



Off to the best start

Research increasingly shows the impact of early socialisation and handling on a foal's behaviour in later life. Gemma Pearson FRCVS tells *Catherine Welton* how to get it right

Pictures by Elli Birch/Boots and Hooves and Alamy

A NEWBORN foal is a blank slate, and correct handling at this formative stage helps set them up for success later in life.

Gemma Pearson is director of equine behaviour at The Horse Trust, and a lecturer in equine behaviour at the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies. She says it helps to think of a foal as a "piggy bank": "Every time they have a good experience, you put money in, but a

negative experience will take money out."

For this reason, she's an advocate of early handling. "As a vet in an equine hospital, it's really hard when a foal comes in, in pain, and it's not been handled. You then have to diagnose and treat it, and its first experience of people is a really negative one."

Horses have evolved to stay safe from predators from almost the moment they're born. Unlike other animals

such as dogs and cats, they're not born helpless, which means a foal's brain is ready to experience the world and learn from those experiences.

"It's almost a tiny adult brain that just hasn't been through as much," explains Gemma. "As soon as the foal has securely bonded with their dam, usually after a day, then you can start handling them. It doesn't have to be every day. A couple of quality sessions early on, then topping it up now and again is ideal."

TEACHING THE BASICS

ALTHOUGH they might be ready to learn, a foal will tire mentally more quickly than an adult horse, so sessions should be kept short.

"If I'm training a foal that's a few weeks old, they're like small children. But when it's six months old, I'd expect it to be able to cope with a bit more, perhaps a 15- or 20-minute session."

Gemma advises starting by teaching pressure and release, which research has shown

- **Handler experience:** doi.org/10.3390/ani16010142
- **Turnout benefits:** doi.org/10.1111/evj.70084

Foalhood is a formative stage in a horse's life, and correct handling at this point will set them up for success

“Within the first week, it’s good for them to get used to being led by pressure – not a headcollar – just get them to move forwards and backwards off light pressure from your hand, then a scratch as soon as they do it. Don’t underestimate the power of positive reinforcement, especially scratching.”

Once they've learnt pressure and release, Gemma moves on to a figure-of-eight rope, with

"I put a very, very light pressure on the headcollar, and use the figure-of-eight rope to get the foal to make the correct response. I wait at least three months before I use a headcollar and lead rope without the figure of eight."

starts getting them used to being separated from their dam.

"I lead them a couple of steps away from her, give them a scratch and return them.

going and coming back.”

In all this, the handler is key. A study published at the beginning of this year found that experienced handlers improved a foal's confidence and friendliness, and reduced its cortisol levels, fearfulness and stubbornness.

Gemma explains that this is because an experienced handler is more predictable, so when the foal is being asked to do something new, they feel

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIALISATION

THE foal's experience with humans is just one part of the puzzle. Socialisation with other horses is increasingly being seen as equally important for a foal's physical and mental development.

"If you keep a mare and foal separate from other horses, the

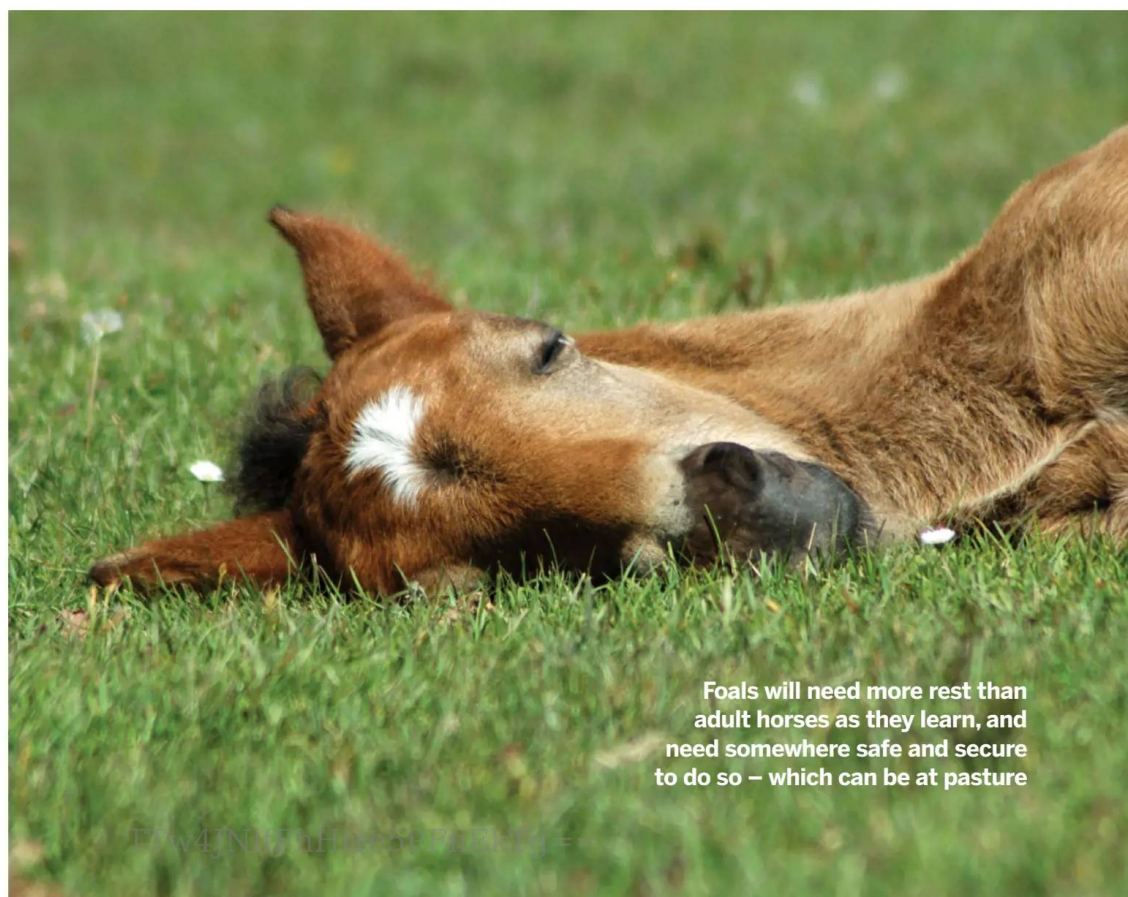
foal doesn't learn the social skills it needs to be a horse," Gemma points out. "It can also drive a frustration response from the foal; they are more likely to be aggressive and less likely to be

