

A Lifetime Partnership

By Karen Scholl

Can anyone resist a frolicking foal? This delicate creature with curious eyes and spindly legs seems to go every direction at once as it plays under the watchful eye of the mare. Witnessing incredible bursts of speed, jumps and leaps, we can't help but imagine how this little guy will one day grow into a confident, athletic and playful partner.

There is a wonderful opportunity at the very start of a foal's life to impress positive experiences in preparation for the future. Most have heard of foal imprinting, pioneered by Dr. R.M. Miller, DVM over 20 years ago.

Throughout many years in practice, Dr. Miller observed that horses from a difficult time foaling that were handled at birth were generally much easier to manage during vet visits. Dr. Miller's curious nature took him on a lifelong journey of scientific study to eventually develop a system he calls "foal imprinting."

Because prey animals have a brain that is fully functional at the time of birth (unlike puppies, kittens or human babies), objects and activities can be introduced to a foal in a positive way and become imprinted into long-term memory.

Common concerns such as interfering with the mare-foal bonding, nursing, etc. are not evident in Dr. Miller's studies. However, problems such as the foal behaving like a "barnyard pet" does become a problem if this is the only type of training that is done with a young horse. Dr. Miller emphasizes that imprinting is only the beginning of the thorough training of a young horse.

Because imprinting a foal prevents the prey-predator barrier from forming, young horses often become too familiar with their human family, and begin treating them like another horse. Because we've all seen little foals jump on their dam, bite at, or even kick at them, it's not surprising to know that a foal will try this with humans. By observing a good dam when she disciplines her foal, we can understand how a firm but gentle hand is important when raising a confident, respectful young horse.

There are five stages of learning for the lifetime of a horse; *imprinting*, *early learning*, *socialization*, *foundation*, and *purpose*.

The window for *imprint training* is within the first two hours of life. This is the stage where Dr. Miller's videos and book by Western Horseman teaches a foal to accept anything that is introduced with a positive experience; clippers, feet handling, noises, plastic, pressure around the cinch area, and the list goes on.

Early learning is the stage after imprinting through weaning of the foal. During this stage, the foal is very receptive to learning how to respect the personal space of the human, moving away from both steady pressure and rhythmic pressure. This is the stage where the foal is most curious about the environment and many people don't realize that this is a good time to establish confidence and respect in their young horse.

From weaning through two years is a great time for the *socialization* of youngsters by turning them out in a herd. This is a time when they are young and impressionable and benefit greatly from learning the social dynamics of herd hierarchy. This approach can also minimize the stress of weaning as the horse is not completely isolated and has other things to think about.

There are also physical benefits for the young horse as they move with the herd over natural terrain, developing their strength, sense of balance and self-carriage. Many resist this environment to prevent injury, but this is the most natural environment for a horse and most horse people know that horses can get injured even in the safest environment.

Foundation training is done in stages and continues for about 100 hours. I like to introduce the first stage of foundation training at two years of age, establishing a positive experience to the human, the saddle, the rider, and eventually the guider. After only a handful of rides on the young horse, I feel it's ideal to turn them back out for a period of time to physically mature, resuming training based on the physical condition of the individual horse.

Some prefer to delay riding until the third year, but I find the young horse seems to have almost too much time to think that humans aren't going to be a part of their life, with much more strength and resistance to the idea over time. Six to ten light rides on a loose rein teach a young horse to enjoy their first experience with a human on their back.

As a horse matures in mind and body, *purpose training* begins to emerge. The purpose of a horse varies from trail riding to international competition. With a strong base of foundation training, these horses move on into purpose training very naturally and with great confidence. These are the types of horses that hold up mentally, emotionally and physically for their entire career, even getting better with age.

Every frolicking foal is fresh with possibilities, and it's exciting to know that we can help this little guy become the best he can be while enjoying a very special relationship with the human. As you're watching the antics of these young colts and fillies, imagine the positive stages of development enhancing many years of use and into the retirement years of this very special horse.

Karen Scholl is a horse behaviorist and clinician, teaching "Karen Scholl, Horsemanship for Women" throughout the U.S. Learn more about this empowering program by visiting karenscholl.com or call for a free brochure at 888-238-3447.