

YODER SAYS...

I look to the herd for my understanding of inclusion. Everyone is welcome here and we have rules. Take the hay piles, for example. At lunchtime 10 piles of hay are set out for 8 horses. The humans do this and think they are outsmarting us. Funny.

We respect the order of the herd before settling into steady consuming. It starts with the dominant leaders and works its way through to, well, Karl. The big dogs need to taste every pile, and if they come for your pile you better move. Karl is the newest member of the herd and he is the last to eat. We ask him to wait. We do this with signs that range from subtle to serious: ears pinned, a head toss, a tail swish, or we might even take a run at him. We rarely make contact though, because just the physical signs get the job done. He backs away, stands, and waits. He is wise to the ways of joining a new herd. Eventually he eats (we are not monsters). Respect is key here, so bookmark that thought.

Honestly, it's more often during play that someone gets hurt. A bite or kick that is a bit too robust or, sometimes (because we are not as spry as in our younger years), someone slips and falls. It happens. We get up again. The humans, they fuss over us, bundle us in wraps, blankets, boots, and masks. These dressings are great fodder for play, with a lot of grab, tug, and run

opportunities. That ripping sound a blanket makes when held firmly in your teeth is pretty satisfying.

Talking about play might sound like I am digressing from my topic of inclusion, but it is actually part of what brings us together. We get to know each other through play. We can push each other around a bit and get to know each other's likes and dislikes. We look for open invitations and respect clear boundaries that say stop. It's important stuff for feeling like you belong, and it helps strengthen the relationships within our herd.

In our herd we respect differences. We use our curiosity to help us learn and we don't make assumptions (this is higher level cognitive stuff!). When conflict happens, it is settled swiftly and rarely involves injury. Clear is kind.

I see humans stepping all over themselves trying to get it right. They forget to make time for play and they try to account for every possible outcome. They spend so much time in their heads. It must be exhausting. Actions matter and it is important to take time to observe and ask questions so we can best advocate for ourselves and for others. Sometimes that means asserting your chance at the hay pile and sometimes, like Karl, it means knowing when to wait. At our farm we understand that through respect, connection, and play everyone will get a chance to eat at the hay pile.

~ Best, Yoder



YODER

THE THERAPY PONY, FEATURED COLUMNIST

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