able to interact normally with other horses."

Play is a key aspect of this early socialisation with other horses.

"Foals have a strong internal drive to play but they can't play with their mum, she just wants to eat. A foal needs other horses to learn how to play sensibly – if they don't get that, they can end up seeing people as the only playmate option and we don't want to encourage that."

“Experienced handlers improve a foal’s confidence”



Foals will need more rest than adult horses as they learn, and need somewhere safe and secure to do so – which can be at pasture

THE RIGHT ENVIRONMENT

HAVING the space to express these natural behaviours is important from a physical as well as psychological perspective, and research has shown a positive link between a foal's access to turnout and its later athletic performance.

For example, a 2022 Royal Veterinary College study followed 129 thoroughbreds from birth into training, and found that foals that were turned out in larger paddocks during the first six months of life were more successful.

“Research has shown a positive link between access to turnout and later athletic performance”

“This is because the muscular-skeletal frame adapts to load – if it's not loaded, it doesn't adapt. Ideally, they need to be out in a paddock that's big enough for them to get up to full speed.”

A foal will also need more rest than an adult horse.

“They need somewhere they feel safe and secure to achieve this. If they're on a yard, having sufficient quiet time during

The role of the mare

EVEN when the foal is still in the womb, its dam's temperament and wellbeing can affect how it will learn and behave in later life.

“Research in human epigenetics has shown that stressful events while a woman is pregnant can influence the cortisol levels of the baby,” says Gemma. “And we know from research into cattle, sheep and lab rats that being restrained frequently is enough to have a negative impact on their offspring, including learning ability.”

Although horses don't

the day as well as at night will help, but don't bring them in specifically to sleep, they can achieve it perfectly well at pasture,” explains Gemma.

WHAT CAN WE DO BETTER?

WEANING is where most of the equestrian world is still lagging behind the research, Gemma says: “We now know you shouldn't wean a foal until it's at least nine months old, but I think only a few are weaned that late. Yet once people see the benefits of later weaning,



The dam's temperament and wellbeing can affect how a foal will learn and behave later in life – even before birth

learn by observing others in quite the same way that we do, foals will take cues from the mare, which Gemma says we can use to our advantage when training them.

“If you spend time grooming the mare, you're

forming a positive association with people, and that can make the foal more confident with people. Similarly with asking the mare to step over a tarpaulin, for example, the foal can take confidence from her behaviour.”

they keep going with it.”

She'd also like to see a better understanding of negative reinforcement (whereby an aversive stimulus, such as pressure, is applied until the desired behaviour happens and it's then removed) and how it should be used with foals.

“A lot of people don't understand it, it's all about timing. You're using it to shape the desired behaviour, and at the same time monitoring the foal's arousal state. We know they get a dopamine hit when it's used correctly.”

Finally, she says handlers need to be mindful of when to stop if a training session isn't going quite to plan.

“Don't think of it as needing to win a battle. I have a zero tolerance of stress rule with my horses – if their level of arousal gets too high, I do an exercise to bring it back down, often asking them to stand still and relax, which helps them learn to control their emotions.” **H&H**

NEXT WEEK

Flying pests: the health problems caused by flies



Left: allowing foals space to reach full speed on occasion helps strengthen their muscular-skeletal frame, as it adapts to load. Above: foals have a strong drive to play and need peers with whom to do so, and also develop social skills in the process