

Creating Calm, Cool Collected Cooperative Camelids

Camelids are the best! You get to experience all the fun stuff about barnyard life without the smell, mounds of poop, noise, and physical danger that often goes along with other species of livestock. Because llamas and alpacas are so “civilized” we forget that these little cute cuddly fifteen-thirty pound babies are barn animals not house pets. Animals that will grow up to be adult llamas or alpacas that weigh in at up to 150-400 pounds respectively. It is in our best interest to raise camelids that are pleasant, polite, tractable, interested, and confident. For animals living in a human world obedience and manners mean more freedom, not less. When animals are well behaved and understand the limits of appropriate behavior everybody wins.

Before I get in to the nuts and bolts of this issue- just a note on boys and girls and the differences between the two. This article is intended as advice for raising male llamas and alpacas. It is true that most behavioral problems associated with inappropriate physical contact involve males. However, I think it is best to teach respectful cooperative behavior from camelids of both sexes. It may be wise to be a bit more vigilant with young

males but for the most part the advice in this article applies to both males and females.

In order to encourage appropriate behavior in adult male camelids we first need to decide what appropriate behavior actually is. Surprisingly many people haven't thought this one out. If you don't know what it is you want, you are probably not going to get it— at least on a consistent basis.

In general baby llamas and alpacas will approach humans from a respectful distance (2-3 feet) they may follow a human around for a bit, again at a respectful distance but generally retreat when the human turns and directly approaches. Baby llamas and alpacas that are trusting and secure will go about their business as humans move around in the barn and barnyard and don't necessarily run away at the sight of human. On the other hand the average baby won't run over with his tail over his back to snuggle, rub and nibble on humans. Babies usually think humans are of interest when they first appear but most don't find humans all consuming and will wander off within a few minutes

Most of us don't bring llamas and alpacas into our lives only to watch them through binoculars. We are interested in having a relationship with our animals. As you seek to develop this relationship particularly if you are

going to raise young animals and shape their personalities it is important to understand the nature of your chosen animal.

Unless we make a conscious effort to make a shift we humans see everything from a human point of view. When interpreting camelid behavior, it is helpful to think about the world from their point of view. From your point of view your baby llama or alpaca may be: the object of your affection, the most wonderful perfect baby the world, a cute cuddly teddy bear and an animal in whom you have a heavy emotional and perhaps a significant financial investment. Who are you to your camelid? From his point of view you may be an interesting, 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 how your young llamas and alpacas will think about you and more importantly how they will behave in your presence. We humans often allow behavior from baby animals of many species —dogs and cats included —that we cannot and will not tolerate from adults of that same species, this double standard is not only unfair, it creates great confusion.

It is completely natural for a young animal to explore his environment. Each llama and alpaca baby is born with a basic nature and

personality all his own. Some are much more precocious than others. It is worth remembering that a camelid's innate behavior is shaped by the environment in which his ancestors evolved. In South America young camelids are usually born at the same time of year and grow up with many other same-sex and other-sex youngsters to play with. Based on my years of observation it is obvious that males and females babies play differently and act differently almost from the time they hit the ground. Boys are much more physical. When, in his natural environment, the urge hits to play, wrestle, bite, and bump, there are plenty of other male youngsters around with which to engage in this natural behavior.

In the United States many breeders of both llamas and alpacas have much smaller groups of breeding animals with babies born through out the year and are unlikely to have groups of same age same sex babies. A single young male living with two adult females in a small pasture is going to have some instincts that will be frustrated. Adult animals in his environment (usually females) will not want to play and in fact they are probably saying something like "Get away from me kid you bother me." A young alpaca or llama that grows up without other youngsters around will tend to find "two-leggeds" much more interesting than he would if he had

five other babies around to play with. It would be a mistake to think of this interest as “love,” you are basically a last resort. A very small percentage of baby llamas and alpacas perhaps 5% are born with a consuming interest in humans regardless of the circumstances of their birth a number of factors may help to create overly interested male youngsters. You are more likely to meet or create 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.

It doesn't matter if your baby was born inappropriately interested in humans or circumstances have helped to create him, 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.

