

# Social play and its initiation in an established group of young domestic horses



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# Introduction

- ◆ Literature presents many inconsistencies in the explanation of play behaviour
- ◆ Few scientific studies focus on equine social play
- ◆ The dynamics of social communication may be observed effectively in pairs or small groups of animals
- ◆ Further knowledge of equine social play communications may be of benefit to equine welfare and performance

# Aim

To describe and quantify the involvement in social play and its initiation within an established group of young horses

# Materials and Methods

- ◆ 8 horses, between 18 and 33 months
- ◆ Group established for over 9 months
- ◆ Single 8 acre pasture enclosure
  - ◆ Minimal human interference, no additional food
- ◆ 100 hours of direct continuous behaviour sampling
  - ◆ 2 hour periods between 06.30 and 08.30 hours
- ◆ Social play behaviours were recorded using McDonnell and Poulin's ethogram (2002)

# Results

- ◆ A mean frequency of 1.34 social play bouts per hour was observed
- ◆ Individuals participated in the initiation of between 3.0 and 50.7% of social play bouts
  - ◆ All horses were responsible for individual initiation of social play bouts
  - ◆ Horses displayed significant inter-individual differences
- ◆ The majority of group social play bouts were initiated by 3 horses

# Conclusions

1. Social play is a regular part of the behavioural repertoire of young horses
2. The majority of play bouts were initiated by a single individual
3. Social play initiation was not represented equally among all individuals
4. Young horses kept in isolation will lack the opportunity to express these behaviours and welfare may be reduced