

How to Get Started with Obstacle Challenges / Handy Pony / Agility and Much Much More.

By Vicki Jayne Yates BA Hons

Written for The Non Ridden Equine Association UK as a FREE resource. To be used alongside support of a practitioner of your own choice.

This is how I used to teach people, it is only my own approach using at the foundation positive reinforcement. There are plenty of other approaches out there. I urge you to research so you can decide what feels right for you and your equine. One size does not fit all.

How to Get Started

Firstly teach a noise = a reward. This is easy to do.

- 1) This is best done either with your horse in a stable or with you one side of the filed gate and the horse the other. Place a treat in your hand and offer it to your horse.
- 2) As his mouth goes round the treat make a click noise that you will use to replace the word yes. I don't use the word yes and often we interact with our horse and talk at the same time and if we used the word yes it would be confusing to the horse. I don't use a hand held clicker as I want to be able to indicate my horse has done the right thing in any situation at any time with my horse. It's a pain to always carry a hand held clicker, but our voice is transportable everywhere.
- 3) Repeat numbers 1 and 2 as many times as you need to teach your horse your chosen noise = a reward.
- 4) Test to see if your horse has learnt the noise = reward by one day when your horse is minding his own business chilling out nearby make your click noise. If he's learnt that noise = reward his head will turn towards you with an expectant look. Then give the reward. Your horse has now learnt the click noise is the bridge to a reward arriving.

The barrier between the 2 of you means we can deal with pushing and mugging as something we teach after the horse has learnt a noise = a reward. It is easy to teach a horse not to get pushy and mugging. I teach a horse to move his head away, then click and reward. This way your horse learns not to push and mug. We have to be consistent with not rewarding begging, pushing and pocket nudging.

Now we can attach rewarding a horse to any given situation and training.

Cool so you taught your horse a noise = yes. Here is how to use it in a practical way. I am going to select for an example teaching your horse to target touch. Why? Most horses haven't been taught it, so it's something new for the horse. You can't force your horse to touch either, so you will have to engage with your horse in meaningful horsemanship dialogue. You and your horse will have to work together. You will have to recognise a try from your horse and be ready to reward. For some horses the smallest try is like **Panning for Gold**. (You can read for FREE my published article for Horsemanship Magazine - **Panning for Gold** on my website in the Horsemanship Resources section).



There are so many practical reasons for teaching your horse to target touch: Your horse will never risk touching anything without investigating it first with its' nose. So having a shared language about checking out new objects can be very handy if you wish to have a go at obstacle challenges, or play with objects such as ball, or help your horse to be confident with everyday spooky objects, or be a confident self-loader into your trailer, etc....

How to Teach Your Horse to Target Touch

- 1) Select a safe object for your horse to learn target touch. I suggest something your horse is used to seeing every day, so it is familiar and non-threatening. When teach a horse I use a plastic cone.
- 2) Let your horse relax and be comfortable before you start.
- 3) Place a treat between your fingers and with your hand in a pointing gesture use this to draw your horse's nose towards the cone. I use the word touch as I do this.
- 4) When your horse touches the cone use your click noise then reward.



Once practiced your horse will recognise the hand gesture and word are to indicate to check out an object and that you will reward the right behaviour. Any safe object can be used for target touch training. So get creative. This can be extended to teach your horse to push a ball, or pick up objects and even to retrieve objects.

You can also use a hand held target. They are easy to make, some people use a simple stick with a ball on the end, or with a paddle like bat end etc.... These are great for encouragement direction of movement, as you can teach the horse to follow the target. Great for motivation of moving in circles or from one point to another.

You can also use targets to train stand and stay. Such as on a target mat; or use your rope earthed as a ground tie.

Target touch is great for spook busting and helping horses gain confidence approaching scary objects. It is a **Golden Gift in Crappy Paper** to use positive reinforcement to help you and your horse tackle confidently every day issues that will no longer limit your world. A Golden Gift in Crappy Paper is another FREE resource on my website to enjoy. There are two types of objects ones you can move and ones you can't – I have covered how to tackle these in **Lets Go Walkies**. Another FREE resource for you to enjoy.

