

Is your horse normal? Now there's an app for that

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Since ancient times, horse behavior, and the bond between horses and humans, has been a source of intrigue and fascination.

The horse-lore that has accumulated over the centuries is a rich mix of both useful practice (approaching horses from their left side, making them [slightly less reactive](#)) and unsubstantiated myth, such as the one

that [chestnut horses are especially difficult to deal with](#).

That's why my colleagues and I at the University of Sydney are launching a [global database of horse behavior](#). Both vets and owners can log a horse's physical, mental and [social development](#), creating an [evidence base](#) on what constitutes normal and abnormal equine behavior, and what defines good, effective and humane training.

This project builds on a [similar project for dogs](#), which has collected information on over 85,000 dogs and been used in more than 70 research studies that have revealed behavioral differences that relate to [head and body shape](#) and the [astonishing effect of desexing on behavior](#).

Now it is the horses' turn

We have created an online behavioral assessment package for horses and ponies, called the Equine behavior Assessment and Research Questionnaire (E-BARQ) that collects anonymous data for horse behavior researchers, veterinarians and coaches. It's a not-for-profit project that allows the global horse-folk community to donate their observational data to the University of Sydney and gain useful benefits in return.

Horse owners can upload photographs and videos to a custom-built app, recording their horse's progress in training and competition over time. For the first time, they'll also be able to compare their horse's behavior with that of other horses. The "share-&-compare" graphs will reveal attributes such as trainability, ridability, handling, compliance, boldness, and human social confidence.

There are two benefits. Firstly, owners can compare their horses' behavior to others around the world, giving them a useful benchmark.

Secondly, it will reveal the true impact of ancient traditions and modern trends. This can be used by everyone from the general riding public to veterinarians.

As E-BARQ can monitor the longitudinal consequences of different training methods, it can be a powerful tool for advancing horse welfare. It will also inform evidence-based judgements on the ethics and sustainability of horse sports.

Human safety, horse welfare

Horse vets know the importance of horse behavior, as it often affects their safety. Indeed, a recent UK study has shown equine vet practice to be the [civilian occupation with the highest risk of injury](#), surpassing firefighters. But vets also rely on owners to observe horse behavior because it indicates health and recovery from surgery or disease. With the permission of owners, vets and riding coaches can monitor their clients' horses over time in the app.

The questionnaire and app will expose how training and management influences horse behavior, and vice versa. They will reveal how breeds differ in responses and illuminate breed-typical personality types, how male and female horses differ, how horses used in different disciplines (such as showjumping versus dressage) differ in their behavior and how horse behavior changes with maturation and training.

A horse's behavior has a direct impact on its usefulness and that, in turn, affects its value and—sadly—the care it receives. There is evidence from Europe that over 65% of horses outside the racing industry are slaughtered before the age of seven, [very often for behavioral reasons](#).

Understandably, given [riding is the most dangerous sport for children](#), parents crave authentic assessment of ponies' behavior. Information in E-

BARQ could potentially help buyers identify warning signs of dangerous behaviors and make more informed choices.

By providing researchers with an unprecedented wealth of information, E-BARQ has the potential to revolutionize the way we train and manage our horses and, as a result, make real and lasting positive changes in horse welfare and the sustainability of horse sports.

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