

Riding for Smiles

Report for ***** primary School

Mental Health Project

July 2021

This school brought a group of 7 children with a variety of emotional needs for a period of 6 weeks in the summer term. It was decided that one child, who was struggling to cope in a school setting would work, initially, on a one to one basis, and the remaining 6 children would work together in a group. They had a mixture of additional needs including attachment issues, physical disabilities, severe anxiety, low confidence, poor social understanding and social skills, low mood, possible ASD, oppositional behaviour and related behaviour issues. Most had suffered from a variety of life and family difficulties such as bereavement or mental health problems. Their difficulties were adversely affecting their ability to function well in school for a variety of reasons. Some like routines and to know in advance what is happening and find change or uncertainty difficult to deal with. Some like to control all decisions and be self- directive. Some were attending Positive Play sessions and find it difficult to form proper friendships. All these pupils were in receipt of Pupil Premium.

This group arrived to the first session very excited but a little nervous as none had had contact with horses before. They were quiet and rather reserved to begin with but willingly responded when spoken to. They listened and concentrated well and followed instructions without fuss. As the session progressed they became more verbally interactive and began asking relevant questions. They all had a look around, met the small pony Jack and had a short hack out. With adult support, all mounted the ponies without fuss, left the yard relaxed

and returned with big smiles. The child working alone responded positively and calmly, despite him being unsure to begin with, of his expected achievement or enjoyment. After a lot of praise for behaviour and attitude he left feeling proud of himself and happy to return the following week.

During the course of the sessions the group had a combination of hacks out and riding lessons. The child working on a one to one initially only wanted to hack out, finding this activity relaxing and calming. For 2 weeks he hacked out alone, enjoying the solitude and the quietness. Due to his low self-esteem and belief in himself, he shied away from the more challenging activity of a lesson, where he would learn to control the horse by acting proactively. However, after watching the others have a lesson and familiarising himself with the activity he agreed to take part the following week. This child generally had a short application span, especially in a classroom learning or passive situation. However, when engaged in a riding lesson, or physical hands on activity in the yard, he took part with increased attention. Furthermore, over the weeks, he was also able to interact more positively with the other children and take part in the activities with the group. This was an immense step forward for this child.

Over the weeks this group made good progress with their riding skills. They slowly gained the confidence to apply themselves rather than to simply sit and let the leader do all the work. One child, who had little strength in the lower legs and who has physiotherapy to help improve walking skills, progressed to sitting in a very good position with heels down. This child put in maximum effort and mastered the rising trot by the end of the 6 weeks which was incredible development.

Another child, who was tiny in stature, very quiet and low in self-confidence, slowly built a good relationship with the pony and began to believe in her own ability. She put in maximum effort riding and increased in strength, balance and stability. By the end of the 6 weeks

her timid expression had turned into a smile and she was making excellent attempts at trotting.

During the stable yard activities this group of children worked well together and were able to share equipment and work together without fuss. They used good thinking skills and asked lots of questions relating to the activity. They took a specific interest in the horse's hooves, cleaning out the stables and hay making. They were especially interested in the carriage and requested that their last session was a ride in it. However, unfortunately this session was cancelled due covid.

At the end of the 6 weeks this group had made excellent progress in attaining targets. They will have a further set of sessions next term to continue their development. Children have already started to develop their self-esteem. The child initially working alone is now able to be part of the group. By accepting challenges and attaining small targets the children have started to develop confidence and self-belief. By giving achievable targets, making advanced deals on activities and giving rewards when these are followed through and achieved, behaviour has also been seen to improve. The quiet children are becoming chatty and displaying positive emotions. Friendships are starting to be built and happiness is displayed. This group are clearly benefitting from our provision.