



SARAH CLARK - HELP WITH HORSE BEHAVIOUR

Having grown up in beautiful Epping Forest and enjoyed it's trees and it's tracks from the back of a horse, I'm thrilled to be writing this piece for EFRA riders.

Hacking is one of the best loved past-times in our ancient forest, and has historical links back to the hunting days of old when royalty gallivanted through it's trees. These days we riders have moments of gratitude when we can feel akin to a king or queen, enjoying life's riches from the best seat in the house - astride our noble steed!

This is not true for everyone however. Happy hacking can seem like horrendous hacking if you're facing a particular challenge with your horse. Many more riders than you might imagine feel nervous about hacking out. Here are some questions sent to me by horse owners experiencing very common challenges;

QUESTION 1

"When out hacking in company, my pony gets over excited if not in the lead. If I try to go behind he protests and if I hold him back he shakes his head and may buck. He's verging on dangerous to hack in company, especially if a friend trots or canters off in front. I try to stay in front but it's not always possible, especially as my pony's stride is shorter than some of my friends' longer striding horses. Any tips?"

What To Do

You're certainly not alone facing this challenge. Riders who've had similar experiences can feel stressed about riding in groups, with others who prefer a more 'forward' ride, or have genuine concerns (which can turn into rider fear) about staying on board and staying safe!

Try these steps to help teach your pony a better way.

STEP 1.

When schooling alone (begin in an arena if possible) practice 'half halts' in trot, then in canter. Practice varying your trot stride, and later your canter stride (i.e. 5 short, 5 long, 5 short and so on). He'll become more attentive to your aids by using one or both of these techniques.

STEP 2.

Choose a calming companion and try the same in trot and when comfortable in canter. Try this with your friend behind to begin with. If this goes ok do the same beside each other but ONLY for a few strides.

STEP 3.

When ready, (with your horse happily listening to your aids) ask your friend to take the lead for a few strides only. By keeping things brief and stopping for you to catch up, your pony will get reassurance.

STEP 4.

When you feel confident to GRADUALLY increase the distance that your friend is in front. Always stay within ear shot so you can ask them to stop or drop down a pace if needed. All the time using your leg aids & half halts to keep your horse's focus.

Having this 'continual conversation' will guide and re-assurance your pony. He'll be less inclined to feel HE should make the decisions, and learn it's ok to be behind.

Why it Works

Horses (and when I say this I include ponies) can feel a tinge of nerves if their equine buddy goes on ahead. A change of pace or a growing distance between them can make a horse believe they may get left, even if WE know this is not the case. As horses are fundamentally herd, prey animal, they often FEEL safer in company. For prey animals whose very DNA warns them to be cautious incase of possible predators, it is 'strength in numbers' for horses. That's why their natural reaction if feeling unsure can be to instantly follow or keep up the pace.

Through patient training we can help them build confidence. Remember EVERY horse is an individual with different life experience and learning. So sometimes it can be safer and easier all round to make small adjustments, to facilitate their individual natures. If your understanding friend (and their horse) is happy to stay behind then perhaps you could still take the lead? They may have to do a little slowing down to stay behind but a good friend will be happy to do this for you.



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It's good to remember too that being sensitive, horses can perceive tension in our own bodies. Try relaxation techniques like slow, deep breathing (breathing in for 2 seconds and out for 4 seconds), visualisation techniques (like seeing yourself riding happily and calmly over the horizon!) and even talking or smiling, which forces us to breathe! A calm rider can mean a calmer horse.

Confidence for us (AND for our horses!) comes from repeating something again and again. So practice often in order to help your horse gain their confidence.

QUESTION 2

"Whilst out on a hack, my friend rode up alongside me and my gelding lunged at her mare to bite her on the neck. My friend's horse was unharmed but she said I should have told him off, but I didn't. Should I have punished him? Now I'm concerned it could happen again and (understandably) think that my friends are now cautious to ride out with us. Any ideas?"

What To Do

Most people will automatically punish the biting (or kicking-out) horse as they feel guilty, responsible for any harm and embarrassed by their horse's 'unfriendly' action.

BUT, and it is a big BUT! Your horse was simply being a horse. Allow me to explain...

When moving freely together, horses usually maintain a distance of at least 1 metre from one another. This relates back to their innate fleeing behaviour; when 'in flight' from a predator, they will move together as a herd, maintaining a safe 1m gap so as not to collide at speed!



If your friend's mare got within the 1m, it's likely that your gelding was simply asking her to 'go away' (a natural gesture in fact) to keep the safe space.

It's best practice to keep a healthy 1 metre gap when riding together. This will not only make sense to your horse (as you'll be 'speaking their language') but it will be safer too in case of a surprise spook, in which case there'll be a safe space to move into.

Why it Works

Body language and communication between our sociable horses is often underestimated. There is so much that we miss and still don't understand. There MAY have been a subtle warning gesture from your horse first, easily missed when we are riding!

Our intelligent horses quickly learn that guarding resources at home brings what they want & need! This can be the field gate at dinner time, or access to the best grass, etc. Horses often learn these responses and so when another horse is alongside, may react in the way they normally would.

I too rode too close past a friend's horse on a hack once, it's easily done! Rather than my horse being told off for being close, I received a swift kick to my leg because of my error!

When riding with horses known to express themselves or those who don't know each other so well, always keep a safe space, and happy hacking!

For more in-depth advice or if a particular aspect of your horse's behaviour is of concern you may wish to employ the services of a registered equine behaviourist. Professionally trained in learning theory, equine ethology and behaviour science, they will explain any cause(s) of the unwanted behaviour and offer kind, tailored advice to best suit your horse.



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