

Horse Corral

How Horses Play and the Benefits of Behavioral Enrichment

By Alex Valverde, Equine Advocates Communications Manager

Much like playtime is essential for children to learn and interact with others, encouraging play behavior for equines is important for their mental and physical health. This is the case for all equines, including foals and older animals. There are many ways equines play, both with other equines and humans.

Fun time for foals

Just like children learn from their parents, foals learn behaviors from their dams and sires. As foals, colts tend to spend more time playing than fillies and their play can be more aggressive, i.e., "play fighting." Playful activity at a young age promotes motor skills and social interactions with other horses. In the wild, some forms of play also help them practice survival skills and build knowledge of their environment. For example, play fighting will help foals practice defensive skills in the event they ever face a predator.

Chasing and nudging as forms of play help develop and strengthen herd stability and bonding. This behavior can help a herd figure out who has what it takes to become a herd leader.

How horses initiate play

As equines grow up, play is still important for physical health and social interaction. There are different ways horses show other horses that they want to play.

- Nip and shove: Horses will nip each other around the neck and head and lean their body weight against each other to get the other to move.
- Chase and charge: Horses will canter and gallop in a specific direction, sometimes with a horse in the back using driving behavior to initiate the chase.
- Pair-bond play: Two horses will show nip and shove behavior with their necks overlapped as if they were grooming each other. This often follows a grooming session and shows a close bond between the horses.

How to promote playful activity

Horses don't just play with other horses; they can also play with us! However, it's important to set boundaries with horses since we're not able to play with them the same way they'd play with other equines. For example, you shouldn't allow a horse to nip or shove you, and you also don't want to chase your horse. These activities could lead to injuries.

Here are some ways you can play with horses:

- Fetch: You could throw a ball or other object and encourage your horse to chase after it. Unlike dogs, horses typically won't bring the object back, but they'll chase and nudge it around.
- Toys: Whether they're homemade or store-bought, bringing out toys helps keep horses mentally stimulated by breaking up their daily routine. Feeder toys, or objects where you can store hay or treats, also make mealtime fun or help fast eaters regulate their meals. You can make homemade feeder toys using cardboard boxes, towels, buckets, or traffic cones. You could also hang treats in their stall. These activities mimic natural foraging behaviors. With homemade toys though, it's important to make sure there are no sharp edges or objects with which horses could hurt themselves.
- Obstacle courses: You can create an obstacle course in a horse's pasture and encourage them to figure out the path, which is both physically and mentally stimulating.
- Grooming: Grooming is a way to help care for a horse and strengthen your bond. Horses may show playfulness by nipping or grabbing grooming tools with their teeth and you can also find and scratch that spot they love.

Discouraging poor behavior is important when it comes to setting boundaries with horses, so they know the proper way to play with humans.

"You [set boundaries] by building relationships with your horses and you don't use punishment on them," said Equine Advocates Humane Educator Michele Jacobs. "They don't need punishment. They don't understand punishment. They learn by reading your body language. For example, if I



Photo Credit: Pedro Nelson

step in, [the horse] should step away. When you have a relationship with a horse, they learn to trust you as their herd leader."

Horses are naturally curious and social creatures, which means they love to interact with their surroundings and others. Encouraging playtime is essential to a horse's livelihood during all stages of their life.



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