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Effect of density and relative aggressiveness on agonistic and affiliative interactions in a newly formed group of horses

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1 **Effect of density and relative aggressiveness on agonistic and affiliative** 2 **interactions in a newly formed group of horses**

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7 **Abstract**

8 Group housing provides horses with social contact, a lack of which is associated with health and
9 behavior problems. Despite the benefits of group housing for horses, horse owners are concerned
10 about aggression and resulting injuries. This study focused on agonistic and affiliative interactions in
11 a focal group of (originally) 12 horses with short and longer term changes in composition, variation in
12 available area and presence of peri-parturient mares. Age and density had no significant effect on
13 agonistic or affiliative behavior. However, when agonistic behavior was considered within three
14 subcategories, density did have a significant positive effect on contact and threat aggression, but not
15 on passive aggression (avoid and displace). When analyzing only the days without the most
16 aggressive horse, age and density had a positive effect on agonistic interactions, and density had a
17 negative effect on affiliative interactions. Days with and without the most aggressive horse showed
18 no significant overall differences in either category of social interactions. Agonistic and affiliative
19 interactions were not significantly correlated, but agonistic interactions had a significant linear and
20 quadratic effect on affiliative interactions. Relative level of aggressiveness was used instead of a
21 formal measure of dominance rank as aggression level is the main issue for horse owners. Comparing
22 interactions with more and less aggressive horses, there was no overall effect for affiliative
23 interactions. However, overall, horses in the focal group were on average 3.7 times more aggressive
24 towards less aggressive horses, compared to more aggressive horses. Relationships between
25 agonistic and affiliative interactions, density, age and the role of relative aggressiveness are
26 complicated and more research is needed to clarify the most relevant factors under particular sets of
27 circumstances and their contribution to intraspecific aggression in various contexts.

28 **Keywords:** Horse; group housing; social behavior; agonistic interactions; affiliative interactions

29

30 **Introduction**

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