



S.A.F.E.R. HORSEMANSHIP FOUNDATIONS WORKBOOK

Lesson 1: Defining Boundaries

Safe - Achievable - Fun - Effective - Respectful

Professional Educational Workbook

www.SAFERHorsemanship.com

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S.A.F.E.R. Horsemanship Foundations Workbook

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Safety • Awareness • Leadership • Respect



DEFINING Boundaries



Healthy boundaries create safer, more respectful relationships between horses and handlers.

Clear communication builds trust, consistency and confidence.



At S.A.F.E.R. Horsemanship, we believe safety begins long before a rider ever gets in the saddle. Horses are powerful, intelligent animals and without clear communication and respectful boundaries, misunderstandings can quickly become dangerous situations.



Healthy boundaries help create trust, confidence and consistency between horse and handler. They teach horses what is expected while helping humans develop awareness, leadership and proper timing. Horses naturally look for clarity and when expectations remain fair and consistent, they become more relaxed, responsive and willing partners.



Some boundaries are universal in horsemanship, such as no biting, kicking, striking or crowding a handler. Other boundaries may depend on the individual horse, environment or situation. A young horse in training may require a larger safety zone, while a horse with anxiety around feeding time may need additional structure and personal space.



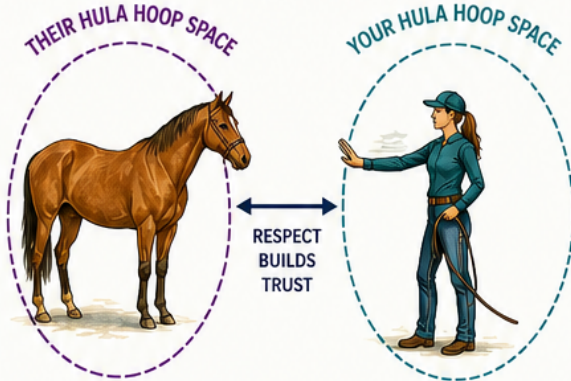
STRONG HORSEMANSHIP
Starts on the Ground.

Before asking horses for performance, we must first teach respect, communication and emotional balance, both for the horse and the human.

★ YOUR SPACE BUBBLE MATTERS

One of the core principles taught through S.A.F.E.R. Horsemanship is learning to protect and maintain your "space bubble." Your space bubble is the invisible area around your body that a horse should respect unless invited closer.

Their hula hoop space and your hula hoop space.



SAFETY



COMMUNICATION



TRUST

Teaching horses to honor that space creates safer handling, clearer communication and stronger relationships built on trust instead of pressure or fear.



TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT

Take a moment to think about your own boundaries around horses.



WHAT BEHAVIORS DO YOU ALLOW?



WHAT BEHAVIORS ARE UNSAFE?



WHAT EXPECTATIONS HELP BOTH YOU AND YOUR HORSE FEEL CALM, CONFIDENT, AND SUCCESSFUL?

Clear boundaries today create a safer, more confident partnership for a lifetime



WHAT IS THE Space Bubble?



The space bubble is the invisible safety zone around your body that a horse should respect unless invited closer.



Your space.

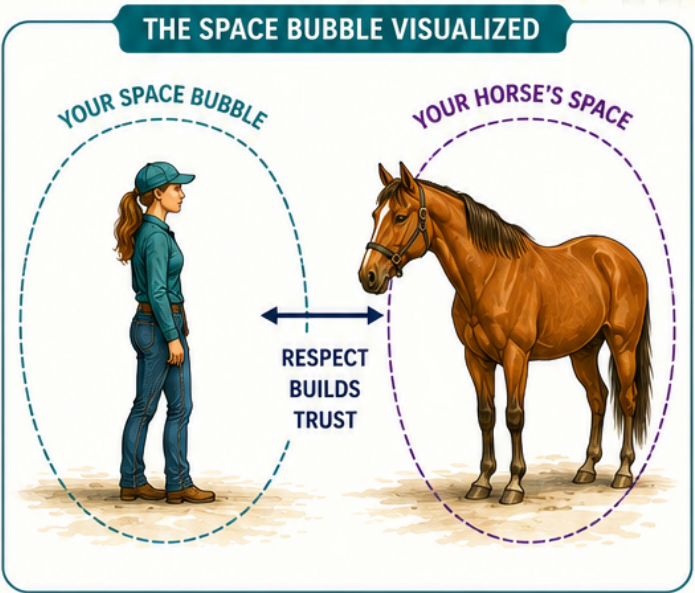


Your horse's space.



