



**ESI  
NEWS**

*Monthly  
Newsletter*

**MARCH | 2026**

# **A SENSE OF CONNECTION**

*By Manuela McLean*

**Does your horse know your body language or words?**

When a horse responds to your visual and verbal cues, it feels as he connects with you on a deeper level, because he becomes attentive with his eyes and ears and relaxed in his body and neck. It's fun for the handler and enriching for the horse to learn new things, so this article is about training some vocal and postural cues to create the feeling of connection with your horse.

## The signs to look for are: -

- The flick an **ear** forward or back acknowledging your request.
- Soft **eyes** (no wrinkles above his eyelids and no white sclera visible, unless the horse has these eyes).
- Soft **nostrils** (no wrinkles at the side) that gently puff in the rhythm of the gait or speed you are doing
- Steady **breathing**, the ribcage in front of his hindquarters moving smoothly in and out. The horse's lungs are huge in a horse and go a long way back in their ribcages.



## How does a horse learn visual and verbal cues?

The process in which a horse learns our subtle cues of voice or posture is called Classical Conditioning, where, an otherwise benign cue of a word or movement becomes linked to an already known aid. To effectively train this, the benign cue must come just prior to the already learned aid.

For example, the handler says “walk on” and then immediately applies a leading aid. The horse soon learns that the leading aid will follow the verbal

cue alone. For this to be effective, the cue must be unique (not something you use in general chatter) and consistent – it must always sound or look the same.

Classical conditioning is really the icing on the cake in training, as we can influence the horse's behaviour with no pressure at all. However, the cues are easily detrained because they are not intrinsically motivating, so revisiting your operant aids often is often necessary.

## **What can a horse hear?**

Horses have incredible hearing with a big range in high frequencies. Their ears are very mobile so they can hear in every direction. They can usually hear us, but we are chatterboxes so we need to make our verbal commands clear and identifiable for them, so each command is a set of different syllables in different tones.

So, when using voice cues such as “walk on” pronounce the word “walk” in a slightly higher tone for attention and the “on” a slightly lower tone for calmness. By the time you have said these two words the horse should be starting to walk.

Low pitched sounds e.g. “good boy” in a low soothing tone has been shown to have calming effects. Use these words or others with a reward (positive

reinforcement) so they become positive to the horse. You must pay your horse with a scratch or treat each time you say “good boy” for the words to become associated with the required response and for it to be effective, so make it sound more unique than your usual chatter. Scratches are ideally at the wither, but the forehead and neck can also be good places to scratch – find the place your horse enjoys by spending time scratching,

## **What and where can a horse see?**

Imagine wearing a pair of glasses with the bottom and top blacked out with tape. This is sort of how a horse sees. He has a limited range of clear vision unless he changes the angle of his head either up and down. He can however, see a 350 degree field of vision.

To see in the distance, he must raise his head, this is particularly important for him to see a jump and be able to assess it.



If his head is low or he is behind the vertical he cannot see the jump clearly until he is almost on it and then may refuse because it surprises him.

To see low down, he must lower his head. You will see this when they first jump a drop or investigate and sniff a novel object.



He cannot see easily visual signals under his neck, but can do when they are to the side. So, when using arm signals while leading it is important he can see them clearly at the side of his head. This will effectively teach him the visual signals. Each signal must be easily differentiated, visible and must only cue one response.

Horses communicate with each other primarily with visual cues e.g. ears back usually precedes biting, charging or kicking. Horses learn these cues early in their lives and can avoid being bitten or kicked if they move away as soon as the other horse's ears go back.

## Body posture



Horses can also read our body postures and movements as well as hear the speed of our steps. We are all a bit different in our energy so if your horse has high energy, then make your body language low, think of being round shouldered. But if your horse is less reactive then up your own energy and stand straighter.

Calm, slow steps are great for relaxation (the 'creepy crawly walk') and once the horse is relaxed then you can make him more active with quicker steps and create more of a 'medium walk'.

## Training voice, body and visual signals

Each cue must be different for each response. Remember, a cue (classical conditioning) must always precede an aid (a pressure) of some description whether it be a lead aid or a touch of a whip/schooling stick. The pressure motivates the horse to respond. Most importantly is that immediately after the horse responds, the cue and/or the pressure are stopped/released. Remember the release trains the response.

There are many different cues (postural and vocal) you can teach your horse. The cues I describe in

the following exercises are just a suggestion – you might use something different, but ensure it is unique and clear to the horse.

The pressure signals need to be consistent, and pre-trained so the response occurs from a light touch of a lead or whip/schooling stick for the horse before you add your cues.

## **STEP BACK**

Stand still 2m away from your horse directly in front and facing him, he should be “parked”, prior to asking him to back. Have your lead rope and whip/stick in your right hand.

Aim for your horse to step back 1-2 steps from cues.

**Verbal cue** - *“back, back”*

**Visual cue** - *use one or both hands up waving them at him*

**Body cue** - *lean forward and take 1 step forward towards him.*

These should all occur more or less at the same time, multiple signals at a time have a better effect than individually. When multiple signals together produce a response, this is actually called compound conditioning, similar to classical conditioning but

multiple cues that are linked to have meaning. Compound conditioning is learned in the same way as classical conditioning.

**Aid** – use a whip or schooling stick to tap his chest to back or a rope movement (up and down) so as to apply pressure to the noseband of the headcollar.

The aid only needs to be used if there is no response to the cues within 1-2 seconds maximum.

Do remember to shape the response gradually so reward 1-2 steps back initially before adding multiple steps. If using food then place the food in their mouth while they are backing for the backing response to be rewarded.

