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Weaning

Is there a right time for the foal, the mare and for us?

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“You’re a very lucky girl!” This is a phrase I say to my now 21-month-old youngster as I look over the gate into the paddock at night, who is still with her mum and her own life long gelding companion. Little does she know this is not the norm.

Breeding from my mare was a decision I toiled with for a long time. I couldn’t bear the thought of losing her if something went wrong. Then on the other hand I could bring up a second generation positively reinforced horse, who could draw on a lifetime of knowledge from her mum. The pros and cons lists pencilled in my diary are still there as a reminder. I also knew it was now or never due to my mare’s age of 19 at the time, having never had a foal before.

My vet Amy’s positivity that my mare was fit and well, along with a visit from a life-long friend and behaviourist mentor, both convinced me to just go for it. With The Barn Equine’s exemplary support through the AI process, a little life was created in early August. My mare’s training to date definitely helped throughout the AI and foaling processes, such as knowing a simple stand command which became invaluable in my mare accepting the foal feeding.

I am lucky that my youngster is growing steadily and still suckling. She has a stable herd to grow up in, my mare will not breed again and I have time. I intend to let the natural weaning process run its course and I have seen her start to suckle less. I can see first-hand the benefits of the nutritional and emotional support this natural process brings and I would recommend it to anyone preparing to have a foal or go through this crucial life stage.

This handout is reprinted in part by kind permission of Jenni Nellist, a fellow clinical animal behaviourist specialising in equines based in Wales. I hope it serves to provide some key points to take away from a behavioural perspective, based on up to date research, on the benefits of not following traditional weaning practices, so that there is a shift towards more mare and foal centred methods.

When to wean

- Foals have four stages of development before natural weaning: dependent period (first month), socialisation period (2nd and 3rd month), stabilising period (4th to 7th-9th month) and a pre-weaning period (8th-10th month).
- Natural weaning occurs in the months just before the next foal is due, normally when the foal at foot is 9 to 10 months of age. But like everything natural there can be slight variation.
- Where there is not another foal due, or it is a mare's first foal, natural weaning can be a very gradual separation taking place from 2-4 years.

Traditional weaning problems

- Based on current research no artificial weaning has been shown to be stress free, just that there are degrees of how much stress is caused.
- Foals weaned at the traditional time of around 5 to 6 months of age are at significant risk of gastric ulceration. At 6 months of age the foal's stomach lining is nearly, but not quite, ready for a life without milk and within 2 weeks of weaning at this age or earlier, the foal's stomach will most likely ulcer.
- Stress caused by sudden weaning can cause crib biting to begin in those animals genetically predisposed to it.
- It is not only the foal that becomes distressed by acute and early separation. The mare knows it is her job to keep her baby safe from harm. When a mare can't locate her foal, and knows it has not died, she will become distressed and hyper vigilant.

How to wean

Stress caused by weaning can be reduced by:

- Allowing natural weaning to occur.
- Delaying weaning to past 9 months of age and using a progressive method where mare and foal are gradually and safely familiarised with short separations, via an appropriate barrier, through which they can still see, smell

and touch each other, but where suckling is not possible, in the month leading up to weaning.

- By weaning foals into a familiar environment in the company of familiar adult horses.
- Feeding a high fibre diet and adding oil where additional energy is required before, during and after weaning.

Benefits of delaying weaning

- Weaning is 'the' significant event in a horse's development and it is important for the future of that horse to get it right for them. We are not just talking about stopping milk here. We are breaking the most significant attachment bond in a horse's life, before they even get to adolescence, which will not even start until the next spring/summer.
- Attachment bonds provide horses with security which helps them to be confident and better regulate their feelings as they grow up. Horses are adapted to growing up in a family group and naturally leave home by toing and froing for a bit before they finally leave aged between 18 months and 4 years of age to pair up elsewhere, or they remain for life.
- Weaning well sets the foal up to cope with life. Good weaning is an investment in the foal's future.

Questions to ask yourself

- Why am I weaning my foal?
- How soon do I actually have to do it?
- What other adult horses do I have available for my foal's emotional support?
- Does my foal already know them?
- Barring accidents and ill health there is usually a right time for everything.

Further reading and viewing

Nellist, J., 2022. The developmental behaviour of foals and its relevance to husbandry. Part 1: the first 3 months. UK-Vet Equine, 6(2), pp.80-84.

<https://insightsmagazine.co.uk/insights-42-christmas-volume-1> for Jenni's article on weaning foals.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68Ve-tx92K8> for Donna's video from the 2020 APBC Equine Conference.

For equine behavioural advice, along with local hands-on help on mare and foal relationships, contact:

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