If you want to have a go at obstacle challenges or in hand natural trail obstacles target touch is an essential skill to master. A horse will not risk any part of its body or feet until it has investigated things with its nose. For example: For your horse to stand on a podium it will need to check it out fully with its nose before its head will move over a bit further, then it may move more over so nose, head and neck are over the podium before it will risk walking over. You can also help your horse by teaching target touch with its hoof touching the object, click and reward. You can also use target

touch for physio type carrot stretches. Plus teach your horse it is safe for you to inspect and handle parts of their body.

You can also extend positive reinforcement into training tricks, liberty work, in hand work and if you ride ridden activities. Plus every day interactions such as catching, leading, etc..... The only thing you are limited by is your imagination and creativity.

Food Reward = Bad Behaviour?

Many people are troubled by using food as a reward. Many reasons I have heard used against the use of food include it will teach the horse to bite, be pushy and have bad manners. In my experience if you are serious about engaging with an equine by tapping into their language you will have zero problems; if you observe a herd of equines you will see there is a language, social etiquette and manners that are observed in regard to food or resources.



Therefore it is essential when starting training with food you establish these boundaries and manners. If you are not sure how to do this invest in a few horsemanship sessions. Each horse in the herd will behave differently in regard to food with the other herd members, so having a professional on the ground with you can make a huge difference in setting up success for the future. One size will not always fit all. The end result should be you can have food on your person and your horse not mug, pester or nibble you.

There are many different types of positive reinforcements you can use in horsemanship. A positive reinforcement it is something a horse enjoys and finds pleasurable. The type of positive reinforcement used will depend on upon the individual horse, each horse will have personal preferences and place higher value on some types of rewards over others. The type of positive reinforcement will also be shaped by the chosen training method being followed. Each situation will also determine what positive reinforcement is appropriate.

Positive reinforcement has so many benefits, when perfected you get amazing results that wins hands down over forceful methods.

It is very possible to train only using positive reinforcement; however most horsemanship is a mixture of positive and negative reinforcement. We should aim to use very little negative reinforcement in our horsemanship. And when we do be careful, soft and have fantastic timing. Sometimes we have to set boundaries and say no to our horse. Sadly many people are unaware of what a negative reinforcement is, and are unwittingly using negative reinforcements far more than they need to.

Here is an example of a negative reinforcement in the human world that will do no harm but is designed to do good: You get in a car and drive off without fastening your seat belt, the car makes an annoying pinging noise (a negative reinforcement) until you fasten your belt and it rewards you for compliance by immediately going silent (a positive reinforcement).

The parallel for me in horsemanship is to use a very gentle no when setting a boundary with plenty of time for the horse to think. Never force. If we can be as gentle as a fly with excellent timing we are on track. It is food for thought if you think how a horse can feel a fly land on its skin our touch in horsemanship can be that soft. As soon as there is a try reward generously. And just as you can teach a horse a bridge noise = yes, a positive reinforcement, so too can you tag a different bridge noise to = no. Horses are so smart often all you will need to indicate no is with the bridge noise and nothing more.

What can be a Positive Reinforcement? Here are a few to ponder:

- Most of us when we think of positive reinforcement think of clicker training using a food reward. And yes it is a fantastic method to start using positive reinforcement. It uses a token tangible reinforcement a food reward that is linked to a bridge noise that marks a behaviour enabling the horse to accurately understand it has done the right thing. However it isn't the only positive reinforcement you can use.
- Natural positive reinforcements, where the behaviour directly gets the horse something it wants.
- Praise, approval, appreciation, encouragement, acknowledgement and recognition.
- Pleasurable reward such as scratching on sweet spot. Tapping into their social pair bonding activities are very rewarding for horses.
- Training that uses mostly yes and very little if any no. Providing opportunity for the horse to cognitively process, think and learn. Allowing the horse to connect on which actions are rewarding.
- Rewarding a try with an activity that is perceived by the horse as rewarding, enjoyable and fun. What does your horse love?
- Play activities the horse enjoys. Some horses have high play drives and play can be a reward for these horses.



