

Promoting Learning

by Dr. Marvin Marshall

HOW THE HORSE WHISPERER TRAINS A WILD MUSTANG IN 30 MINUTES A Lesson for Teachers and Parents

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Adults can use a little horse sense.

Monty Roberts is a famous horse trainer--the model for the Robert Redford film, "The Horse Whisperer." The trainer conducts demonstrations of how he trains wild mustangs. Monty grew up in central California and, at age 12, started observing them. He now puts his observations and experiences with horses to work with humans. As with the strategies I share, his approach is one of noncoercion to effect behavior changes and improve relationships. The strategy is in direct contrast to traditional approaches of using coercion.

Here is how the horse whisperer trains a wild mustang within 30 minutes in front of hundreds of people.

He gives instructions to the audience and emphasizes that, during the demonstration, there can be no movement. He admonishes the crowd that there can be no sound of any kind--that if anyone needs to go to the bathroom to go then because everyone must be absolutely still during the training. Monty explains that the horse listens intently, and any sound can spook him.

The wild horse is then let into the arena. The horse gallops around the ring 5, 10, 25 times before realizing he cannot escape and that there is no threat to his safety. The initial reaction by the animal is one of fear. **(Especially with young people, fear turns into hostility because being afraid is unpleasant.)**

The human then puts on a stance of attack. Monty rears up on one foot, knee bent, arms above his head, torso crooked, and grimaces by showing his top and bottom teeth. The horse panics. He gallops around the ring until he again concludes that nothing is going to happen to him.

Monty returns to his usual demeanor.

Then the audience, on cue, simultaneously claps and hollers very loudly. The horse is spooked. He looks for safety.

Horses have the ability to classify. Classification means putting things into categories--things that are alike and different, in this case, safe or unsafe.

In addition, as social animals that live together, horses have a basic desire for belonging. **They, like humans, relate with those with whom they feel safe.**

After the arousal by the crowd and looking for a place of safety, the horse turns to and approaches the human. The trainer softly strokes the horse. The animal sought safety and found it.

Monty starts walking around the ring. The horse follows.

A few minutes later, another man--dressed just like Monty--enters the ring carrying a saddle and blanket.

This man, like Monty, must also be safe.

The horse trusts the man. The saddle is put on. The horse is walked around the ring. The horse is softly stroked. Safety has been reinforced. Monty mounts--and horse and rider continue walking around the ring.

The crowd goes wild!

Trust is really the foundation of any relationship. It assumes that you will be safe, that you will not be harmed.

With people, trust also carries with it an implicit message that the other person has your own best interests in mind. That is why we can accept criticism and even anger from those whom we trust. We know, deep down, that they really mean to help us.

Trust is an interesting quality because, once it is lost, it is hard to recapture. Many a relationship gasped its last breath on the words, "I just do not trust you any more."

To have optimum relationships, all parties must feel a sense of trust, a sense safety. The feeling must be that harm will not be forthcoming--physically, emotionally, or psychologically.

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