

Riding for Smiles

Report for *****Special School

July 2021

*****Special School brought a group of 6 or 7 children with complex needs for a block of sessions during the summer term. These children were severely disadvantaged due to various conditions including Autism, hearing loss, delayed or no language, mobility issues (including splints), heart conditions, challenging behaviours, epilepsy, global learning delay, ADHD, sensory processing needs, Down's syndrome, Hydrocephalus, and a rare genetic condition. All had virtually no speech and poor language understanding. Four of these children had support workers with them at all times who understood their individual communication signs and personal needs.

Due to the severity and mix of issues in this group objectives and outcomes were limited and steps in progress needed to be small. By being patient and ultra- flexible in activity provision and organisation,(e.g. allowing children to personally access riding for as short or as long as deemed beneficial), Riding for Smiles managed to see positive interaction and progress in all children by the end of the block of sessions.

Outcomes for the sessions included simply being able to cope with travelling out of school and in a bus to an unfamiliar place. These children are from the inner city and so being around animals, especially large ponies, was a milestone in itself. Basic management of emotions and being calm, along with willingness to try something new was another objective for children who have severe anxiety. Sometimes it took a while to understand the nature of the change in behaviour or acceptance to engage, but by working together with the school staff and trying different approaches, we managed to find successful ways forward. Often, once we had achieved this and the

child achieved something new, they wanted to continue with the experience and took part with obvious enjoyment and happiness. For children who are often physically rough our objective was to develop a gentle approach and for those with sensory issues the aim was to encourage coping mechanisms which enabled them to take part in the same activity as their peers.

At the first session all but 1 child, with a great deal of adult support, got on the pony and had a short ride out. Due to the complex needs, lack of understanding and poor concentration, most of the children were unable to sit balanced or still enough to begin with, and needed side walkers. However, after the first session, once they knew what to expect and were familiar with the movement of the horse, they improved considerably. At the first session, one child got on the horse happily, then decided she wanted to get off and refused to cooperate. After a lot of analysing we came to the conclusion it was because she had got on first and was fed up of waiting. Action needed to be instant for this child and so in following sessions she mounted last and accepted that. For other children, their enjoyment and excitement was demonstrated by arm flapping, face slapping and loud noises.

The child who suffers from the degenerative condition, who is in a wheel chair, was taken out in the carriage, which allowed him to take part and be around his peers. Despite having lost his speech due to his condition, he managed to say the word "donkey" which was a major achievement for him. He displayed lots of visible enjoyment during his carriage ride and short interaction with the small pony. Having the carriage available to give rides out to the non-ambient child meant we could utilise it for the one child with Autism who refused to wear a riding hat, due to sensory issues, and therefore couldn't ride. This allowed the child the opportunity to be integrated into the session and be alongside a peer.

Due to the short concentration span of these pupils the stable yard activities consisted mainly of fleetingly stroking and brushing the

pony, brushing the yard and looking around. For children from the inner city simply looking at the tractor and the stable tools was a learning experience. For all of these children it was necessary to use single or 2 / 3 words to communicate an instruction, alongside a visual example, and then respond with overt facial expressions and sounds to recognise achievement and show adult approval of the child's action. Every small step needed to be praised and built on.

After only a few sessions, significant improvements and development in the children could be seen, both at the stables and back in school. School staff reported communication and conversation skills had improved greatly for one child, who was able to describe the sessions to other adults and speak in full sentences. Other children had learnt to be gentle, overcome anxiety, become calm and take part in an accessible form of exercise. One child in particular had, by taking small steps, eventually overcome some sensory issues and was able to stroke and brush a pony, which school staff did not think was possible at first. For all the children we had enabled them to take part in a group activity from which they had found immense pleasure, enjoyment and enrichment.