What can be a Negative Reinforcement? Here are a few to ponder:

- Physical or emotional pressure or discomfort. If you consider a horse can feel a fly land on its' skin the only acceptable negative reinforcement using physical pressure should be very soft, light with a timed instant release. Consider how you use touch.
- Equipment acts as an amplifier. So when you use pressure on a rope or reins it should be soft, with care and with an instant well timed release. This ideally needs to be reinforced with another positive reinforcement other than just the release of the pressure. However horses experience terrible negative reinforcement with: Inappropriate pressure and uneducated hands. Even a head collar, or mild bitless bridle or a mild bit in harsh hands can cause considerable discomfort or pain.
- Hard aids, or upping pressure in graduated steps. This includes sometimes reinforced with using a stick or rope waving. Think of the rope if it has a metal clip the horse will be getting that moved near or on its' face. I have seen people waving a rope at a horse side to side and not realise the metal clip is whacking the horse in the face. I encourage people to find an alternative path to achieve the outcome they seek.
- Nagging, no one likes to be nagged, horses learn to switch off from nagging and this is the path that eventually leads to more force.
- Use of a whip to inflict pain. It's how a whip is used that is the issue here. A whip can have a soft touch right through to inflicting terrible abuse.
- Restrictive nosebands, training aids and gadgets. For me there is no short cut in training. The equipment is often used as a quick fix, or to patch up lack of training. Research has shown that restrictive nosebands cause stress to horses. Training aids and gadgets are also another method of fixing a horse into a desired body shape or to restrict certain undesirable behaviours. They have the potential to be uncomfortable, painful and cause distress to a horse.
- Harsh training methods, drilling, forcing, human desires placed higher than the horse, human outcome driven with no regard for the horse, etc....If you take the joy out of the horsemanship for the horse what is in it for the horse?
- With emotional pressure horses often suffer when folk are unable to read their horse's responses. Horses can get confused, worried, anxious, frightened, etc..... Often leading to resistance. This is often labelled as the horse being naughty resulting in punishments.
- Punishments or punitive measures are a negative reinforcement that has no place in ethical horsemanship. Negative reinforcements include: whipping, slapping, increased harsher requests, chased and forced to run, tugging or pulling on the horse, food or water withdrawn, isolation, forcefully restrained in gadgets, worked hard to break spirit, etc....
- Many training approaches use negative reinforcement. Horses naturally use no in their in herd language and herd etiquette. However it is worth examining how a negative training approach sits in relation to your own ethics. Make an effort to note if positive reinforcement is also used, and if it is what percentage of time this happens. Do the horses get time to think and reflect and supported with generous positive reinforcement when a try is offered?
- It is ok to make mistakes. Learning by a safe mistake....because the horse can be rewarded with a positive reinforcement when the horse offers a try in the right direction.

Boundaries and discipline sadly are often applied using inappropriate negative reinforcement. There are plenty of ways of tapping into herd etiquette that are gentle, soft and appropriate. Some of these can be negative reinforcements some positive and if done correctly are appropriate. It is essential to recognize the smallest try and reward with a positive reinforcement.

Watch any horsemanship and there is bound to be a mixture of positive and negative reinforcement going on. Horsemanship is about providing appropriate learning activities, this includes play, tapping into preferred learning styles, giving the horse time to consider options, explore, think and reflect.

Yes it is easy to teach your horse a noise that = YES. This is a wonderful horsemanship tool, as two legs or four we all love positive feedback when learning. Positive reinforcement is one type of application of an extrinsic motivation.

Any horsemanship method is application of an extrinsic motivational approach applied by the human. A human led agenda. What we desire is to ignite self-motivation in the horse (intrinsic motivation). So knowing the difference between a positive and negative reinforcement and what is ethical is essential for success.



