



From haltering and leading, to toenail trimming and shearing, CAMELIDynamics guides alpaca owners to more efficient ways of handling their livestock, resulting in a minimum amount of stress for human and animal alike.

■ Raising Respectful Animals: Preventing Aggression in Alpacas

Alpacas are wonderful – no doubt about it. You get to experience all the fun stuff about barnyard life without the smell, mounds of poop, noise (mostly), and physical danger that often goes along with other species of livestock. It is for just these reasons that it is easy to forget that these little cute and cuddly, 16- to 20-pound babies are barn animals that grow up to weigh 175-250 pounds when they are fully grown and will fight for mates and dominance. As an industry, it is in our best interests to raise pleasant, polite, tractable, interested, confident, alpacas – animals that are a joy to be around and add fun to your life. However, when it comes to shaping behavior, there is a lot more to raising alpacas than putting a male and female in the same pasture!

I think that in order to encourage appropriate behavior in adult male alpacas, we first need to decide what appropriate behavior actually is. Surprisingly, many people haven't thought this one out. The answer to this question is not going to be the same for everyone, so if you are shopping for companion or breeding males, it would be a good idea to compare notes on expectations with the breeder.

Secondly, it is important to understand the nature of your chosen animal companion. Unless we make a conscious effort to make a shift, we humans see everything from a human point of view. When interpreting your alpaca's behavior, it is helpful to think about the world from his point of view. From your point of view, your alpaca baby may be: the object of your affection; the most wonderfully perfect baby in the whole world; a cute, cuddly teddy bear you would love to bring in the house; and an animal in whom you have a heavy emotional and perhaps a significant financial investment.

Who are you to your alpaca? From a baby alpaca's point of view, you may be an interesting, yet potentially dangerous, odd combination of feed bin, playground, and predator. The point is: the way you behave and the kind of interaction you allow determines what your young alpacas will think about you. We humans often allow behavior from baby animals that we cannot and will not tolerate from adults of that same species. This double standard is not fair, creates great confusion in the animal and can lead to real tragedy.

It is completely natural for a young animal to explore its environment. Alpacas are born with different personalities and tendencies. Some are much more precocious than others. An alpaca's behavior is shaped by his natural environment. Historically, alpacas grow up in vast open areas, in the company of other adult alpacas as well as lots of other same-sex and opposite-sex youngsters to play with. His instincts tell him to play, wrestle, bite, and bump.

Many alpaca breeders have very small groups of animals on relatively small plots of land and are unlikely to have groups of babies. A single young male alpaca living with two adult females in a small pasture is going to have some instincts that will be frustrated. The other animals in his environment will not want to play, and in fact, they are probably saying something like "Get away from me, kid, you bother me." Young alpacas that grow up without other alpaca youngsters around will tend to find humans very interesting. You may raise fifteen alpaca babies before you have one who is interested in initiating contact with you, but if and when you do, it is really important to understand the behavior and how to respond appropriately.



There are a number of circumstances that may create overly-interested, male youngsters. You are more likely to meet one if:

- you have a small herd group
- your baby does not have another male baby to play with
- you have a small property
- you have small children that spend large amounts of time in the barn
- you have to bottle feed, supplement, or medically treat a young baby for some reason.

If you have a young male that is interacting with you, it is very important for you to be clear about the messages you send back.

A young alpaca that rubs, leans, stands closely, or walks right up and puts his nose in your face or crotch and fails to yield space when you move toward him are often referred to as “friendly.” In my opinion, these behaviors are not friendly in our sense of the word. Your alpaca is exploring his environment and checking out the boundaries of what is allowed. He is asking: What are you? Will you play with me? Are you to be respected? What am I allowed to do with you and to you? How strong are you? Can I control you? Is it okay to

climb on you like a hill? Can I eat you like grass? Will you shock me like that funny wire stuff?

The conventional wisdom of ignoring a youngster until it is time to train him, is, in my experience not the answer. Like it or not, you are training your alpaca all the time, so is everyone else who comes in contact with him. If you do nothing to discourage this seemingly “friendly” behavior and properly answer the questions the behavior represents, it may grow into behavior that is a problem later on. These early questions signal that it is time for you to set clear boundaries.

Let’s look at a specific situation. Your alpaca baby is running up to you as soon as you appear in the field, bounces to a stop, and picks at whatever is in your pocket as you walk around the barnyard. At 30 pounds, this behavior is cute. Everyone that visits loves this little guy, pets him, hand feeds him, and in general thinks he is the cutest alpaca baby in the world. This little guy wants to play and wrestle and do all the things alpacas do with each other. Unless you correct this impression, why wouldn’t he assume that it is okay to continue on in the same vein – chest butting, leg biting, spitting, and other behaviors normally reserved for other alpacas.

Insist that alpacas approach and greet you respectfully. I consider a foot and a half around me from head to toe my personal space.

There is nothing wrong with a young alpaca soliciting a nose greeting with neck and nose extended, and then waiting politely for you to lean forward to participate in the greeting.

