

Riding for Smiles

Report for *****Special School

July 2021

A group of 11 secondary aged children attended from this special school for a block of 6 sessions. This was a larger group than we normally accommodate and were all from the same class. They had a variety of additional needs including physical, ASD, learning delay and language difficulties. Some were quiet and hesitant, others were chatty, lively and enthusiastic. A couple had behaviour and engagement issues related to ASD and a two were near the riding weight limit. The carriage was used each session so as to enable those who were unwilling or unable to ride the opportunity to take part alongside their peers who were riding.

This group attended the first session understandably nervous as most of them had never been near a horse before. For some, the unfamiliarity of the surroundings and routine also made them anxious, but all were well behaved and excited. The group were split into 3 and we divided the session into 3 activities (a ride or carriage ride, grooming a pony and a stable yard activity such as cleaning a stable) with the groups rotating around the activities. For the first session all had a carriage ride which was a nice introduction for them and allowed them all to take part in the same activity. In the weeks following 3 children each week had a carriage ride and the others rode on the horses.

From the second week this group became a lot more confident and vocal. Some children were chatty and asked lots of questions. Those who had poor language also displayed more engagement and interest. With a great deal of adult support and encouragement all the children who rode mounted the horses with minimum fuss, even when they were very anxious. On the first ride one child was

overwhelmed and tearful momentarily but soon relaxed and returned to the yard smiling. Some children needed side walkers initially, for either physical or emotional support, but over the course of the 6 weeks the children's confidence grew and they developed a more stable position. By the end of the block of sessions they were eager to get on the horses and happily looked around as they rode while engaging in interaction with staff and helpers. Two children who had physical difficulties and wore leg splints demonstrated immense resilience and determination. Mounting and dismounting needed careful movements with adult support but they were able to perform the task without fuss. Being able to ride had enabled these children to take part in an activity alongside their peers and they were very proud of their achievement.

This group especially enjoyed some of the stable yard activities and worked very well together. They practised their social skills of sharing, helping each other and turn taking when using the wheel barrow and dropping scoops. Physically handling the equipment allowed them to develop their hand eye coordination and motor skills. Over the course of the 6 weeks the group became more confident and enthusiastic around the small pony and were willing and confident enough to brush him. Some members of the group enjoyed plaiting his mane and tail and demonstrated good concentration and application when performing this task. For those who had short attention spans the opportunity to keep changing to a new activity helped to keep them busy.

By the end of the 6 week block the children were sad that their time with us had finished. They had all grown in confidence around the horses and made some steady progress in riding. Their achievements had helped build self-esteem and the opportunity to take part had widened their horizons and enriched their lives.