We all want our horses to enjoy our shared horsemanship; so knowing how to ignite intrinsic motivation ensures your horse looks forward to your shared activities. When intrinsic motivation surfaces in your horsemanship your horse will engage willingly, offer to you what you have been working on and have a very positive outlook.

When we engage in any training activity, no matter the methods we use with a horse we are using an extrinsic motivation. It could be a positive or a negative reinforcement. And there are good, bad and ugly practices out there. And maybe you already know the difference between a positive and a negative reinforcement, or maybe not?

Motivation is in all species, it is the inner yearning and passion. There are two types of motivation extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Knowing the difference makes a huge difference. Extrinsic motivation is usually determined by someone else who has set goals and uses methods such as positive reinforcement or negative reinforcement. Many of you are already familiar with extrinsic motivation in horsemanship, there is good, bad and ugly to be found. Good use of extrinsic motivation will unlock intrinsic motivation.

Intrinsic motivation does not rely on being influenced by another. It is often referred to as self-motivation. It is a powerful force within us all. Enjoyment and interest that comes from within will fuel action to try out new things and gain skills. Two legs or four, we all have personal self-motivational drivers, desires and goals. This is a powerful driver for learning and achievement. Horses and humans are born with a curiosity and a drive to learn; learning naturally through play and social interactions without the need for reward. Tap into this inner motivational force we make

learning a fun and enjoyable activity. We all want our horses to enjoy our shared horsemanship; tapping into intrinsic motivation ensures your horse looks forward to your shared activities. When intrinsic motivation surfaces in your horsemanship your horse will engage willingly, offer to you what you have been working on and have a very positive outlook.

Types of Motivation Found in Horsemanship

	Positive	
Extrinsic Motivation	Positive reinforcement, training using yes, suggesting, inspiring, praise, rewards, treats, encouragement, appreciation, acknowledgment, recognition, bonus, comfort, etc.....	YES, self-motivated because it is enjoyable, fun, pleasurable. Offering without prompting. Inner confidence, feeling safe with trust and partnership. Positive outlook.
	Negative reinforcement, training using no, discourage, correction, consequences, discomfort, punitive measures, discipline, punishment, etc.....	NO fuelled maybe by fear, anxiety, stress, confusion. Refusal or resistance fuelled by negative past experiences or entrenched thinking. Shut down, disinterest, un-motivated, what's the point etc.....
	Negative	
		Intrinsic Motivation

Most horsemanship is extrinsic, human led, it certainly helps in difficult situations for example: when no or negative responses surface from your horse. To move from a position of no to yes an individual needs to travel through maybe. That is about providing appropriate extrinsic based learning activities, this includes play, giving the horse time to consider options, explore, think and reflect. Many people are not aware of which extrinsic approach they are using. Watch carefully and there is bound to be a mixture of positive and negative reinforcement going on. Knowing which to use in a given situation can make a huge difference to the outcome. There is a huge debate in the area of horsemanship training as to which methods are right and which are wrong. This resource pack does not set out to answer this. For me extrinsic horsemanship is simply communicating yes or no appropriately to the horse using language it understands.



Extrinsic motivation has limitations. If the activity becomes strongly associated with reward, the activity without reward the motivation can decrease. If you use negative reinforcement you can end up nagging your horse or applying more pressure. This can have serious dire consequences in the long run. Some horsemanship only uses extrinsic motivation micromanaging the horse to do what we request. Tactful extrinsic motivation is very useful in ignition of positive intrinsic motivation. The key is how to ignite this powerful inner force with our horse and ourselves. So when a horsemanship session allows a horse the opportunity to give without asking it is essential you recognise and treasure it. In this series I will share with you insights into intrinsic motivation and how to tap into this powerful inner motivational force.



Panning for Gold. The Panning for Gold article appeared in Horsemanship Magazine.

