint training in his first hours.

For those animals who live in groups (or flocks, herds, packs, pods or even tribes, like humans), there is a social structure. Horses in the wild have a leader, usually an older mare who guides not from physical strength, but by wisdom and force of personality.

A horse surrenders to its leader by holding its head down, and a foal, by mouthing. To put the foal in a vulnerable position, you must restrain him, so it's always important to have a partner working with you.

As you hold him down, the foal will give in and relax and you become the leader. Later, when he gets on his feet, you keep him from moving away, reinforcing the lesson. Submissiveness without fear will bring him to trust and respect you. It will give him the desire to follow you, his leader.

When my sister arrives, we begin the imprinting in the correct order I have listed on the blackboard. It is an exciting night and our fears of the mare rejecting her baby because of our presence are soon allayed. Just as Dr. Miller suggested, we work in full view of mother, and let Mom and baby touch noses every once in a while.

It was a special night and the bond between the foal and me became important sooner than expected when the mare was not able to produce milk for three days. I bottle fed every few hours night and day until the mare's milk came down, and that first imprinting hour made everything much easier.

Over the years, I felt the imprinting was worth the preparations and the early morning rise when I saw the easy relationship this filly had with people, and how fearless she was of the every day duties of a domestic horse, the riding, the driving, vet and farrier visits, shots, and her happy life today as a practically bomb-proof therapeutic riding horse.

I suggest anyone expecting a foal consider reading Dr. Miller's book. Even if you miss the first hour, it contains a lot of interesting follow-up training that makes good sense. 🐾

HORSE OWNER'S DICTIONARY

Betting on a horserace: One way to stop a runaway horse.

Colt: What your mare always gives you when you want a filly.

Equitation: The ability to keep a smile on your face and correct posture while your horse tries to crow hop, shy and buck his way around a show ring.

Gallop: The usual gait a horse chooses when returning to the barn.

Grooming: the process by which the dirt on the horse is transferred to the groomer.

Ground: The hardest thing about learning to ride.

