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## POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT: FOOD MANNERS

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# WHAT IS POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT?



## **Positive Reinforcement: what is it and why use it?**

Positive reinforcement offers a learning theory-based approach to horse training that emphasises clarity, choice, and confidence-building. It involves giving the horse something it values (a reinforcer) immediately after it performs a desired behaviour, thereby encouraging the horse to repeat the behaviour in the future.

This method of training focuses on the rewarding “positive” behaviours your horse performs and ignoring “negative” behaviours, rather than simply correcting “negative” behaviours, thereby making it a force-free training approach..

By using positive reinforcement you can have a horse that:

- Enjoys training and is motivated to work with you
- Tries to problem solve and thereby offers behaviours willingly
- Is curious about new objects that they may have previously found frightening
- Can remain emotionally regulated, even in new or challenging environments

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# WHY USE FOOD REINFORCERS?

## **Why is food an effective reinforcer?**

Because eating is essential for survival, horses naturally release dopamine when they eat, making food a powerful motivator. This is why food rewards are such a clear and effective reinforcer in training. Not only is food highly rewarding for the horse, but it is also easy for humans to deliver consistently, helping to strengthen desired behaviours.

When used correctly, food rewards:

- Create strong, positive associations with training
- Help the horse learn faster by clearly marking desired behaviours
- Build confidence and motivation, especially in anxious or shut-down horses

**It is because food is such a powerful motivator it is important to ensure horses are able to behave safely and in a calm manner around food. This booklet will provide guidelines to follow to help you to ensure you can safely use food to train your horse.**

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# 4 KEY GUIDELINES



There are 4 key guidelines that it is important to know and stick to when training with food reinforcers. These guidelines will help you to stay safe and ensure you achieve the best results. They are:

1. Establish Clear Boundaries
2. Use a marker Signal
3. Feed away from your body
4. Be consistent

This booklet will guide you through these key guidelines, enabling you to set yourself up for the successful use of positive reinforcement with your horse!

# 1. ESTABLISH CLEAR BOUNDARIES



Before using food in training, it is important to spend time teaching your horse how to politely take food from your hand. We want our horses to take food from our hand in a “neutral” position, whereby the understand not to come toward you for food. This “neutral” position for me is when your horse stands with the head straight and relaxed. This helps prevent mugging, nudging, or pushy behaviour by making it clear that only calm, non-invasive behaviour earns rewards.

## **How to achieve this:**

- Stand with your horse in a relaxed environment
- Stand next to your horse and wait until your horse offers a “neutral” head position or moves their head away and towards a “neutral position”.
- Mark that moment (with a clicker or a word like “yes”) and reinforce
- Repeat this process, rewarding a “neutral” position. Never feed when your horse is mugging or pushing for food.
- If your horse starts nudging or pushing, wait quietly without reacting until they offer a calm, “neutral” position again.
- With repetition, your horse will understand that a “neutral” position is the position at which they are reinforced.
- Horses often pick this up quickly when the exercise is done with clarity. However, some horses who are particularly food motivated or have been reinforced for mugging in the past

## 2. USE A MARKER SIGNAL



A marker signal, I recommend using a “clicker” due to the clarity they provide, pin points the exact moment that the horse has performed the desired behaviour. This creates clear communication and speeds up learning. The marker acts as a bridge between the correct behaviour and the food reward that follows, allowing time for the food reward to be presented.

### **How to Use a Marker Signal Effectively:**

- Get a clicker (You can use a word like “yes”, however this word needs to be spoken the same each time and cannot sound the same as any other word you use around your horse)
- “Click” the clicker a few times and feed a reinforcer (Exercise 1 can be a good way to begin pairing the marker with reinforcers)
- Immediately use the marker when your horse performs the desired behaviour.
- Deliver the treat after the marker, not at the same time. This helps keep timing accurate and the horse focused on behaviour, not your hands.
- Be consistent, only use the marker when you intend to reward.
- Keep your timing sharp, mark during the behaviour, not several seconds after, so your horse can link the reward to the right action.

### 3. FEED AWAY FROM YOUR BODY



When training with food, the placement of your delivery matters. Feeding away from your body, whereby your horse remains in a “neutral” position helps reinforce polite manners and prevents crowding or mugging, as your horse expect the treat in that place. If you consistently feed close to your pockets or hands, the horse may begin to nudge or push into your space in anticipation. Feeding in a neutral position encourages the horse to stay relaxed and focused, and helps maintain a safe, respectful boundary.

#### **How to Feed Away from Your Body:**

- Use a consistent feeding spot, such as beside the horse’s shoulder or slightly to the side of their head.
- Hold the treat hand still until after your marker signal — don’t let your hand drift toward the food too early.
- Extend your arm to the feeding spot, rather than drawing the horse toward you.
- If the horse reaches or crowds your space, pause and wait until they move away before feeding.
- Avoid feeding directly at the mouth or near your pockets, especially with horses prone to mugging.
- If your horse is particularly pushy, you can provide a bucket, into which you throw treats when they perform the desired behaviour. This makes it clear to the horse where the reinforcer will be delivered.

## 4. BE CONSISTENT



Consistency is key to helping your horse understand how to earn a reinforcer. If your timing, cues, or criteria change from moment to moment, your horse may become confused or frustrated. It is essential to be consistent, whereby you always reward the same behaviour, use the same marker, and maintain clear boundaries. This builds trust, speeds up learning, and prevents problem behaviours like mugging or anxiety.

### **How to Stay Consistent:**

- Use the same marker signal every time to mark correct behaviour (a clicker is the easiest way to do this).
- Reward only the behaviour you want to reinforce
- Keep your timing sharp. Mark and reward immediately after the correct behaviour.
- Stick to the same criteria. Understand what it is you are expecting from your horse and only reinforce that behaviour.
- Use the same body position and routine for delivering treats to avoid sending mixed messages and confusing your horse.
- If the horse offers the wrong behaviour, pause and wait for the right one. Sometimes this can lead to frustration. Make sure you are asking your horse for something that they are capable of achieving, to reduce frustration.

THANK YOU FOR READING



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