Look for signs the response is beginning to happen:

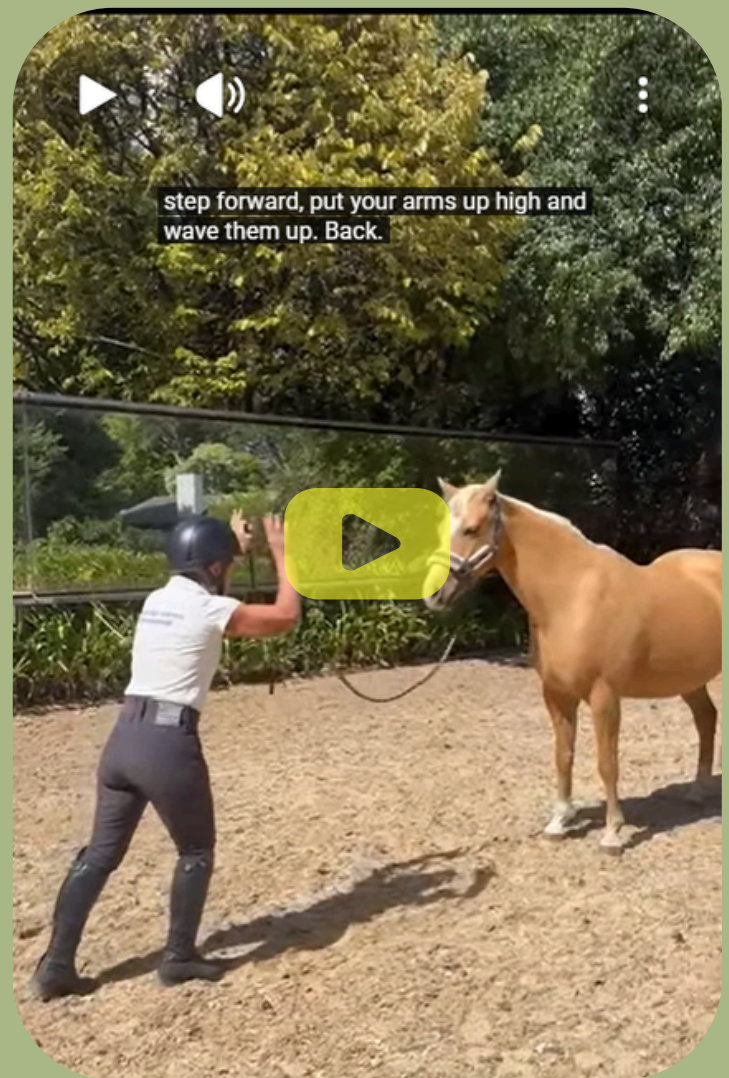
- *The pectoral muscles clench*
- *The horse begins to incline backwards*
- *The horse raises his head to step back*
- *Keep the cues on until the horse steps back*

As soon as the horse responds by stepping back to the cues (hands up waving, verbal cue) they need to be immediately removed to a neutral position. However, the trainer can continue to walk toward the horse and if desired the cues and aid can be repeated to achieve more steps backward.

Repeat the cues and aid (if no response to the cue) about every 3-5 seconds for optimal learning until the response occurs from your cue.

As the cue produces the response, say "good boy" and reward him profusely with lots of scratching or treat.

Watch video on  
'STEP BACK'



## COME FORWARD

Stand still 2m away from your horse directly in front and facing him, he should be "parked", prior to asking him to come. Have your lead rope in your right hand. Aim for your horse to walk toward you from cues

**Verbal cue** - "come"

**Visual cue** - use an arm movement to come, or slap your thigh

**Body cue** - lean backwards and take a step back

**Aid** - apply pressure on the lead rope as a lead aid

*The moment the horse steps forward walk backward facing him and release all cues and pressure.*

Be careful where you lead and don't crash into anything, my favourite seems to be the mounting block!!

Look for signs the response is beginning to happen:

- The horse inclines his neck slightly forward
- The horse begins to lift a foreleg
- The horse walks
- Keep the cues on until your horse walks all 4 legs
- He will end up following you as you walk backwards

- **Remember to reward by using your reward words** (e.g. "good boy"), going to him and give him a scratch/treat.

Watch video on 'come forward'



# STOP OR STAND

Train this after he has come to you. You are walking backward (6-8 steps) and facing him. If he comes to you but goes off to the side or is inattentive ask him to stop immediately and repeat.

Aim that your horse stops from your cues

**Verbal cue** – “and stand”

**Visual cue** – both hands up

**Body cue** – stop moving, stand tall and one or both hands up

**Aid** – use your lead up and down (side to side also works) until he stops.

The moment he halts all 4 legs, stop all cues and aids and go to him to reward him.

Look for signs the response is beginning to happen:-

- He raises his head to stop, just slightly in the end
- He begins to stop his forelegs square
- He stops all 4 legs
- Keep the cues on until all 4 legs have stopped.
- He should stand still while you approach to scratch, if not don't fuss too much, he will stand after a few repetitions.

• Watch video  
putting it all  
together.

Forward, stop  
and back



## CONNECTING

Your horse will learn these cues quite quickly and the outcomes are numerous:

- His eyes will go soft
- His ears will flick forward or back when you use your cues
- He will become attentive and focussed on you
- He might start to lick and chew
- He will sigh or snort deeply
- He will take deep breaths (look near his flanks to watch his ribcage move)
- He will become relaxed
- He will enjoy his scratching, his nose will wiggle

Enjoy your training and connection with your horse.

**Manu**