One of my clients had a horse with a very negative outlook. The horse was sceptical, and ready to say no before he has considered the request. No matter how polite or appropriate she is with him. The skills she needs reminded me of my time in Montana when I learnt to pan for gold. You need the right tools and knowledge for the job plus the right environment. Someone teaching you speeds up the process. Gold panning, like any technique cannot just be given or passed on, it is a developmental process to refine and master. Be prepared to put in quality, consistent, persistent, purposeful practice. Standing in an icy mountain stream for hours teaches you industrial patience and endurance is required in testing conditions. Intuition will come into play along with optimism and belief. There is gold to be found in this stream. The smallest try from the horse is like the tiny fleck of gold in our pan. Easy to miss so you must learn to look carefully in the dirt. Treasure each minute try. Appreciate it. Reward it. These tiny flecks of

gold are the ignition. Many expect to put in little effort, the quick fix, and expect to be rewarded with a nugget of gold. Reality is with the accumulative tiny flecks of gold you can make something of value. Horses with years of bad experiences need to accumulate more flecks of gold than others to ignite their inner motivational force.

The road to success is to unlock a powerful inner motivational force from within. If something is fun, enjoyable, pleasurable, rewarding, meaningful, and our efforts are appreciated we are more likely to be driven to want to do more, try harder and repeat the activity. This applies to our horses too. For horsemanship the key is to know: What your horse finds enjoyable, rewarding and fun? In the eyes of your horse what is a meaningful accomplishment? What is in the activity for the horse? Does the horse feel appreciated?

My work before I retired from being a horsemanship practitioner sometimes involved working with clients on the opposite end of this spectrum. The partnership at risk of falling apart with associated problems that need addressing. Many factors can block our powerful inner motivational force here I will touch on a few.



Micromanagement from the human in horsemanship is disastrous. A sure fire way to switch of the powerful force within the horse. Horses learn to shut down, as they know they'll not be listened to. It saps the joy out of activities. Horses eventually quit trying, with the result the human resorts to nagging or more pressure. Some horses will use their intelligence to express unhappiness with protests and resistance surface. Other horses become resigned to their fate and perform what is required with a mechanical sadness and a shut-down spirit.

Then there are horses that have experienced very harsh treatment from humans. They have been bullied, had training using force, pain and fear. Some just refuse to even try anymore as the joy has gone from their spirit and soul. Others learn to say no to the most basic polite reasonable requests. They become sceptics, just waiting to see if you will revert to the old patterns they associate with humans. I have seen horses that have learnt attack is the best form of defence. A few are waiting to pitch a fight.

There are horses that are not understood. They may have complex emotional issues or physical discomfort or pain. Some have huge gaps in their understanding in their training and are confused and then become fretful and fearful. An unlucky number of horses are owned by people who don't seek to make a connection with them. The horse is seen as a vehicle for human pleasure.

My work was about addressing the issues and to ignite the power within. It is vital to teach how important it is for both to engage in fun, rewarding activities that are joyful, bring happiness and relaxation. To ignite passion, requires a horsemanship connection, partnership, learning to listen to understand, using appropriate language of the herd.

This is ignition. As Bruce Springsteen sings you can't start a fire without a spark. A spark is not a short cut to success, it starts the journey. It's how we sustain this inner motivational force that keeps the momentum. You need belief in yourself, your horsemanship and the relationship with your horse. See failures as golden opportunities in works clothing for development, learning and growth. Challenges are opportunity. It requires self-confidence, confidence in your horse and what you are working towards. Striving for what is just out of reach. Great emotional strength, with balanced energy, there will be times this will be tested. Positive, optimistic mind-set produces positive powerful inner dialogue. This is additional to your chosen horsemanship approach. Enhanced positive reinforcement will speed up the process. Tailor the training to the mind-set of the individual; be we have 2 legs or 4 we have a preferred learning style. Tune into your gut feeling, if something doesn't feel right the chances are it isn't. Learn to listen to understand and the more perceptual you will become to your horse. Expand horizons with planned wonderful positive experiences. Briefly I have touched on a powerful internal motivational force has so much to offer in terms of positive feelings: happiness, joy, passion, fun, relaxation, appreciation, etc.....it's what unlocks potential and enables us to live our dreams. It's true gold dust try sprinkling this in all aspects of life. Keep panning for your gold.