Healthy boundaries.

Establishing clear boundaries with each horse you work with is an important part of safe and effective horsemanship.



Simply put, the space bubble is the area around your body where a horse should not enter unless you specifically invite them in.



We can better understand the space bubble by observing herd dynamics. In a herd, the leader establishes and protects their personal space. Other horses learn to recognize and respect that boundary.



In horse training, you become the leader. That means you are responsible for establishing, communicating, and maintaining your own space bubble in a fair and consistent way.



Not every horse requires the same amount of space. Age, experience, training level, personality, and environment can all influence what boundaries are appropriate and safe.

LOOK TO THE HERD

In a herd, the leader establishes and protects their personal space. Other horses learn to recognize and respect that boundary.

LEADERSHIP	AWARENESS	RESPECT
Sets the boundary	Recognize the boundary	Honor the boundary

On the next page, we will take a closer look at some of the factors that affect the size of your space bubble.

Clear boundaries today create a safer, more confident partnership for a lifetime.



HOW BIG SHOULD Your Space Bubble Be?



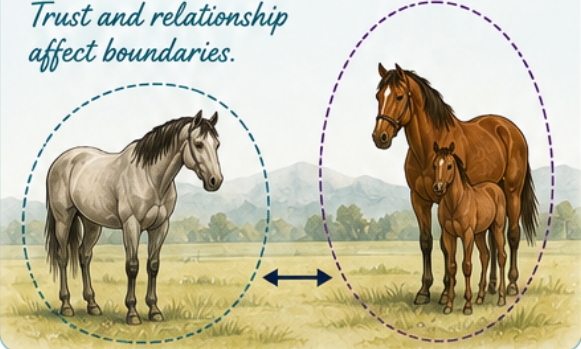
Different horses require different levels of space depending on age, experience, training and emotional state.



The herd leader out in the field or in the wild has a space bubble, but that bubble is **not the same for every horse in the herd.**

For the stallion or gelding trying to get close to his mares, he may establish a much larger boundary but, for the mare he trusts most and has spent years alongside, she may be allowed much closer.

Trust and relationship affect boundaries.



YOUNG HORSES NEED MORE SPACE

For a young horse that is just beginning groundwork, it is important to establish a larger space bubble for several reasons.



YOUNG HORSES ARE OFTEN reactive, uncoordinated, curious and still learning how to control their movement and emotions.



A LARGER SAFETY BUFFER helps protect both the horse and the handler from mistakes or sudden reactions.



YOUNG HORSES WILL TEST BOUNDARIES, just as they did with their mother or when introduced into a new herd.



CONSISTENCY MATTERS. Horses learn through repetition and clear expectations.



It is very similar in the horse and human relationship.



At S.A.F.E.R. Horsemanship, we teach handlers to be *clear, calm, fair and consistent* when establishing their personal space.



BE CLEAR



BE CALM



BE FAIR

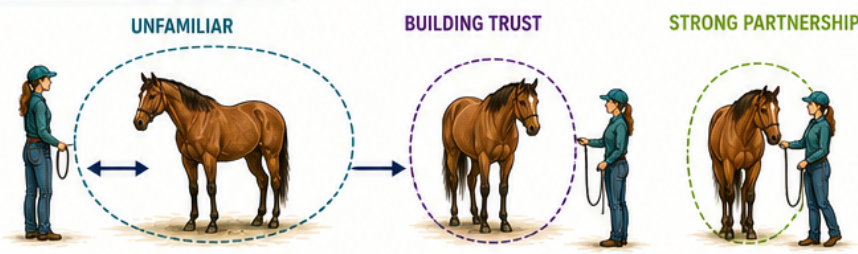


BE CONSISTENT



AS RELATIONSHIPS GROW, SPACE CAN CHANGE

As trust, communication and experience grow, *the size of the space bubble may change.*



Horses and humans who have spent time building a strong foundation together often move with greater awareness, understanding and connection, making advanced work safer and more controlled than basic work with an unfamiliar horse.

Clear boundaries today create a safer, more confident partnership for a lifetime.



REINFORCING *Boundaries*

At S.A.F.E.R. Horsemanship, we teach the **ASK → TELL → CONSEQUENCE** communication system to create clarity, consistency and safer interactions between horses and handlers.



