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ASK TEAM H&R

WEANLING PRE-SCHOOL

Robin Gollehon gives our reader her 10-point checklist of lessons that every young horse needs to learn, sooner rather than later.

PRODUCED BY JULI S. THORSON PHOTOS BY ROGER GOLLEHON

Q *I have two foals that'll soon be old enough to wean, and that I've done very little with so far. They're out on pasture with their dams and haven't even worn a halter yet. Where do you suggest I begin with their handling and training, and what should I plan to work on with them in their first months after weaning? My goal is to sell one as a yearling and keep the other as a future mount for myself.*

CINDY GOLDEN, ILLINOIS

A You're smart to seek help, because a young horse's earliest lessons at the hands of humans are ones he'll never forget. Those first experiences can either set the stage for positive further learning, or imprint a youngster with wariness that's challenging to overcome. My husband Roger and I work extensively with weanlings and yearlings, some of them raised and handled by others, and we can always tell when a horse's education had a rocky or inadequate start.

Over the years, we've developed a systematic approach to working with foals and weanlings, and I'll share it with you here. Think of it as a sort of pre-school checklist, designed to give young horses the basic skills they need in order to be handled safely, and comfortable enough with people to accept the many training lessons to come as they get older.

Bonus: Once he's gotten the pre-school lessons down, the baby you intend to sell will be that much more appealing to potential buyers. You might be surprised to learn how many yearlings are offered for sale with little to no education, and what a turnoff that can be to a serious buyer.

Here's our lesson list, with tips on whys and hows. We find it ideal to begin working through the list while a foal is still with his dam. However, with a few modifications, the tips can be applied readily to youngsters no longer with their mothers.

✓ 1. Make friends.

Foals learn about behavior from their dams, so the first thing we do to get a baby confident about human handling is to make friends with his mother out in the pasture. To do this, I go out to the mare/foal pasture every evening with a tail comb in my back pocket. I use the comb to scratch a mare's favorite spots, and she soon learns to look forward to my presence and to stand, blissfully, while I scratch her.

Eventually, her foal's inborn curiosity draws him in, and I'll be able to scratch him, too, most likely on his chest or rear end. It's a matter of putting horse psychology to work, and it makes a big difference in how that baby views humans—not as creatures to fear, but as ones that are pleasant to be with.

Tip: Although mutual scratching is a normal part of horse behavior, you don't want to encourage a foal to nibble on or nip at you while you're scratching him. Stand out of reach of his mouth as you scratch him, and correct him with "no!" and a firm smack if he tries to bite you.

✓ 2. Teach him to accept hand touch.

Once your baby will allow himself to be scratched with the comb, advance to scratching, rubbing, and stroking him with your hands. Start with the areas he's used to from the comb, and gradually extend your reach onto his back, neck, and shoulders. Eventually, you want to get

him comfortable enough with touch that you can contain him in place with one arm curled in front of his chest as you rub him with the other hand. You'll need this level of control in order to get a halter on him for the next step on the checklist.

You won't have this degree of control over him at first, so keep your own safety in mind. Be prepared for anything, and don't get yourself in a position where he could connect if he were to whirl and kick out. If he moves out of reach (and he probably will at first, due to apprehension), don't chase or scold him. If he's with his mother, just turn your attention to her until he re-approaches. If he's weaned and on his own, back up a step or two, allow him to relax and realize he's not being pursued, and try again.

Tip: Many babies seem to enjoy the light-scratch touch of fingernails or nubby garden gloves.

✓ 3. Begin halter training.

We teach this when a foal becomes independent enough to wander off on his own, as his dam is being led from place to place; at this point, it becomes a safety issue for his sake. Another benefit of halter training before weaning is that the baby learns to go forward on a lead by following his mother as *she's* being led. He learns an important aspect of leading without knowing he's being taught. Plus, at weaning time, it's just easier and safer all the way around when the baby's had halter training beforehand.

In any case, I recommend a youngster be in a small, confined space for his first halter lessons. This reduces chance of injury if he happens to get away. If he's still with his dam, enlist a helper to halter and control her. Put the halter on the baby, with the lead rope attached, and let him get used to the feel of it on his head.



The skills you teach a horse during the first year of his life provide the foundation for all his future training. Robin Gollehon teaches you the system she and her husband Roger use at their operation for imparting a youngster's earliest lessons.

To begin teaching him to yield to the pressure a halter puts on his head and face when the lead is pulled, first apply just enough light, *sideways* pull to get him to tip his nose one way, then the other. (If you tried to pull him forward at this stage, he'd be likely to panic—possibly enough to flip over backward.)

From there, follow up with just enough additional pressure to get him to take a sideways step. Build from there, rewarding each step with release of pressure and lots of scratching and petting. With practice, the sideways steps will have more “forward” to them.

Tip: If your baby has trouble getting the idea of going forward, drape a looped soft rope around his rear end and pull on its end as you take a step. This will disengage his back end and make it impossible for him to balk. It'll also help him make the connection between your forward steps and his.

✔ 4. Go for walks.

Let's assume your foal has accepted being haltered and led within safe enclosures, and you've subsequently weaned him. The next logical step for weanling education is to take your newly motherless horse on regular walks around other

parts of your property. Along with reinforcing halter training, this pre-school activity helps expose a weanling to new sights and sounds, builds his confidence, and allows you to step actively into the role of his new life leader—literally, as well as figuratively.

