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Separating a horse from the social group for riding or training purposes: a descriptive study of human-horse interactions

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate how difficult it was to halter and separate a horse (Equus caballus) from a group for riding or training purposes and to describe how human-horse interactions could affect this common procedure. A total of 20 different horse groups, with a minimum of five horses in each, were studied on 14 farms in Norway, from June to October 2007. On each farm, information about the facilities, the horse and the handler was recorded. In each group, the horse owner or keeper (handler) was asked to enter the group, approach his/her horse, halter it and lead it out through the gate, then keep the horse standing out of sight from other horses for two minutes. The entire procedure was video recorded and the behaviour of the target horse, handler and other horses was subsequently scored. Only one of the 100 horses moved away from the handler when approached. Ninety-six percent of the target horse followed their handler without showing any resistance. In 75% of the tests, the other horses did not interact with the target horse and/or handler. At the gate, 26% of the handlers did not turn the target horse around before closing the gate, thereby placing themselves in a vulnerable position, with their body in very close proximity to the horse's hind legs. In conclusion, separating a horse from its group can be considered relatively safe and unproblematic, provided good management practices and trained handlers.

Keywords: animal welfare, behaviour, group housing, horse, human-horse interactions, separating horse