THIS SYSTEM HELPS:



Build trust and communication



Improve safety and awareness



Develop leadership and consistency



Create confidence for both horse and handler



SO, WHAT SHOULD YOUR RESPONSE BE WHEN YOUR HORSE CROSSES THE LINE OR ENTERS YOUR SPACE BUBBLE WITHOUT PERMISSION?

At S.A.F.E.R. Horsemanship, we teach handlers to respond clearly and consistently using a three-step reinforcement system.

1 ASK

The “Ask” is your first communication.

This is usually a verbal cue, body language, or light physical signal that tells the horse they are reaching the edge of your boundary.



The goal is to give the horse an opportunity to make the correct choice.

Examples may include:

- Clucking
- Pointing
- Stepping toward the horse
- Waving your hand
- Light lead rope pressure



♥ *Clear boundaries today create a safer, more confident partnership for a lifetime.*



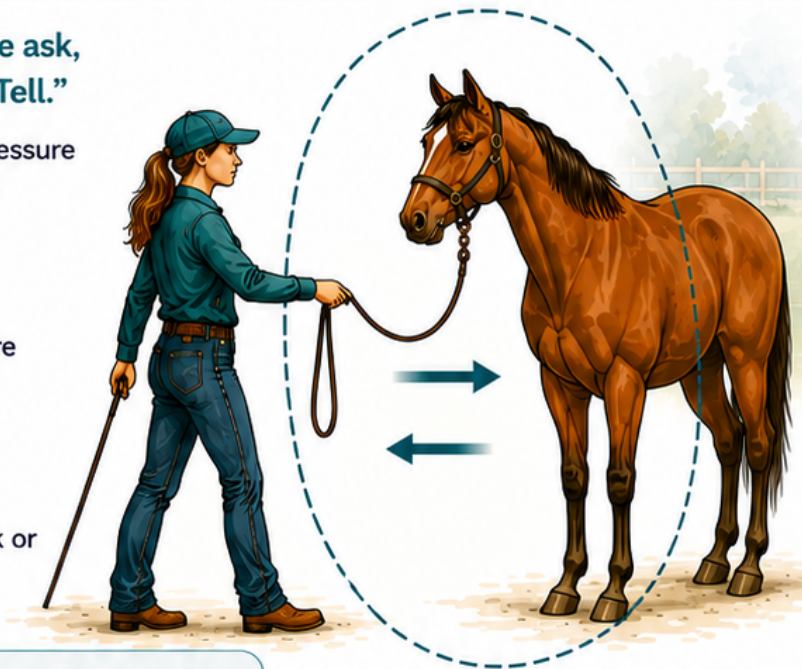
2 TELL

If the horse ignores the ask, the next step is the “Tell.”

The tell uses increased pressure or energy to reinforce the boundary more clearly.

Examples may include:

- Firmer lead rope pressure
- Pushing the horse away from your space
- Increased body energy
- Smacking a training stick or whip on the ground



The pressure should always be fair, clear, and appropriate for the situation.

3 CONSEQUENCE

If the horse continues to ignore the boundary or pushes back against the handler, a stronger correction may be necessary. The consequence communicates that the handler will continue reinforcing the boundary until the horse responds respectfully.



If you “Ask,” you must be prepared to follow through until the horse respects the boundary. If the handler asks and then backs down, the horse learns they can ignore or push through that boundary.



This is not about anger or punishment. It is about safety, consistency and clear communication.



However, it is also important to be fair and reasonable.

If a horse is frightened, confused or lacks the training to understand what is being asked, the handler may need to slow down, adjust the situation or make the request easier.



GOOD HORSEMANSHIP REQUIRES BOTH LEADERSHIP AND UNDERSTANDING.

At S.A.F.E.R. Horsemanship, we teach handlers to balance firmness with fairness while always keeping safety the priority.





SAFETY IN *High-Energy Situations*



Calm, prepared handlers make safer decisions during stressful or reactive moments.

At S.A.F.E.R. Horsemanship, we teach that the amount of pressure or reinforcement you use should depend on two things:



The danger level of the situation



The horse's level of experience and training



FOR EXAMPLE:

A young horse that is still learning boundaries may not respond as quickly as an experienced horse. If a young horse lightly drifts into your space while walking, you may *allow a moment* for them to process and respond to your cue.

EXPECTATIONS GROW WITH TRAINING AND UNDERSTANDING

LESS EXPERIENCE

More time and understanding needed



MORE EXPERIENCE

Quicker, more respectful response



As the horse gains more training, consistency and understanding, your expectations for their response should grow as well.



An experienced horse that already understands the rules should respond more quickly and respectfully when asked to move out of your space.



