

Riding for Smiles

Report for *** primary**

Mental Health project

July 21

This group of children had been identified as having significant emotional and comorbid problems and chosen to take part in the longer Mental Health Project which started in September. After a covid lockdown break they restarted sessions with us after Easter and continued through to the summer holidays. This meant that they benefited from the experience for a lengthy period of time. They were a lively group of children with a multitude of difficulties. All suffered from low self-esteem, low confidence and self-worth. In school they presented with a range of difficulties which affected their ability to access learning and integrate with others. Some were angry and suffered temper outbursts when they were unsure of something or couldn't have their own way. Some were easily anxious or had poor sleep or eating problems. Some had stressful or difficult backgrounds which affected their feelings of security. Most of the children suffered from poor listening and found staying on task difficult due to concentration difficulties. All craved extra attention and needed support to change habits which were affecting school life and attainment.

This group returned to the sessions confidently and were excited to be back. They quickly settled back into the routine but had forgotten some things they had learned 6 months ago (e.g. names of grooming brushes). Practical things had been better retained and they all had a basic knowledge of riding aids. Over the course of the sessions they had a combination of hacks and lessons and were equally happy with both, though some made more progress than others in the school. All

could explain how to make a horse walk, turn, stop and trot. The lessons kept the children more calm and focussed as they concentrated on the practical task in hand. For some a hack out could find them losing interest in the riding aspect and becoming distracted but for others the chance to be quiet and simply enjoy the rhythmic movement of the horse and the scenery was therapeutic and relaxing. By the summer 4 of these children had mastered the rising trot and the others were almost there. They all sat in better, more relaxed and stable positions and were able (with a leader) to make the pony stop, turn and walk.

Two children in this group suffered from sullen moods and could display a negative attitude at times. However, after weeks of splitting the group into smaller fractions during the stable activity they began to physically and verbally engage more. One responded really well to a volunteer leader and together they chatted away to each other. The other became more vocal and adopted a more positive attitude and tone when working alone away from her peers. This child needed to talk about what she was good at and receive praise and reassurance for her efforts. Over time this child's mood improved slowly and her self- assessment showed she had greatly enjoyed her experience.

Throughout this Project it was noted that the children found standing waiting or sedentary activities harder to positively engage with. Being physically and practically involved in a few short timed activities helped to keep them busy and inspired, which led to less behaviour issues and more positivity. Working in smaller groups also helped to keep them engaged and absorbed in the task, where they worked productively and to an end cause, especially when they were involved in conversation with an adult (e.g. plaiting the pony's mane, cleaning out a stable and clearing the yard of droppings).

At the end of the block of sessions both standard school assessments and ones devised by Riding for Smiles for the Mental Health Project were done on all the children we had worked with. They showed, as

we had agreed in our discussions, that many outcomes had been achieved. There had been improvement in behaviours and social skills (ability to share, work together, take turns and speak politely and respectfully to others). They had also developed emotionally and were more able to accept difficulties or failure and work towards a more favourable outcome positively. All had risen in confidence, self-esteem and self-belief. They had also taken part in an enjoyable new activity where they had learned new skills. For many of these children the sense of achievement was immense, and had an incredible positive effect on them. They wore their award Rosettes with pride on the last session, having indeed benefited from our provision.