

Accidental Imprinting by Julie Taylor-Browne, CamelidSense.

Have you ever noticed that one or maybe two of your cria are far friendlier than the others? Or have you noticed that one of your older alpacas is more difficult to handle than the others and behaves in atypical ways. Read on.....

Normally alpacas have a certain 'camelid reserve'; that is, they don't like to be within arm's reach and they move out of your way when you walk towards them. Some cria, however are different. For example, they may come up to you in the field, flipping their little tails up in a sign of submission and seem to invite you to stroke their necks. They may also stand in your way as you walk towards you, and we, being polite humans, often walk round them.



We have a tendency to label this behaviour as 'friendly' and enjoy this unexpected contact. However, as these cria grow into adulthood we may find that they are far from friendly as they become more difficult to handle and train, and may even go so far as to rear up at visitors or bite them. This applies to males and females. If we encourage this behaviour to far, males may go on to develop so called 'berserk male syndrome' but females can also be difficult and I have heard them described as 'control freaks'. A friend of mine with a large herd in Sweden has one of these females that she calls 'the Police'. This alpaca rushes up to you when you enter the field and sniffs you all over and clucks at you in a disapproving way. *No one* escapes her inspection....

Figure 1. This is not an alpaca being friendly!

Sometimes an unsuspecting (or perhaps unscrupulous) breeder may capitalise on these animals and take them to trade stands at shows as an example of how 'friendly' alpacas are or invite visitors to stroke their 'friendly' alpacas in the field. I have even heard them described as 'sales' alpacas. This is, in my opinion, a misrepresentation as this is not the normal alpaca relationship with humans.

This is not to say that alpacas cannot learn to enjoy contact with humans, but rather that taking advantage of an unfortunate event is not the way to raise easy to handle alpacas. Hopefully everyone reading this is aware of the dangers of deliberate imprinting and of cuddling and talking to orphan cria, bottle feeding whilst petting and talking to them and making a pet of cria needing medical treatment. These human behaviours lead to some very unwanted alpaca behaviours as they mature, including biting, rearing, chest butting and fence guarding. In the case of one problem male I visited, one of his owners 'wrestled' and 'played' with him every day until he started knocking down the smaller (female) owner when she entered the field. Watch this space for a forthcoming article on what to do with Berserk Alpacas!

So what about difficult alpacas that have not been subject to these types of imprinting? Is it just a genetic difference or is something else going on? When I started my camelid training studies with Marty McGee Bennett I heard about about type A babies and type B babies. The type A cria are the pushy type who are ‘can’t get enough of people’ and type B, the normal type, described above. She describes the way to deal with the type A, but doesn’t give an explanation of why the two are different. She notes that camelids are born with different characteristics and tendencies.

I am happy to report that I see fewer deliberately imprinted alpacas and llamas than I did a few years ago. However I do see an increasing numbers of these initially ‘friendly’. then ultimately, difficult ones.



Figure 2. Normal cria stay with their mothers...

What, then has gone wrong? It seems that too few people are following McGee Bennett’s advice that the essential equipment you need for a successful birth of a cria is a chair, a piece of rope and a pair of binoculars. When you suspect that a birth is imminent, you should sit on the chair, use the rope to tie yourself to the fence and

observe the birth through the binoculars... The vast majority of alpaca births go really well - alpacas do not need a human birthing partner, and the rest of the herd will usually offer all the advice and support the alpaca needs.



Figure 3. The ‘temptingly overfriendly type’

This is not to say that things never go wrong, obviously you will be on the lookout for malpresentations, stuck cria, panicking mothers and overlong labours. However, you do not need to be and should not be ‘on the doorstep for the birth’. This is because of our terrible human tendency to *talk*.....

During the birth and just afterwards the dam will hum to her newborn cria. If you listen carefully this will be at a different pitch from the normal ‘I am a bit unhappy/worried/fed up’ type of hum. This is an essential part of the bonding



process and I believe that we can inadvertently interfere with this by being at the the birth **and** talking to the baby and/or the mother.

Figure 4. Give mother and cria space and time to bond....

During a session on dealing with problem animals at a recent clinic I gave in France, one of the participants described the difficulties she was

having with her two year old female. This alpaca was very friendly in the field and in the barn. You could approach her and stroke her neck, but when she tried to handle and train her she was very difficult; jumping around and generally not acting like a normal alpaca. The owner worried that it was fear making her behave in this way. Having met camelids with similar behaviours I asked if she had been at the birth and had spoken to the mother or the baby. She replied that it had been a dystocia and that she had been on her mobile phone to the vet describing the situation whilst with the mother and the cria. This was in fact, an identical situation to one I had been in. About three days after the birth at my farm a 'very friendly' cria bounced up to me and stood in front of me. Bemused, I wasn't able to work out why until I remember she was the cria who had been very stuck and in the end the vet had arrived to deliver her. There was much talking, by me, to reassure the mother, and between the vet and myself.



If I hadn't recognised that what I had was a 'type A' baby I might have been tempted to encourage her and stroke her etc. thus making myself a problem for the future. So I resolutely ignored her when she approached me outside the pen, but did put her through my normal training programme for babies and weanlings. See my previous articles for more information on training youngsters.

Figure 5. Daylily at almost 1 year old.

I have heard so many similar stories and met animals with such similar behaviours that I believe this phenomenon is beyond coincidence.

Daylily is two4 years old now. She is still one of the first to come to inspect visitors but is not aggressive to them, although she did half heartedly rear at a couple when she was about a year old. Firmly dealt with by me at the time, she didn't repeat that behaviour again. She is halter trained and relatively easy to handle, but it is easy to see the difference between her and the 'normal' alpacas when she is in the pen with you. For example she doesn't line up nicely with the side of the pen, but turns into you when you are trying to handle her. She certainly isn't easier than the other animals in the herd and I would recommend avoiding any form of imprinting either accidental or intentional.

Further resources. Raising Babies: www.carthveanalpacas.com/articles
Camelid Culture CD by Marty McGee Bennett,
Understanding Aggression CD by Marty McGee Bennett and The Camelid Companion
(Book) all available from www.carthveanalpacas.com

For more information about camelid training and handling see www.carthveanalpacas.com or contact taylor.browne@clara.net. We offer books, cds and DVDs plus equipment for training llamas and alpacas.