

# DONKEY EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION. PRELIMINARY STUDY ABOUT EMPATHY GIVING RISE TO EMOTIONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH ABLE AND DISABLED CHILDREN

Tralli M\*, Stanzani F\*, Giovagnoli° G, Cerino S°, Bacci ML.\*

\*Department of Veterinary Morphophysiology and Animal Production - DIMORFIPA, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Bologna;  
°Italian Equestrian Federation- FISE, Roma; Italy.

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper the authors would like to point out how understanding emotional expressions is the starting point of the empathic relationship between human being and equines (as horses and donkeys) used in Therapeutic Riding.

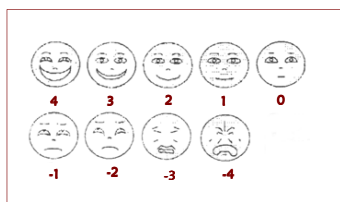
## MATERIALS AND METHODS

In Verona Horse Fair 2006 176 children (about 9-10 years old) were asked to indicate the mood of different donkeys when submitted to different ethological stimulus.

The stimuli were:

- A positive one (strolling on the neck)
- A negative one (a clothes pin on the head), to simulate the situation of an uncorrected harness, but without any serious bother for the donkey-

After the administration of the two stimuli the children were asked to fill in two forms to evaluate both the stimuli. To describe the mood of the donkey the children marked by a cross the appropriate facial expression as drawn in Facial Affective Scale. The scale includes 9 different possibilities of choice, from a neutral expression (value 0) to great happiness (+4) and great sadness (-4) FAS is generally in use to evaluate the mood of hospitalized children. In the present study FAS was applied in animal field: so the children, in empathic communication with the donkey, can mark their appropriate experience.



Facial affective scale



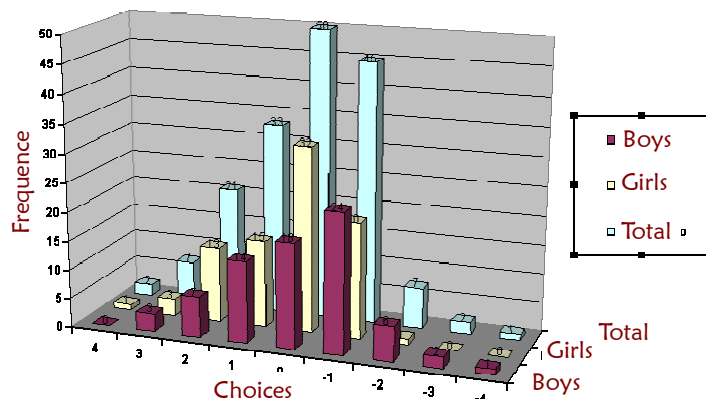
## DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

The children hadn't well interpreted donkey language, but they were better able to perceive discomfort condition. In fact, in group dynamics is much more important to perceive the pain conditions than the pleasure ones, as in Darwinian theories.

Also in Therapeutic Riding sessions with autistic patients often a positive intention is expressed by a "negative" action (to hit the horse neck instead of caressing it). In the unaffactive autistic world with no emotions, the relationship between the patient and the equine can be expressed by negative or positive analogic communication. It is very important to stress that the animal answer, in both circumstances is not an "avoiding" answer, but - rather an understanding and tolerating one.

The preliminary evaluation of these data underline how the correct interpretation of verbal and no-verbal communication between men and equines is the foundations of every "interpersonal" and emphatic relationship and ethological comprehension. What is really important, both with able and disabled children, is the possibility to establish an empathic communication between them and equines, because the correct understanding of the animal behavior is the starting point for both man and horse safety and well-being. Such understanding acts are the basis for the establishing of empathic relationships, allowing a proper interaction both with the donkey and the horse. Even though the difficulties in interpretation seem to be in connection with the fact that the behaviours performed were not extreme (e.g. +4 or -4) it is evident how much important is the cultural mediation of the veterinarians in guiding the right human-animal relationship.

## Answers distribution after positive stimulus



	4	3	2	1	0	-1	-2	-3	-4
Boys	0	3	7	14	18	24	8	2	1
Girls	1	3	13	16	32	20	1	0	0
Total	2	7	21	33	50	45	7	2	1

## RESULTS

Positive stimulus

Answers: Long nose, Flehmen, exposition of tongue

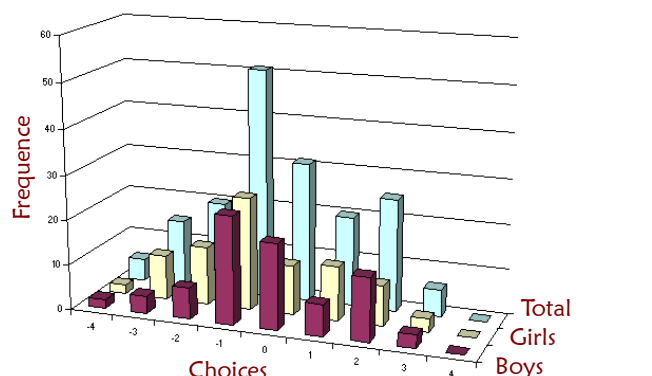
Negative stimulus

Answers: flared nostril, head shaking

The children gave different points to the various answers, as shown in the diagrams showed.

Comparing the answers given by boys and girls, it results that the girls had a more correct perception of the donkey experience and that they had a better interpretative skill.

## Answers distribution after negative stimulus



	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4
Boys	2	4	7	24	19	7	14	3	0
Girls	2	10	13	25	11	12	9	3	0
Total	5	15	20	51	31	20	25	6	0