Why isolate during training? Social learning and social cognition applied as training approach for young horses (*Equus caballus*)

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In the last decade an increasing number of studies has been oriented towards equine social learning and their social behavior within the herd (Kruger, 2006-2008). In social species, social learning is important to learn and gain useful skills to move and live in their own social and environmental context. Group housing has been recognized as an important element to fulfill the physical and behavioral needs of horses, especially their need for social contact (Søndergaard, 2011). Still, when it comes to horse training, the social aspect and, in general, cognitive abilities of the horse are rarely taken into account. Although it is widely accepted that social isolation is stressful for horse (Mal et al, 1991a and 1991b) still isolating a young horse is the first step when it comes to training methods. Due to tradition and culture and our performance-oriented society it is both difficult to accept and apply a different social/cognitive training approach. Training sessions are focused on immediate results whereas in cognitive learning part of the process is latent and will not be visible immediately, but taking the cognitive skills into account plays an important role in avoiding tension both in the horse as in the human-horse interaction (Baragli and De Giorgio, 2011). In this study we tested the possibility to apply social learning by creating a social environment, favoring a cognitive learning approach, for the training of six young horses. The group existed in three males and three females, between two and three years old. All six showed initial difficulties and defense to human interaction. They were housed in two groups in adjacent spacious paddocks where they had ample opportunity to move and express their individual and social behavioral repertoire. Each horse had one training session per week without isolating it from the others. The training sessions were held following a cognitive-relational model defined as the equine-zooanthropologic approach (De Giorgio, 2010 – Marchesini, 2011). The learning objectives were to be able to handle each horse, conduct it, saddle and ride it within a maximum time-frame of two years. Every time a defensive or alert behavior would occur the training activity was re-arranged to not over-pressure the horse. Therefore the persons working with the horses carried out the activities without tight expectations focusing on the horses' positive attention. After eighteen months all six horses were used to the saddle and to riding. None of the horses ever fled or showed defense behavior and in the case of unexpected events they showed no emotional reactivity/reactive behavior. Today the horses show the same calm behavior whenever worked individually.

This preliminary study highlights how social learning applied to equestrian activity can be fundamental for safety and welfare and the establishment of a more problem-free relationship between horse and human. Safety as the defensive behavior seems to have been reduced and welfare as the horses have been trained in a social context without being isolated and thus without being stressed during the training experience.

Key words: Cognitive approach, Horse training, Horse-Human relationship, Social environment, Social learning

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