

# Handling Your New Mule Baby

By Marlene Malcher

[www.mammothmules.com](http://www.mammothmules.com)

I believe in early handling of donkey, mule or horse foals. It is the easiest stage of life to desensitize the animal to outside stimuli and sensitize them to others. Mule babies rarely have any fear of people at birth, whereas horse foals usually exhibit a more instinctive fear of humans. Handling them soon after birth aids in bonding them to you and all humans.

Proper handling should include picking up all their feet, one at a time, and tapping them on the bottom to simulate trimming and possible shoeing later on in life. Done properly, that is, releasing the foot once the foal is relaxed with the touch, will desensitize that foot for future handling, especially when it's repeated several times. On the other hand if you release the foot when the foal is still struggling, you will only teach the animal to be even more resistant next time. Of course at no time should you use force to hurt the animal. If the foal is thrashing with the foot, hold on as lightly as you can without losing it, and move with the foot until the foal realizes it doesn't hurt and quits resisting. Once he quits struggling, then that is the time to release the foot. This will desensitize the animal to having his feet handled and is the same approach to use on handling the rest of his body, including his face, ears, girth area, under the tail, etc. Release, or quit the stimulation when they have accepted it and are relaxed with it. If you quit too soon you will teach them the wrong thing. Use common sense in all instances and do not turn this into a muscle match! Your role is that of a teacher, leader and protector of the animal so don't jeopardize that by causing that baby unnecessary pain.

If you are unable to handle your baby shortly after birth, don't think you can't do anything if the foal is several hours, or days old. Remember this animal is going to need this handling at some time in his life and the sooner the better if you want to keep him out of the killer market. And for those of you who may acquire an animal that has never been handled, it can still be done but will require a lot more skill and patience. That's why I think it is such a shame when breeders don't handle their stock as youngsters. The average owner doesn't have the skill or knowledge to take an unhandled mule and make anything out of him and so the mule is deemed as untrainable.

Mules, unlike horses, are best to teach to tie before teaching to lead. *Never use this order on a horse foal.* Mule foals, when tied, rarely panic and become frantic like a horse foal would. Still, never tie up a baby mule and leave him unattended. Remember to tie up to a stout post and never tie up to a rail or fence which can break; also be sure to use a quick release knot and make sure the rope is not too long so your baby cannot get a foot over the rope. Also check that the tie is at least at the height of his withers. Short tying lessons are the order of the day for the baby mule. Mules will lean back on the rope, but once

they figure it out they tend to accept their lot and will not hurt themselves by panicking. Tying them first also helps them at their leading, as they have learned to give to the pressure of the halter,

Whether you start with your mule as a newborn, weanling or yearling, you still need to take them through all the same steps. They will learn to accept and love scratching and massaging all over the body, from head to tail, and don't forget those ears. Donkeys and mules will learn to have their ears handled and scratched and will love it and that solves any future bridling problems right there.

Never leave a halter on any animal and especially not on a baby. Why? Because it's darn dangerous. An animal can easily get a foot caught in the halter or hung up on a fence or any object and choke to death or break its neck. Please, just don't do it. When you leave your animal, take the halter with you!!

While an animal is young, it is very advantageous to introduce them to as many "fearful" things as possible. Take your animal for walks, over rails, bridges, around obstacles and through puddles. Anything he might encounter as your future driving or riding animal is easiest at this age to desensitize him to, than when he is older and much stronger. If your animal is dreadfully afraid of something, back off and give him the time to get use to it. You cannot force an animal to be unafraid of something. Can you learn anything when you are scared? I suspect not! Well, neither can they, so have some patience and understanding and try to think and see things from their point of view.

Another difference between baby mules and horse foals, which has scared many a visitor to the farm, is the fact that baby mules will walk towards you with a very intent look on their face and their ears laid back! This alarms most people, but it's a false alarm, believe me. This behavior in the horse world signals dislike and aggression and should warn you to back off... in mule babies it is only their intense concentration and focus on you. Baby mules are very possessive and jealous and have targeted you as their next conquest for attention. Mules that are mad will have their ears pinned really flat and the look on their faces will convey to you the difference.

Babies will sometimes want to play with you, and while it's hard to do when they are so cute and young, try to discourage it as soon as possible, but keep your discipline within reason. For attempted kicks, a firm swat on the behind and a firm "NO" will be enough, also with "nips" a firm "NO" and turn your attention elsewhere will get them where it hurts. Donkeys and mules love to be loved and sometimes just ignoring them will be painful to them and punishment enough. Remember babies and young animals have short attention spans, so keep your lessons short. They're kids, so don't expect them to learn everything the first time around.

Along with leading lessons it's important to teach your animal to back from the ground. We accomplish this with our young mules as part of their training when we bring them into the barn and tie them in a tie stall for their daily feed of oats. This way they learn to

stand tied and when we take them out they are taught to back out of the stall, and then we always turn them away from us, just like we would in a halter showmanship class, and then lead them out of the barn. Turing them to the right isn't just for show, its real purpose is for safety, so they learn to stay out of our space. Pulling an animal into you can be hard on your toes and teaches the animal to think its okay to invade your space.

There are many things that can be taught from the ground, so even people who never plan or want to ride, can have an animal very well trained, by just doing a lot of ground work. Donkeys and mules are suppose to have the reputation as being hard to teach to back but we have never found that, so maybe teaching them to back up as weanlings is the secret, as it is with many other things. The main idea is to do as much as you can think of to do with your animal while he is young. Many problems can be totally prevented and avoided by consistent, firm and kind handling from the ground. You'll end up with an animal that will fit into someone's life, be it yours or someone else's and you will be leaps ahead of your neighbor, who thinks it best to leave his stock run wild until its time to bring them in and "break" them. Quite often that's what happens.... something or someone gets "broke" and that's the end of their story. Your story should have a much happier ending..... It's up to you!