Young llama and alpaca babies that rub, lean on you, stand closely to you, walk right up and put their nose in your face or crotch and a fail to yield

space when you move toward them are often referred to as friendly. In my opinion these behaviors are not friendly in our sense of the word. This baby animal is exploring his environment and checking out the boundaries of what is allowed. With his behavior your young camelid is asking you very important questions... What are you? Will you play with me? Are you to be respected? What am allowed to do with 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 youngsters until it is time to train them at 4-6 months, is, in my experience, not the answer. Like it or not you are training your animals every second you are in their presence—unfortunately so is every one else who comes in contact with them. If you do nothing to discourage this seemingly “friendly” behavior, 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. Bring these babies into a catch pen with their mothers right away and begin to work with them using balancing techniques (CAMELIDynamics techniques are great for this). You may be surprised to find that while these kinds of animals seem very confident in a field they have a very difficult time being contained in a small pen. Their

confidence evaporates when they can't get away. By bringing these youngsters into a pen and leading the dance of catching and haltering you will take charge and teach them to accept your direction. You are changing their assumption that they are free to come and go at will and do whatever they like. It is VERY important with these kinds of animals that you take care NOT to use force. The standard approach of cornering, grabbing and holding will make the situation worse. You will be saying with your behavior that getting into a physical contest with you is appropriate--in fact you are starting it! Most babies wouldn't think of fighting back and will submit. The kind of baby that is eager to touch you and be near you won't feel that way.

Lets look at a specific situation. Your camelid baby runs up to you as soon as you appear in the field, bounces to a stop and picks at what ever 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 baby in the world. This little guy wants to play and wrestle and do all the things baby boy camelids do with each other— with humans. 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

animals. I don't want to create the impression that you need to discourage interactions with a baby llama or alpaca that walks up politely with his neck and nose extended for a greeting. There is certainly nothing wrong with a young camelid soliciting a nose greeting with neck and nose extended and then waiting politely for you to lean forward to participate in the greeting. Human beings that know and like each other hug and sometimes kiss when they meet. This is a greeting. Being grabbed by a total stranger on the street is assault. A male camelid that runs up to strangers and puts his nose in their face is not engaging in behavior we want to reinforce. It is not a big deal to stop this behavior before it gets going, but you must recognize the behavior that is going to become a problem and discourage it.

Take care of your personal space. Insist that baby llamas and alpacas that approach and greet you without getting too close or making bodily contact. I consider 12-18 inches around me front and back from head to toe is my personal space. A human need only stop an animal from barging into this space; we do not need to chase him away. Most of the time you don't have to actively discourage the behavior you simply need to STOP encouraging it. The most effective approach is to be as uninteresting as you can possible be don't interact at all when the baby approaches, if he

follows you stop be completely still like a post. The baby will wander off to interact with something more interesting. With an older baby that you have previously encouraged you might try tossing something like alfalfa hay or pellets AWAY from you. In my opinion it would be a big mistake (and a very common one) to push this young guy away when he approaches. This indicates you are going to participate in a physical contest as would another camelid male. This is not the impression you want to convey, more appropriately the message is-- I am not available for physical interactions of any sort. I would also discourage yelling as a correction. Yelling gets every bodies blood up, escalates the situation and indicates that you are afraid.

If you are currently dealing with a young llama or alpaca who is headed down this road and is already at the point of rubbing and pushing, It is important that every human in this young camelid's life behave consistently. If you have children, keep them away from him until he is understands how to behave. Don't expect farm visitors to train your animal's for you, if you have farm visitors put this guy on a halter, or if he is not halter trained put him away. If the behavior is pretty entrenched, it is not a bad idea to geld him. Gelding makes the the problem less

complicated but doesn't solve it. You must still learn to behave differently and set limits.

Babies do best if they have other babies to play with. Most of the time if there are other babies available the whole issue of inappropriate contact becomes a non-issue. If you are going to have a single baby, think about forming a baby play group. Contact other breeders that 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 is the boss attitude. In my role as animal trainer I prefer to think of myself as the teacher rather than the boss. If you prefer the boss analogy, how about being a boss of the new millennium instead of the 40's. Enlightened managers, teachers and bosses know that backing your subordinates into a corner creates difficulties. Many trainers use the word dominance to describe how to behave around an animal. The issue of dominance is a tricky one. Humans come into an animal's life as being entirely different from them, all powerful. We control everything about an animal's

environment— no question. I don't think it is a good idea to participate in physical dominance contests with animals. Assume you are in charge, don't feel like you have to prove it, and by all means don't give away your place of preeminence by getting into physical contests with them.

Setting consistent limits and being careful about asking too much too soon are all good ways of avoiding confrontation. Using training methods that do not rely on force or intimidation are important when training camelids, particularly the ones that are testing the water. Tying a llama or alpaca and forcing him to submit to excessive grooming, 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 males, squat down and invite them to sniff you. Begin working with them as youngsters in a catch pen. Teach them that it is safe to allow you to handle their faces, their legs and their bodies. Build a creep feeder that will encourage your babies to become comfortable with your presence. Work with your older females so that they will transmit their confidence in you to each new baby. Remember to pay attention to your

young males as they ask questions, set limits right away and you will be blessed with confident as well as polite and respectful boys.