Tip: As you're taking your weanling out on these walks, don't be in a rush to get him from Point A to Point B. Instead, give him whatever time he needs to stop, look things over, and decide they aren't going to hurt him. The more calm, confident, and reassuring you can be, the faster he'll advance.

✔ 5. Start teaching manners.

Along with being taught that nipping is unacceptable, a young horse needs to learn such good-horse basics as stopping and standing in place after you've said “whoa.” He'll need this skill throughout his life; without it, he'd be like a truck with no brakes.

In our program, we teach the whoa/stand-still lesson by saying “whoa” at every halt, and by moving the baby back into the original halted position, with a repeat of “whoa,” each time he moves. With patience (very key!) and lots of

repetition, you'll be able to expand his stand-still time from seconds to longer and longer spans of minutes.

Tip: By now, you should have a pretty good read on your baby's temperament and personality, with indications of whether he's super-sensitive, ultra-laid-back, or somewhere in between. Take this into consideration when you're teaching and correcting him. If you mistake a sensitive weanling's fear of something for disobedience and spank him for it, you'll set his training back, instead of advancing it.

✔ 6. Handle his legs and feet.

Regular hoof trimming/balancing is something your weanling will need as he grows, and for that to take place, he has to tolerate having his feet lifted and held. The safest way for you to embark on this aspect of his pre-school learning is to work with a partner. This allows one person to hold and control the horse while the other works toward the lifted-foot goal.

Start at the top of each leg, gradually touching and rubbing your way down the limb until you can grasp and lift it. Hold it for a split second; set it back down and offer praise; then repeat, until



This soft, flexible, noodle-like toy makes an excellent tool for “sacking out,” or desensitizing a weanling. You can reach most of his body with it, while standing near his head for control.

you can hold the foot up for longer and longer periods.

Tip: Don't expect to lift and hold each of the four feet in the first training session. Instead, work on this as part of each handling session, building as you go.

✔ 7. Desensitize by “sacking out.”

Years ago, when burlap feed sacks were commonplace, people typically desensitized their horses by rubbing and flopping the sacks against them—hence, the sacking-out term. But any soft object will work for this purpose, and we've had good results using a long, flexible pool toy (readily available from toy vendors) that we call “the noodle.”

Using the noodle allows you to reach a weanling's back, rear end, belly, and legs, while maintaining control of him via halter and lead. Begin by letting him see and sniff the toy. Then start touching him back by his hip, gradually working your noodle forward and down, over all parts of his body on both sides.

Tip: If your weanling is especially touchy about having his legs and feet handled, do lots of sacking out with the noodle in those areas.

✔ 8. Add tie-up lessons.

Like leading and knowing the meaning of “whoa,” every horse needs to learn to accept being tied. Otherwise, dealing

with him becomes a nuisance at best, and dangerous at worst.

Rather than tie a weanling hard and fast, as we would an older, well-seasoned horse, we avoid that recipe for a wreck by first setting the baby up to succeed. We conduct his earliest lessons in a familiar stall or pen, with another horse nearby for company and comfort.

Initially, we just thread the weanling's lead through a tie ring or around a post, without knotting it. By holding the free end with one hand while brushing/petting the horse with the other, we can tighten the hold until he steps forward to relieve the pressure on his head (the correct response on his part); or else release it completely if he should happen to panic and start fighting uncontrollably.

You should plan to incorporate this into every handling session, until your weanling clearly understands that when he's attached to something, stepping forward and standing quietly is the way to relieve pressure on his poll.

Tip: When you do finally tie your weanling for the first several times, attach the lead rope to something with a little stretch or give, like an old inner tube affixed to a post.

✔ 9. Teach trailer loading/unloading.

This is yet another must-have skill. Even if you never intend to show your young

horse or haul him to other activities, there's no telling when you might need to trailer him to a vet clinic for emergency treatment, or evacuate him in case of a wildfire or other natural disaster. The crisis will be that much less traumatic for all if you don't wait until then to teach the loading/unloading skills.

Tip: Although a complete how-to on trailer training is beyond the scope of this article, you can find excellent advice on the subject by going to **HorseandRider.com**, and typing *trailer loading* into the search box.

✔ 10. Introduce clippers.

We recommend this step even for owners who prefer a natural look over a clipped one for their horses. The day may come when you need to clip an area for treatment purposes, and as with trailer training, it's best not to wait until an emergency forces you to deal with the acceptance aspect.

Before you attempt any actual clipping, accustom your weanling to the sound and vibration of clippers by holding them in your hand as you stroke him with that hand. Gradually work your way up his neck and down his legs, making this another one of the things you do on a regular basis. As acceptance grows, you'll be able to introduce the sensation of the blades against the weanling's skin.

Tip: Cordless clippers work great for this purpose. They allow you to work away from an electrical outlet, and there's no cord for the weanling to bite at, or get tangled in. ■

ROBIN GOLLEHON and her husband Roger operate Gollehon Show Horses in Versailles, Kentucky. They stand Quarter Horse and Paint stallions and raise weanlings destined for yearling longe-line, and Western pleasure and hunt-seat competition. To learn more, go to gollehon.com or YearlingHeadStart.com.



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