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Social interactions and spacing in horses (*Equus caballus*) grouped according to gender

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The aim of this study was to investigate the social behaviour and spacing between horses when grouped according to gender in homogeneous- or heterogeneous groups, and to see if the amount and severity of aggression differed in relation to gender composition.

A total of 66 horses divided in six batches were used. In each batch, horses were allotted into one mare group, one gelding group and one mixed gender group, with most groups consisting of three or four animals. Three batches were performed on Icelandic horses and three batches on riding horses and -ponies. After 4-6 weeks of acclimatisation, a trained observer recorded all social interactions using direct, continuous observation one hour in the morning and one hour in the afternoon for three consecutive days. In addition, the nearest neighbour of each horse was recorded using instantaneous sampling every 10 minutes. The horses were inspected for injuries before grouping, day one after grouping and after 4-6 weeks. Furthermore, a novel object test and a handling test (taking horse out of group) were conducted after the behavioural observations were completed.

No significant effect of gender composition was found on social interactions, spacing or injuries. Most of the aggressive interactions recorded were threats, and not aggressive interactions involving physical contact. Aggression seemed to increase with decreased space per animal and more horses per feeding place. Very few injuries were found and most were superficial. Horses showed a low degree of fearfulness in the novel object test and most horses were easy to handle in the „horse out of group test“.

In conclusion, gender composition does not seem to have any effect on aggression level, spacing or injuries in social groups of horses.

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