

ABERRATIONAL ANIMAL BEHAVIOR

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We all know the Platitudes, as I was taught to call them. “You Reap What You Sow” – “Do What You Always Did, Get What You Always Got,” etc. The Platitudes were one of the fun parts of Bible class. In animal training they become true – particularly the one which said “Don’t Do With a 25 Pound Animal What You Don’t Want To Do With a 300 Pounder!” Animals learn to react to stimulus in a certain way. Some stimuli go to the core of animal behavior – instinct. Instinct, once aroused, is often difficult to stop.

We see this in domestic animals. Some dog breeds live at the instinct level. Border collies and Australian shepherds live to herd. Control their instincts and you have great dogs to help with the sheep. The large, white Mediterranean dog, be it Great Pyrenees, Kuvasz or Maremma, wants nothing more than to live with and protect its herd. Other breeds have the instinct to be attack dogs, but may not be in attack-mode unless the instinct is aroused.

Instinctive behaviors in domestic animals are vestiges of the wild. We see it in large animals as well as small. The natural behavior of a newborn colt is to be with mom and other horses. It tries to avoid contact with people unless trained otherwise. This is true of llamas and alpacas too, although they have been domesticated for 6,000 years.

Old time horse trainers, the ones who trained colts from birth, have done animal owners a great service. It was they who learned – and taught - that if you handle a newborn colt everywhere on its body for an hour or so immediately after birth, it will retain the lesson for life. The colt’s instinctive apprehension of people becomes limited. This practice is of great value with llamas

Handle a cria all over its body for an hour or so, immediately after birth. Do this only one time.

and alpacas. Each of our newborn crias gets an hour or two of training at birth, as well as the usual iodine on the navel. We start with the head, ears and mouth, and work back to the rear, ending with taking the animal’s temperature. Every spot is touched, rubbed, dried, manipulated, etc. We check the eyes and teeth; we check for hernias; we look at

the reproductive organs. All joints are manipulated, and the feet are checked, as is the tail. The cria learns to accept our handling of any part of its body. It takes an hour or so and ***is not repeated***. Once done, the future with this animal is quite secure. We know that shearing, toenail trimming, shots, oral wormers, and taking the temperature, will be easier for the rest of our time together. The animal will have neither fear nor an aggressive attitude towards us.

There is room for error in this practice. It comes in the area of over-handling. Early on, over-handling creates cute behavior – but remember the platitude of “don’t do with a 25 pound animal what you don’t want to do with one weighing 300 pounds.” Here is where it really comes into play! An over-handled large animal, as it grows up, can lose the differentiation between itself and people. This can happen with both males and females, but is more of a problem with males. An adult female llama may not want to have anything to do with female people, but the male llama might want to breed them. The male can also become extremely aggressive and territorial, chasing all other animals out of its area – a dangerous occurrence. These are aberrational behaviors and must be prevented ***at all costs***. If not prevented by appropriate early training, they often result in the eventual necessity of euthanizing the animal.

Newborn males of whatever large animal breed are most at risk. This is particularly true of animals that have to be hand-fed for whatever reason. These babies come to rely on and “love” their keepers as they would mom. To avoid this, it is necessary to keep the animal with the herd, and when feeding it, do so without making overtures to its emotions – feed it and leave. This is very hard to do, but very necessary.

If we can help with llama or alpaca problems, call, write, or e-mail us.

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