In some situations, especially dangerous ones, the response may need to happen *immediately*.



REMEMBER:

Each horse and each situation are different. Use good judgment, *stay consistent* and *always keep safety* the priority.



*Clear boundaries. Clear communication.
Safer horses. Safer handlers.*





SAFETY IN *High-Energy Situations*

In these moments, the **Ask → Tell → Consequence** system may happen very quickly.

THIS COULD INCLUDE:



A loud verbal cue



Increased body energy



Waving a rope or training stick



Stronger reinforcement to move the horse away from your space



SAFETY MUST ALWAYS COME FIRST.

EXAMPLES OF DANGEROUS SITUATIONS:



A horse charging toward you



Kicking out



Striking



Bolting through your space



Running while distracted or frightened



At S.A.F.E.R. Horsemanship, we believe pressure has an important place in horse training when used **fairly, responsibly** and **for safety** purposes. The goal is never to frighten or punish the horse, but to create **clear communication** and protect both horse and handler during dangerous situations.



Good horsemanship also means doing everything possible to avoid unsafe situations before they happen through *preparation, awareness, consistency* and *proper training*.



If a horse becomes extremely frightened or distracted and is no longer responding, your first priority should always be your *own safety*. Move out of danger while continuing to make the horse aware of your presence using *calm but clear* verbal and physical communication.



Move out of danger. Stay aware. Stay safe.



The safest handlers are not the loudest or strongest. *They are the ones who stay aware, prepared, calm and consistent.*





INVITING THE HORSE *Into Your Space*



Boundaries and connection can coexist.
Horses should respectfully ask for closeness, not force it.



SO, WHEN IS IT OKAY FOR THE HORSE TO COME CLOSE?

Building a good relationship with a horse means helping them feel safe, relaxed and comfortable around you. Affection, trust and connection are all important parts of horsemanship.

At S.A.F.E.R. Horsemanship, we teach that there should be a clear and consistent signal from the handler that lets the horse know when it is time to relax and when it is time to focus and respect boundaries.

SOMETIMES THIS MAY BE A VERBAL CUE SUCH AS:

“Okay.”

OTHER TIMES, IT MAY SIMPLY BE:

- ✓ Relaxing your posture
- ✓ Softening your energy
- ✓ Turning toward the horse
- ✓ Offering a gentle touch or scratch



WE CAN LEARN A LOT BY WATCHING HORSES INTERACT IN A HERD.

For example, one horse may approach another looking for companionship or mutual grooming. The other horse may respond in one of two ways:



Asking for space by pinning their ears or moving away



Or welcoming the interaction with relaxed body language and attention



HUMANS AND HORSES COMMUNICATE IN SIMILAR WAYS.

When a horse approaches your space bubble looking for affection, you have a choice. You can either ask the horse to stay focused and respect the boundary, or you can invite the horse closer for a calm and positive interaction.



AT S.A.F.E.R. HORSEMANSHIP, ONE IMPORTANT RULE IS THAT HORSES SHOULD NEVER APPROACH A PERSON WITH AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR SUCH AS:

- ✗ Pinned ears
- ✗ Threatening expressions
- ✗ Pushing
- ✗ Rubbing forcefully
- ✗ Crowding



Affection should be respectful and calm.
A horse should ask politely with soft body language, a gentle touch, or quiet attention – not by pushing into the handler's space.



TAKE A MOMENT TO THINK ABOUT YOUR OWN BOUNDARIES AND COMMUNICATION WITH HORSES.



What tells your horse it is okay to come closer?



What behaviors should remain off limits, even during affection and relaxation?





INVITING THE HORSE *Into Your Space*

HOW A HORSE MAY APPROACH YOU

RESPECTFUL APPROACH

This is how a horse asks politely.

- ✓ Soft eyes
- ✓ Relaxed ears
- ✓ Lowered or level head
- ✓ Calm, slow steps
- ✓ Gentle sniff or quiet attention



This is an invitation you may choose to accept by relaxing, turning toward the horse, and offering a gentle touch or scratch.

DISRESPECTFUL APPROACH

This is not acceptable.

- ✗ Pinned ears (flat back)
- ✗ Hard stare
- ✗ Pushing into you
- ✗ Rubbing or crowding
- ✗ Forceful or demanding behavior



Do not reward or allow disrespectful behavior. Use your boundaries and the Ask → Tell → Consequence system to redirect.

ACCEPTING THE INVITATION

When a horse shows soft body language and asks politely for closeness, you can invite them in.



