

Riding for smiles

Deprivation Group

October 2021

This school brought a group of children with a variety of social and emotional needs for a block of 6 sessions. All the pupils were on the SEMH Register (Social, Emotional and Mental Health) and 2 pupils had an EHCP (Education Health Care Plan). In addition to the social and emotional difficulties which these children present with some also had additional specific needs, such as autism, epilepsy, ADHD, language and communication problems and behaviour issues. One child accesses the local authority Behaviour Unit part time. Some children display inappropriate behaviours and linguistic responses, and had poor audio memory and emotional regulation. Lack of awareness of acceptable personal space was common amongst this group and reminders needed to be given on being respectful and keeping hands to themselves. Some were sullen and lacked confidence, had low self-esteem, were unsure and self-conscious or had a negative self- image and were inclined to constantly put themselves down.

Due to the combination of difficulties and personalities it was sometimes necessary to split 2 children and keep them in different groups. This enabled each one to be better focussed and to concentrate on the given task rather than interaction between the 2, thus leading to more positive involvement and outcomes. Objectives for these sessions included improving social skills and respectful interaction, developing language skills and improving motivation, concentration and application and increasing confidence and self-esteem.

The group arrived at the first session a little nervous and this was displayed through loudness and exuberance. They initially had poor

listening and focussing skills and talked all the time, needing adult support to calm and listen to instructions. They did, however, display good thinking skills, especially when the group had been split into 2 and they had more adult attention and less distraction from each other. All mounted the ponies without any fuss though they sat a little rigid to begin with. However, by the time they returned to the yard they were all smiling and sitting more relaxed. On the yard all except one child was willing to go close to the small pony to stroke him. When looking around the yard they listened well to the information they were being given and added comments but did not ask any questions.

Over the period of weeks the group took part in both hacks out and riding lessons and responded well to both. Once on the horse these children became quieter and more focussed. They listened well to instructions during the lessons, rose to the challenge and put in maximum effort to achieve. All sat in relaxed positions and were confident enough to perform the sitting trot. Two of the children, who suffer from anxiety and low self-esteem and often look troubled, especially began to relax and enjoy their achievements Their big smiles and positive comments about their enjoyment was lovely to observe. One child who has a tendency to be self-centric and negative built up a good relationship with the pony leader and began to engage in positive and relevant conversation. Another child who was usually loud and boisterous in class became much more focussed, calm and quiet on the horse.

During activities on the yard this group needed lots of physically engaging tasks which kept them busy. They especially enjoyed mucking out a stable and poo collecting around the yard. One child, who normally would be a bystander rather than get involved, needed a lot of adult encouragement to take part in the first 2 weeks but after that he engaged positively and independently. By keeping the topics physical, light and positive this group of children slowly

changed their conversation over a few weeks to be upbeat and relevant and they started to display a more caring thoughtful attitude towards the animals and their peers. They improved their ability to share time, space and equipment and started to work together as a team to complete a task.

Over the period of weeks these pupils developed many skills and improved attitudes. They had engaged in an activity which originally had taken them out of their comfort zones, taught them something new and increased their confidence and self-esteem with achievement. They had developed their social skills and positive interaction with their peers and others and were able to complete a given task with commitment. They had found the riding and stable activities both physically challenging, yet mentally relaxing, and had enjoyed the experience of taking part in something new in a different setting. Although this group of children would have benefitted from further sessions the outcomes of this Project had been achieved and both children and school staff were happy with their experience.