Let's Go Walkies

First things first, before we go any further let's discuss safety.

- Basic ground handling skills practiced in the school or field are a must have before venturing out for a walk in hand with your horse. Your horse must stop to the word whoa. Be easy to lead and be mindful of your space so as not to step on you or push you over. You should be able to move your horse's feet in any direction easily, forwards, backwards and sideways. You should be able to read your horse and be able to be appropriate with your horse. So investing in some horsemanship ground skills is a great idea.
- Equipment for the horse – You need a good fitting halter, headcollar or bridle. Ideally the one you have ground worked your horse in. Make sure you have a lead rope that is in good working order. If you are going onto the roads an essential is hi viz for your horse.
- Equipment for you – Non slip, with good grip on the soles sturdy foot wear. Gloves are great for protecting your hands. And a hard hat is wise. If you are going onto the roads an essential is hi viz for you.
- Insurance – If you are venturing out it is essential to have adequate insurance cover, minimum is third party insurance.
- Holding the rope – Folds in the rope not coils. If your horse pulls away and you have a loop or coil of spare rope it will quickly tighten around your fingers. And broken fingers are very painful.
- Have your horse walk beside you. That way you are able to see what is going on. If your horse is behind you, you haven't got eyes in the back of your head.

Taking your horse for walks in hand has many benefits these include:

- It's very natural for in the wild horses to walk and roam miles every day. So by going for a walk together you are doing something nature intended.
- It's an opportunity for you and your horse to have some special one to one time, just chilling and strolling along together. Bonding time.
- It's great for building horse and handler confidence as you will meet things on your travels that may worry or rattle your horse. These are Golden Gifts in Crappy Paper and training opportunities.
- When you come across scary things they will be either; things you can pick up and move or not. Here are some tips to help when you meet the horse eating scary things. If it is a lightweight portable item and it is ok to move it, pick it up and walk away with it. Predators never leave. Your horse will note that your arms have not become detached, no blood is coming out and you are not bothered by the horse eating thingy that you are carrying. Your horse will re-evaluate and go from scared to curious. Once your horse is curious he will want to check out the horse eating thingy, at first very tentatively. When you get to this stage you can stop walking away with the horse eating thingy and go into graded approach and retreat. This is when you allow your horse to sniff it and then take it away. The taking away bit gives your horse time to think, reflect and consider things. You can then approach with the horse eating thingy and let him sniff for longer and then take it away. Reward your horse's bravery. Once your horse is comfortable with his nose on the object if you wanted to carry on your walk simply return the object back to where you found it. For objects you can't move. If it is a safe place to use the scary object for training place yourself between

the object and your horse. It is the safest place to be as scared horses don't tend to run towards what scares them. Keep your energy low and reassure your horse talking gently and slowly. Show your horse it is safe by interacting with the object, if safe stand on it, touch it. Your horse will eventually work out it hasn't eaten you, so it will get curious. At first very tentative and may only close the gap a little to get a better look. Reward this bravery. And maybe that day this is as far as you want to go. Or if you feel comfortable to take the next step it is retreat a bit and give your horse time to think, reflect and relax. Then approach the horse eating thingy again as before taking your time. Then retreat as before. Repeat and repeat taking your time. It takes as long as it takes for a horse to be brave enough to trust your judgement on horse eating things.

- Some horse eating thingy can be replicated in the school before going out. You could practice the skills in helping your horse overcome fears. I regularly help people with these skills so they feel confident before venturing out.
- Going for walks together you and your horse will learn to trust each other.
- It's great exercise for you and your horse. It's proven to be good physically and mentally.
- It establishes ground manners beyond the schooling environment.

