

Riding for Smiles

Report for ***** Junior School

Deprivation Group

July 2021

***** brought this group of junior aged children for a period of 6 weeks during the summer term. After a long period in lockdown these children were in great need of a physical and enrichment activity and were very pleased to be with us. They were a quiet group who had a mix of difficulties including possible autism, anxieties, social and emotional problems, speech and language difficulties, weight and physical issues and learning delay.

The children arrived to their first session quite nervous and apprehensive, but they listened well and were able to follow instructions and engage in the activities with adult support. This group were especially interested in looking around and becoming familiar with their surroundings. They were very hesitant about going near the horses to begin with and preferred to stroke them over the stable door. Most children willingly spoke when addressed but 2 children were very reserved and used only non-verbal responses. One of these children was reluctant to interact at all, and attended with a blank expression, which made it difficult for us to gauge the child's feelings or thoughts. With a great deal of staff support all children mounted the horses and completed a short ride out. Two of the children initially needed side walkers, due to confidence, but returned to the yard all smiles. The following week they rode happily without the side walker support. The group had a combination of lessons and hacks and were equally happy with both. They enjoyed learning riding skills and being able to control the horse, using simple aids to walk, turn and stop. However, due to a combination of

learning difficulties, poor memory retention and concentration, this group needed the pony leaders to reiterate the instructions and help in following them through. Over the weeks this group all started to sit with relaxed positions, even the children who were very nervous initially. They were all able to hold the reins correctly and made good attempts at the rising trot. They could also all explain in simple terms what they had done during their lesson and how to control the horse.

This group showed great interest in the stable yard activities and happily engaged positively in many different ones. They especially enjoyed learning to lead the small pony, learning about the hoof and how to correctly and safely clean it, and naming the body parts. They listened with intent and used good thinking skills, asking questions such as “where does the spine end” and explaining why you walk at a pony’s shoulder instead of in front when leading, although they required adult support to sometimes keep focussed. During other tasks, such as cleaning a stable and grooming the pony, they worked co-operatively together, sharing equipment without fuss and treating each other respectfully.

As the weeks passed this group of children gained incredibly in confidence, although they remained a quiet thoughtful group. They increased their willingness to engage in conversation and started to initiate it and ask thoughtful relevant questions. The child who had initially attended with no expressions or speech was given the opportunity to undertake a stable yard activity individually. This unlocked a willingness to verbally interact and the child slowly changed into a chatty individual. Building a relationship with the staff members had helped and familiarity had built confidence. All outcomes had been achieved, and some even surpassed. For the child who had limited engagement at the beginning the benefits were immense. This child had been motivated to take part in a physical activity and understood the importance of weight and fitness in an indirect way. Many of the children had worked out of their comfort

zones and their achievements had increased their self-belief and esteem. For all children there had been development in verbal and social skills and an ability to work together as a team.

At the end of the block of sessions the children were proud of their achievements and recognised how their lives had been enriched by the experience.