

Locking up your Children

By Sabots Libres March 2015



This week, a study by Nottingham Trent University (UK) reached the mainstream British media. The study told us nothing new – but it did manage, with this media coverage, to suddenly reach a much wider audience. Essentially it was a study into the well-being of horses and the effects of stabling.

The study showed that stabled horses have higher cortisone levels – cortisone is the stress hormone – than horses kept in paddocks and fields and also makes the point that much of our reasoning behind stabling horses is based upon our own human views of comfort and safety. But – probably unsurprisingly – there was immediately a backlash from owners, at least in the MailOnline coverage, that this was all nonsense and their horses positively *love* to go indoors.

So, is the study bunk, and do our horses “love” their boxes, or has Trent Uni got a point? And what are the ethics – something neither party has really looked at?

Like the majority of prey animals, horses seek safety in numbers. They form herds to reduce their chances of being singled out and caught by a hunter. But a horse in a stable does not have a “hunter” to single it out so it should be happy alone, right? Wrong! The herd instinct is an evolutionary factor – you don’t breed it out in a few generations. In fact, genetically, the horse today is just about identical to its first domesticated forefather 5,500 years ago. Furthermore, the horse does not have a prefrontal cortex in its brain that allows for reasoning. This means that a horse cannot go into its box thinking “oh, this is safer than out in the field”; in fact, if the horse *was* capable of reasoning like a human, I for one would not expect it to put up with being locked up for large parts of the day!

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So we can agree that the horse is a herd animal and will benefit from some contact with others of its species – “but my horse can see other horses when it is in its box”. Horses may not have the higher reasoning powers of humans but they do have greater sensitivity to each other – and their surroundings – than do humans. Horses don’t just need to see each other, they need to touch, to smell, to groom. Just as we do with good friends. With horses, seeing is *NOT* believing; proximity, touch, smell, sound are so very important in the equine experience. It is one of the reasons a horse will run if it sees a plastic bag flapping at 500 paces; but introduce the horse to the bag and they could become good friends!

“But he loves his box, he goes in all by himself” – quite possibly true. Firstly, despite being a scaredy pants (see previous paragraph), he is also inquisitive by nature. It is that which gives the horse a successful interspecies relationship with humans. So if the horse is given the possibility to explore in an (apparently) safe environment, it will do so. If the entrance to stalls or boxes is in shadow, the horse will often have much less difficulty in going in than when the entrance is in sunlight – horses have fairly restricted vision, not in peripheral observation but focus and vision upwards and light sensitivity plays a big role too (horses are essentially nocturnal*). The horse will also not see the door and think it is going to be locked up – open is open.

The other – often overlooked – reason why a horse will show willingness to go into a box is addiction and craving. The vast majority of horses that live in a stable are fed commercial food. This contains starches and – despite labelling to the contrary – sugars in very unnatural quantities for the horse. Sugar (of which starch is really just another form) is addictive; a study in 2007, highlighted again last November, showed that sugar is substantially more addictive than cocaine†. Because of this addiction, there is a craving for sugar which the horse may be able to satisfy by going into the box where there is usually another shot.

So, what about the ethics? The majority of owners will say they love their horse and want the best for it – even the major racing trainers and owners, despite the atrocious treatment their horses are actually receiving. Keeping their horse “happy” is often a very large expenditure for the average owner: a good stable, clean bedding, quality food, rugs, blankets, inoculations, regular shoeing... The individual’s attention paid to equine welfare is often far greater than that paid to child welfare. And yet, if we were to treat children as we treat our horses, we would be committing atrocities in our quest to do the right thing. To continue with the analogy: we would be feeding our child Cadbury’s Creme Eggs as its main meal, but only once a week; he would get a lettuce leaf every three days as a snack between “meals”; he would be wearing thermal underwear, an Aran pullover and a duffel coat in the summer; we would make him work delivering newspapers (on foot) from the

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age of three, all the time with a pencil in his mouth which he could only take out when he was finished; and when he got home, we would lock him in the toilet – which unfortunately, he can't get to flush – and throw his food in with him.

This may seem an exaggerated analogy but sadly it is not far from the truth, and if it *was* a child being treated like this, then the social services would be down on the parents like a ton of bricks. And yet for horses, we accept it as “normal” to treat them in this way.

* Numerous studies of free-roaming horses have shown greater activity during hours of darkness

† Lenoir, M. *Intense sweetness surpasses cocaine reward* PLoSOne, 2007, 8 : e698

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