

Riding for Smiles

Report

Special School

December 2021

This school brought a group of 7 junior aged children with complex needs including global learning delay, ASD, behaviour problems, language difficulties and physical health problems. One child was in a wheel chair and so accessed the carriage each week, along with one of the other children. All the other children were capable of riding each week, though they all required at least one side walker.

Most of these pupils had limited or no spoken language and verbal understanding. They needed short sentence or one word instructions with lots of non-verbal extra communication. Some had extremely short attention and engagement spans and found transitions and waiting, such as moving from the bus to the yard or taking turns to mount the pony, difficult. This could result in behaviour outbursts which involved loud verbal expression and running or flopping to the floor. Some children with sensory issues initially found it upsetting to wear a hat or a vest and resisted touching the pony. Cause and effect behaviours were common, such as knocking over the water buckets to watch the water run out. All of these problems were expected at the first session as none of the children had been riding or near a horse before. Unfamiliarity in objects and routines frequently causes anxiety in children with ASD and we understood that we needed to work with the school to cater for individual needs and find ways which best provided a good learning experience.

On the first session hats and vests were fitted and, for those who resisted, a box of equipment was taken back to school and handled throughout the following week. All children were able to get onto the

ponies with a lot of adult support. These children were not able to understand the verbal instructions and so needed more physical assistance. They were not afraid, however, and sat very relaxed once on the ponies.

On the first session we tried dividing the group into 2 with one group riding and the other group taking part in an activity on the stable yard. This proved to be unsuccessful due to the engagement level of the children and the nature of the stable yard made the environment unsafe as the children were hard to contain in a certain area. We therefore decided that from the following week the group would only ride and this would be for a longer period. The small pony would be available on the yard for stroking or brushing fleetingly as the children passed him on their way back to the bus. It was also decided that hats and vests would be put on the children on the bus, in a contained space, so that waiting time was reduced on the yard. We also identified the best order of children to mount the ponies. The school increased their number of staff and we added extra volunteers to ensure that we had 2 side walkers with each rider.

From the second week the children had a 40 minute trek out into the quiet relaxed countryside. Each week they got on the horses without any fuss and sat relaxed and calm immediately they were on. All were confident and some didn't even feel the need to hold on to the saddle strap. They sat with natural innate balance and needed the side walkers due to unpredictable behaviour and actions rather than stability. These children enjoyed the higher vantage point which being on the ponies gave them and they happily looked around at their surroundings and other people. Sometimes they would wave and smile at people and the ones with limited language often uttered the odd relevant word to the pony leader. The child in the wheel chair, who had a weekly carriage ride, engaged in simple conversation with the stable staff and enjoyed giving the horse the command to trot. As with the riders, being up in the carriage allowed her to see further

and she found the movement of the carriage both relaxing and exciting. The other children who were chosen to have a carriage ride also enjoyed their experience.

Once this group of children understood the routine and became familiar with the process they became calmer and more positively responsive. They had all taken part in a new activity and the experience had widened their horizons and given them confidence and raised self-esteem. Simply coming on the bus to a different environment, then taking part in riding, had been an achievement for them. They had overcome their worries, control issues and sensory difficulties in order to take part and had benefitted from the relaxation and calm which riding brought. Outcomes for these pupils may appear small but they are immense in facilitating participation and the development of life skills.