



The case study can be accessed at www.ridingforsmiles.org

Riding for Smiles is an Equestrian Charity providing riding and activity sessions for children and adults with additional needs. Our aims are to help build and develop essential life skills in an enjoyable informative manner. Over the past years we have worked successfully with children and young people from schools, youth groups and sports clubs enhancing their social, emotional, and mental well-being.

After a meeting and discussion with the CEO of Nottinghamshire MIND it was decided that our projects could be used as part of the "Get Set To Go" initiative in North Nottinghamshire.

We planned 2 taster sessions followed by a 12-week programme for 10 users. The hourly sessions included a ride or a ride in the carriage (for those over the weight limit or those without the confidence to ride a horse), a hands-on grooming session and a coffee and chat.

Over the period of 14 weeks, we have witnessed a significant positive effect on the users and would describe the project as extraordinarily successful. Riding for Smiles gave the users questionnaires to complete at the end of the 14 weeks for the purpose of monitoring and evaluation. Discussions take place each week in a relaxed manner which give constant feedback and evaluation. The main findings from both methods are listed below:

- Users attended the Taster sessions nervously and unsure. Most had never had contact with horses before and kept themselves at a safe distance. They were hesitant to initiate conversation yet were happy to answer questions or engage when spoken to. Being confident around new people and unfamiliar situations appeared to be a key issue. One user came the first week with a support worker but has been able to attend independently since then.
- Over the weeks the users became more relaxed and began to offer more conversation. Many started to open up about their problems / issues and seemed to want to chat about them. The relaxed atmosphere helped as the users were not put under any pressure to undertake an activity but just given encouragement and allowed to work at their own pace.
- Some participants were disappointed that they were over the weight limit to ride a horse and became motivated to lose weight in order to eventually be able to take part. This encouraged them to change their eating habits and take part in other activities such as walking.

- Some of the members are beginning to develop a relationship with a particular horse, especially one which they enjoy grooming. Most members have commented on the therapeutic effects of the grooming aspect and the relaxing scenic area when out on the ride.
- Many users find they are more relaxed and confident and able to make the effort to take part in the activity because of the physical placement – i.e., it takes place away from an area they have bad association with and where they are afraid of seeing other people who are aware of their problems or who may be judgemental. The activity appears to be a bit of escapism but also a chance to take part in something as a new start.
- The session has become a support group for the users where they can chat to others with similar issues and support each other with problems whilst taking part in an enjoyable activity. The users state that they feel relaxed and less anxious because they are amongst others who understand their problems and are sympathetic. The riding session provides an informal platform to engage in therapeutic activities and converse about worries. Indeed, we have witnessed on several occasions users arriving tearful, stressed, or anxious and becoming more relaxed, focussed, and happy by the time they leave.
- Users claim to be motivated to attend the sessions because they now anticipate that they won't feel anxious, nervous, or uncomfortable due to the relationships that they have built up with each other and with the staff. Trust appears to be a major factor in positive involvement.
- All users feel incredibly lucky to be involved in the programme and have the chance to take part in an activity which they would not be able to afford.
- Over the 14 weeks all participants have faced challenges and taken part in new activities. They have shown an increase in self-esteem and confidence for allowing themselves, with encouragement, to face their fears and overcome the attitude to not engage or give up easily. Members of the group have shown each other much encouragement and given praise and positive reinforcement when they have achieved something. They frequently ask friends to take photographic or video evidence for them so they can show chosen people their achievements.
- All participants have been willing to answer questionnaires but most need help to complete. Many struggles with confidence and with language skills when facing a written activity yet all are happy to discuss and capable of answering thoughtfully. General discussion has therefore given us the most accurate and helpful evaluation and insight.
- It has become apparent when asking questions that often users have different interpretation of statements (e.g., the word "active" means different things to different people). Participants have also stated that often when asked questions by professional bodies or members of organisations they don't answer honestly but rather give the answer which they think they should, or which makes them look better.
- So far, the participants have not learned many riding skills – the impact has been aimed at social and emotional improvement. Now they have all gained confidence it may be beneficial, if a further project could take place, to begin

introducing skill targets. This would build confidence even more if taken slowly and with patience.

Successful outcomes for the participants have been-

1. Group identity
2. Raised social and emotional skills
3. Increased confidence
4. Reduced anxiety
5. Increased motivation to leave the house
6. Increased awareness of weight issues / eating issues /and the necessity for physical activity to aid weight loss and promote good health.

The positive impact of the project can be partly attributed to the fact that physical effort and exercise is hidden within the activity. The principal enjoyment and benefit is seen by the users to be animal contact. They speak enthusiastically about the horses and how contact with them makes them feel. The activity session is also clearly seen as more than just a physical sporting activity. It is an outdoor therapeutic experience which enriches all senses due to the rural scenic landscape, the physical motion of the horse or carriage and the sense of touch when grooming. The opportunity to make, meet and chat with friends in a relaxed non-threatening environment is an important aspect of the sessions which makes the participants feel a sense of belonging and being part of a group in a safe non-judgemental place.

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