

Riding for Smiles

Report for ***** Deprivation Group

July 2021

***** school decided to bring the youngest children we have worked with in this group – a group of reception children aged 4 and 5. These children had a variety of additional needs ranging from anxiety, language difficulties, ASD, low self-esteem and confidence and low aspiration and opportunities within the family unit. Some of the children have dysfunctional family background life and have social work intervention. The aim of sessions for this group was to provide opportunities which the children wouldn't otherwise get, increase the children's confidence, self-esteem and self-belief, improve behaviour and provide sensory and therapeutic opportunities.

This group consisted of some tiny children who arrived on the first session very excited, confident and brave. They were happy to talk to the staff when spoken to and followed instructions without any fuss. They all mounted the ponies on the first session and listened well to instructions. We employed 2 side walkers holding onto one child, who was unsteady on the pony, although he didn't have any fear. Over time he slowly progressed to one side walker holding him and then a side walker simply walking alongside. Despite the age of these children they engaged well with the riding lessons and were eager to have a go at everything that was asked of them, including trotting. Initially one child sat fairly hunched over but as he got more confident his position and balance improved. All pupils made good attempts at the rising trot and had almost mastered it by the end of the block of sessions. These younger children seem to have less fear than the older ones, which enables them to sit more relaxed and go with the horse's movement rather than resist it, and this in turn helps them rise to the trot.

This group of children were happy to engage in any stable yard activity. They listened well and tried their best to copy but because of their age they needed constant reminding. They employed good thinking skills and, as time went on, initiated relevant conversation. With support and encouragement they practised social skills and were able to share, turn take and work together on activities such as poo and stable clearing, and hay net filling. The one child who had ASD was a little hesitant to ask something without adult support to begin with, and needed to be given a specific task to perform and complete. Over the weeks he learned to accept change a little better as he understood the possible events which would happen. And was able to listen to reason and strike a deal for the future which gave him a chance to build acceptance in disappointment. Over the course of the sessions the children developed greatly in confidence and were able to approach Jack and begin grooming him with purpose without one to one help from an adult. They were also able to engage

After a block of sessions with us the Head Teacher stated that there had been a noticeable difference in the classroom amongst the children involved. They were contributing more verbally and speaking more confidently to others. They have also observed a reduction in anxiety especially with 2 members of the group. The children had found trekking out soothing and enjoyed the riding lessons and learning to trot as it gave them a sense of accomplishment. This group of children especially loved grooming and interacting with the small pony Jack. Leading him gave them a sense of achievement and looking after him they had gained a feeling of pride and comfort. Back in school they talked constantly about Jack and clearly had begun to build a bond with him.

During these sessions it was decided to involve a sibling who has complex needs and who is in a wheel chair. Six sessions were arranged for him so he could have a ride out in the disabled carriage at the same time as his sister rode a pony. In this way we could be

truly inclusive and allow the siblings to do the similar activity at the same time. This child would be the first who had used our new carriage. He attended the first session and, despite having no language and limited movement, was able to demonstrate his enjoyment. He was able to ride along the same path as his sister and see the same scenery. Back on the yard he was able to get close enough to the small pony to stroke and brush him, with an adult holding his hand. The activity only happened for a short time but the effects were immense. Unfortunately this little boy was unwell during the following weeks and so his sessions were put on hold until September.

Working with such a young group was clearly very successful and we would enjoy the opportunity to do so again. We had met our outcomes and provided an enjoyable enriching activity for 8 very deserving children. The children who took part in this group stated they “want to do it forever”!