

# Dear Debbie...

## Your questions answered by Debbie Reilly

**“My youngster has started to bite. When my foal was born, I thought it was sweet when he nibbled me and nuzzled for titbits. He is now seven-months-old and his teeth are getting bigger, and he has started to nip people and become aggressive. He is a clever young horse, but I’m worried that if I don’t deal with this now it will escalate. Please help!”**

Well, in a nutshell it appears that you have already identified the underlying cause of your problem -your initial lack of boundaries for special respect and ‘titbits’. You are also quite right that this needs to be dealt with ASAP, or things can escalate rapidly. Particularly if people start to react negatively, either by hitting out or backing off, as this can quickly lead to ‘defensive aggression’ and/or a game of strength and speed, and we all know the horse is going to win that one! The good news is that with careful management and consistent handling, this kind of behaviour can be totally transformed within a matter of weeks, possibly days.

The first step would be to stop hand feeding any titbits. The same goes for anyone else who is around or handling your youngster. Unfortunately the need to ‘give presents’, usually in the form of hand fed titbits, is purely a human condition and is generally totally misread by the horse. As a predator, it is in our human nature to have to work for and earn our food, but for prey animals like horses, they are by nature surrounded by food. As Monty Roberts likes to say, “Have you ever seen a blade of grass run away from a horse?” Therefore, horses do not instinctively see food as a reward.

The confusion comes from the fact that we restrict and control their food intake, making horses wait and only offering the tasty stuff from time to time. This can lead to the misconception that horses will do things for food - “My horse is as good as gold to catch or to load, as long as I have a carrot or a bucket of nuts!” This may be fine for some and many horses don’t necessarily become biters, but the reality is that I would like my horses to do these things for their own sake, rather than only if there is food around.

The second step is to implement clear boundaries of special respect. This should be done calmly but firmly, keeping in mind that getting angry, aggressive or causing any pain will only increase his defensive behaviour. Use clear body language to move your youngster out of your space as you step into the stable. Then work to move around him with a mutual respect for space, with smooth, clear and deliberate movements.

At this stage, keep your arms and hands away from his head and mouth as much as possible, to avoid temptation, and quietly but firmly and consistently, discourage any attempt to put his mouth or nose on you at all. Always remain calm and consistent and leave things on a positive note to make real lasting changes.

If you find you are nervous and occasionally backing away from him when he goes to bite, don’t be afraid to get help at this crucial stage. There are many different and effective methods to deal with biting. In situations like this, keep to the points above and remember the pointers below, and they should all set you on the right track.

- Concentrate on the quality, not quantity of time spent
- Ensure that you make it as easy as possible for him to do the right thing
- Remember that he is learning every time you are with him

One final point to make is the importance of ensuring your youngster is well socialised with other horses over the coming months and years. This is vital as he grows, as it will allow him to ‘play’, to develop his strength and speed, to test boundaries and to learn about special respect from his own kind, making it much easier for him and us in the long run. n



Keep sessions short and to the point



Mutual spatial respect is key to safe handling