It is truly not a big deal to stop this behavior before it gets going. Be aware of and protect your personal space. Insist that alpacas approach and greet you respectfully. I consider a foot and a half around me from head to toe my personal space. A human need only stop an alpaca from barging into this space; we do not need to chase him away. I use my flat hand and say firmly STAY BACK. Stay back is a much better command than NO. “No” is usually said with anger. It is also dreadfully over used and non-specific. We use “No” for everything. How is an alpaca supposed to figure out what NO means when it seems to mean ten different things? In my opinion, it would be a big mistake (and a very common one) to push this young alpaca away physically when he makes contact. This indicates to the alpaca you are going to participate in a physical interaction just like another alpaca male would do. From your alpaca’s point of view, it is *GAME ON*. I would also discourage yelling as a correction. Yelling gets everybody’s blood going, escalates the situation, and indicates that you are afraid.

I don’t want to create the impression that you need to whack a little alpaca baby that walks up with his neck and nose extended for a greeting. There is certainly nothing wrong with a young alpaca soliciting a nose greeting with neck and nose extended, and then waiting politely for you to lean forward to participate in the greeting. However, sticking his nose in your face or other body part any time he feels like it is crossing the line of allowable behavior.

If you are currently dealing with a young alpaca that has headed down this road and is already at the point of rubbing and pushing, you may need more than your hand to back these little guys up. A Frisbee is a good tool. The large surface area makes it easy to connect with the nose, but a Frisbee is light enough that it won’t actually hurt. The idea is to startle the alpaca out of your personal space just as if you had some sort of force field around you. I have a special Frisbee that Camelidynamics practitioner Tracy Annis of Wimberly, Texas invented. It is a Frisbee with



Photos courtesy of Marty Bennett



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a retractable key fob attached with a zip tie. You can put one of these on your belt every time you enter the pasture and it is always handy! Consistent correction is crucial, so you must carry this tool with you at all times until the youngster gets the idea. Remember, when you use the Frisbee, there should be NO follow-through. Use a very short, staccato bop on the nose, along with a firm "STAY BACK."

It is important that every human in your young alpaca's life behave consistently. If you have children, keep them away from this young alpaca until he understands how to behave. Don't expect farm visitors to train your alpaca for you. If you have farm visitors, put this guy on a halter, or if he is not halter-trained, put him away. It is not a bad idea to geld this kind of male alpaca. Gelding uncomplicates the problem, but doesn't solve it. You must still learn to behave differently and set limits.

Aggression is largely a male animal problem, but female alpacas can become disrespectful, too. Female alpacas that are raised with no boundaries turn into spoiled brats and resist doing anything they don't want to do. When they hit puberty, they become difficult to halter, lead, and manage. These females will often reject a male, even when they are not pregnant, and may grow up to be lousy mothers. My policy is to treat male and female babies no differently. I insist on respectful behavior from both sexes.

Babies do best if they have other babies to play with. With other babies around, the whole issue of inappropriate contact becomes a non-issue. If you

are going to have a single baby, think about forming a baby alpaca play-group. Contact other breeders who are going to have single babies. Make arrangements to board your female and baby at their farm for a month or two and then move both mothers and babies to your place for two months. The hassle is well worth it and you will both benefit from the enjoyment of watching the babies play together.

Beware of overcompensation – the old "I-will-show-this-animal-who's-boss" attitude. I prefer to think of myself as the teacher, rather than the boss. If you prefer the boss analogy, how about being an enlightened boss of the new millennium instead of the 1940's. Good managers, teachers, and bosses know that coming on like Attila the Hun creates major rebellion.

Many trainers use the word dominance to describe how to behave around an animal. The issue of dominance is a tricky one. Humans are very different from animals and they know it. If we do nothing to change their mind, they see us as very powerful. We control everything about an alpaca's environment, no question. I don't think it is a good idea to participate in dominance contests with animals. Assume you are in charge, don't feel like you have to prove it! By all means, don't give away your place of preeminence by encouraging animals to behave disrespectfully towards you. Setting consistent limits, being respectful of the needs of your alpacas, and being careful about asking too much too soon are all important ways to avoid confrontation.

Additionally, using training methods that do not rely on force or intimidation are important when training alpacas, particularly the ones that are testing the water. Tying an alpaca and forcing him to submit to unwelcome handling, dragging him to teach him to lead, physically holding him to put a halter on, or to pick up his feet will all provoke the young animal that has decided to be physical with humans.

Enjoy your young alpacas. It is fine to engage in mutual greetings such as nose sniffing. Begin working with your alpacas as youngsters. Teach your alpacas that it is safe to allow you to handle their faces, their legs and their bodies. Building a creep feeder will encourage your babies to become comfortable with your presence as you replenish their special food and walk closely among them. Work with your older females so they will transmit their confidence in you to each of their babies. Remember to pay attention to your young alpacas

as they ask questions. Set limits right away and you will be blessed with confident as well as polite and respectful animals.

For over twenty-five years, Marty has traveled the world, devoting her professional life to the well-being of camelids and the education of their owners. Marty's ground-breaking work with Linda Tellington-Jones (creator of the TTEAM animal handling concept), combined with the principals of balance and leverage, make "Camelidynamics" the world's most popular and enduring training/handling system for camelids. Her clinics, books, and videos have helped thousands of camelid owners more fully understand, appreciate, and enjoy this magical animal. Marty, her husband Brad, and their family of dogs, cats, camelids, and chickens live in Bend, Oregon, where they run the Camelidynamics Training Center. She can be reached at marty@camelidynamics.com.

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