

EDUCATING THE GAITED HORSE FROM START TO FINISH

The Beginning: 4 weeks to 6 months

The "For the Horse" Method By Elizabeth Graves ©2013
www.lizgraves.com



The 4 weeks to 6 months age of the foal is a fun one for us to observe and such a special time to witness their discovery as they gain those new experiences that come with a new and fresh life. This is the age where we can see how curious the horse is and begin using that natural curiosity to our advantage when teaching them their early manners and also teaching the foal how to learn. Curiosity is an element we should work at building on while being very conscious not to instill fear yet be clear and reasonable in how we work with them and the environment we provide for them. The foal is more or less being raised in an artificial life in comparison to a free range (mustang) foal.

This age is a good time to turn the mare and foal out with other horses if desired. Choose the horses you turn them out carefully. Ensure that they are compatible with the mare and safe around foals. The horse or group they are turned out with should be easy to catch and work with, setting a good human-horse environment for the foal to observe and experience on a daily basis. Catching and handling at this age 3-6 times a week for short sessions is a good plan and this helps prevent them from acquiring a wild behavior. Some foals are born more timid and skittish than others so these foals will benefit from 6 times a week as long as the sessions are short, positive and fun for them. In the early stages of teaching manners and handling, choose times when there is no excitement or a lot of outside activity going on, reducing distractions for good working sessions. As the foal gains more experience, it will be able to handle outside distractions more but set them up to succeed as much as possible. It works well to bring the mare and foal into a contained area for this daily work such as a small pen. Start working with the mare first--even just a short time



grooming the mare and picking up her hooves to clean. At this early stage, have someone else hold the mare or tie the mare and as the foal becomes more familiar with the work sessions and the mare is more comfortable with you working with the foal, you can put the mare in another pen close by or tie her outside of the working area. When haltering the foal check the fit of the halter daily as foals grow rapidly and adjustments may need to be made often.

The next 5 months are the times we teach to lead from both sides of their body, to stop (whoa), stand, turn both directions, back up, to define the space boundaries between them and the handler, to tie and load on a trailer. Take your time with these lessons to ensure that the foals are not pressures and stimulated beyond what their young mind can absorb and endure.

In each work session, start with a consistent routine progressively adding more as they are ready and show comfort in what they have previously learned. Four weeks is a good time to have their hooves balanced with a rasp as needed to ensure no conformational deviations from normal leg alignment ensue. This also allows them to get used to the feel and sound of a rasp early.

Leading work should advance to being led alone and not following the mare. Focus on teaching the foal more advanced work of giving to pressure on the halter and stepping forward when asked. To start stand in front and just slightly off to one side of the foal and doing gentle tug releases on the lead encouraging the foal to step forward. Instantly release the pressure whether it steps up intentionally or by accident, so the foal learns to associate the release with the reward. Only do this a few times and one step at a time is all that is asked for to start. More

steps will come with understanding and in time. Then ask the same of the foal standing just off to the other side as well. Give verbal praise each and every time.

As the foal understands giving to pressure, then step more to the side of the foal and ask it to walk beside you with your hand on the lead. One should not hold the lead too close to the halter but 12-18 inches from the lead snap. Never wrap or coil the halter around your hand but fold and hold the extra lead length with the opposite hand. Your position should be between the head and shoulder but the foal should not be behind you, pulling you and never let them pass you.

This is the time to also teach space boundaries. The foal should lead no closer to us than a length from shoulder to elbow. This is a safety factor in case the foal does bump us coming into our space, we are just pushed out of the way and not unbalanced or knocked off our own feet. We can then help correct and redirect the foal quickly and efficiently. Practice this distance on both sides.

Teaching the foal to stop and stand is done with a downward and slightly backward angled tug release of the lead toward the lower neck or chest area. If needed in the early stages, a hand to the chest with the verbal command of whoa or stop may be used. Ask the foal to stand just briefly at first. Time standing can be increased in small increments as they understand the whoa command. Don't make them stand so long that they get fidgety.

Keep working sessions at this age no longer to 15 to 20 minutes if possible. Be patient, supportive and confident. When releasing the halter at the end of a working session,

have the foal face you and don't allow or encourage them to bolt away causing a poor and dangerous habit. Give them a good scratch on the neck or the chest before stepping backward first and then turning and walking away from the foal.

I am always aware of my attitude before going to work with any foal or horse. Being in a good positive frame of mind is important and there is no place for impatience or loss of temper when working with the foal. We are their teachers and are there to help them understand while each will learn at their own rate of speed. We just take the time it takes and should see when they are ready for more added to their lessons. My next article installment will be in the same age span but will discuss teaching the foal to back in hand, turning both directions, teaching to tie and loading on a trailer. This is such a fun age to work with and introduce them to their new big world and living with us.