RELAX YOUR POSTURE

Soften your body and breathe.



TURN TOWARD THE HORSE

This shows you are open to connection.



OFFER A GENTLE TOUCH OR SCRATCH

Keep it calm, quiet, and respectful.



ENJOY THE MOMENT

Connection grows through trust and respect.



BOUNDARIES AND CONNECTION CAN COEXIST.

- ✓ You set the rules.
- ✓ The horse learns to ask.
- ✓ You decide when they are invited in.
- ✓ Trust and respect grow.

“ *Good horsemanship isn't just about controlling the horse. It's about earning their choice to be close to you.* ”



REMEMBER:

Respect builds trust. Trust builds connection. Connection builds a partnership that lasts a lifetime.





UNDERSTANDING

The Horse's Boundaries

Good horsemanship includes recognizing stress, discomfort, confusion, fear, and physical



Horses also have boundaries, preferences, and emotional limits.

Good handlers pay attention to what the horse is communicating physically and emotionally.



S.A.F.E.R. students learn to notice the whole horse.

Stress, discomfort, confusion, fear, and pain can all change what a horse can safely understand or perform.

EVERY HORSE HAS A STRESS LIMIT

1 Nervous

2 Overwhelmed

3 Frightened

4 Confused

5 Uncomfortable

6 Physically sore or painful



Physical boundaries matter.

If a horse is experiencing pain, discomfort, fatigue, or physical limitations, those boundaries must be recognized and respected during training.

Pause. Investigate. Adjust the request.



Horses communicate through body language and behavior.

Learning to see the small signs early helps keep both the horse and handler safer.



HORSES COMMUNICATE

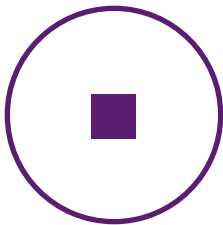
In Stages

Just like humans use Ask - Tell - Consequence, horses often communicate in stages too.

1 ASK

The first signs are usually subtle.

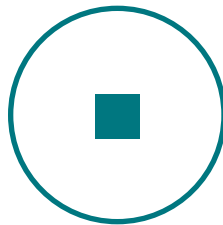
- A worried eye
- Tight lips or nose
- Tension in the body
- Ears changing position
- Increased alertness
- Difficulty focusing



2 TELL

If discomfort grows, behavior becomes more noticeable.

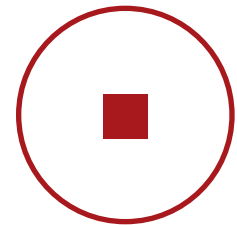
- Moving away
- Refusing to stand still
- Becoming reactive
- Tossing the head
- Increased movement or anxiety



3 CONSEQUENCE

If earlier signs are ignored, the horse may react bigger.

- Bucking
- Bolting
- Biting
- Kicking
- Rearing
- Striking



Good horsemanship means recognizing the Ask before the situation reaches the Tell or Consequence.

The earlier you notice the communication, the easier it is to help the horse remain calm, confident, and successful.

SEE IT EARLY. RESPOND FAIRLY. KEEP LEARNING SAFE.



LEADERSHIP WITH

Thoughtful Understanding

When behavior changes, stop and ask what the horse may be trying to tell you.



Example: A horse suddenly becomes uncomfortable during an exercise they normally perform easily.

That change may be important information. Pain, fear, confusion, fatigue, or stress may be involved. A thoughtful handler does not simply push harder without asking why.

A SAFER RESPONSE MAY BE TO:

1

PAUSE

Stop the exercise long enough to assess what changed.

2

SLOW DOWN

Reduce the pressure, speed, or complexity of the request.

3

ASK EASIER

Return to something familiar so the horse can succeed.

4

INVESTIGATE

Consider pain, fear, confusion, environment, or training gaps.

CLEAR LEADERSHIP + THOUGHTFUL UNDERSTANDING

At S.A.F.E.R. Horsemanship, horses learn best when training includes both clear leadership and thoughtful understanding.

The goal is not to excuse unsafe behavior. The goal is to lead clearly while recognizing when the horse needs help, clarity, comfort, or a simpler request.



TAKE A MOMENT To Reflect

Good horsemanship means balancing leadership, safety and thoughtful understanding.

? TAKE A MOMENT TO REFLECT

What signs tell you a horse is moving toward their stress limit? When should you pause, investigate, or make the request easier?

[MOVE ON TO WORKSHEETS ->](#)

