

Riding for Smiles

Report

Deprivation Group

December 2021

This group consisted of a mixed aged group of children, ranging from reception to year 6. They had a variety of additional needs including social and emotional difficulties, extreme anxiety, attachment issues, language problems, physical difficulties (celiac) poor attention and concentration, ASD, poor confidence and global learning delay. All of the children were in receipt of pupil premium and free school meals and some have intervention from other professional bodies such as Paediatrician, Speech and Language therapists. They were a quiet reserved group of children who were hesitant to engage linguistically to begin with. One child, although having normal hearing, had no speech at all and used Makaton sign language. Two of the children have EHCP plans.

This group of children presented with an array of difficulties. One child had a lack of appropriate social skills and understood the surroundings and activities in a literal sense. This child also had heightened sensory skills and could be affected easily by sights and smells. One child lived in an imaginary situation and activities undertaken at the stables would be linked to a fantasy world. The children who suffered from extreme anxiety were understandably timid and clingy to the school staff to begin with. They were unwilling to engage in verbal communication, with one child having a comfort toy under their coat. School had noted an increase in difficulties for these children after lockdown and the restrictions of the pandemic, especially with anxiety, social integration and speech.

This group arrived at the first session very quiet and nervous. None of the children had ridden or been near a horse previously and so the sessions provided a new experience. They listened well to rules, information and were able to follow instructions with adult support and encouragement. They all listened and looked intently as they were shown around the yard and taken to meet the small pony. All managed to go close enough to him to stroke him with adult persuasion and support. All children were able to follow instructions and mount the pony without fuss at the first session despite being very nervous. Two small children had side walkers but sat relaxed and confidently. All returned to the yard with big smiles and couldn't wait for the following week.

Throughout the 6 week period the group had a mix of treks, riding lessons and, in the penultimate week, a carriage ride. This group enjoyed all of the options equally. They all made good progress with the riding lessons and gained confidence very quickly. By the end of the 6 weeks most were able to perform a trot with their arms out rather than holding onto the saddle and could tell me how to make the pony walk, stop, trot and turn. Only 1 child needed to retain a side walker, though he was able to try trotting. This child had the same leader each week who was able to use some basic Makaton signing with him and enhance his understanding and communication. In week 3 one child was replaced by another who had ridden before. This child was able to perform the rising trot and was confident controlling the pony and around the horses.

The group took part in a variety of stable yard activities, including grooming and leading a pony, cleaning a stable, poo collecting around the yard, filling hay nets and water buckets and learning to name the body parts of the pony. The group worked well together, supporting each other in jobs and showing/telling each other how best to perform tasks. They especially enjoyed the poo collecting and wheeling the wheel barrow. They soon learned to share equipment,

time and space without adult intervention. The older members of the group could often be seen to be helping the younger ones in a caring and helpful manner, which was a pleasure to watch. The children in this group were quick to learn the names of the grooming brushes and groomed the pony with purpose, completing a task rather than flitting from one thing to another.

Over the 6 weeks many outcomes had been met. Social skills had been developed and children had practised and developed their language skills. They had grown in confidence and self-esteem and had learned new skills. Children had worked out of their comfort zones and extended their horizons. These children were sad to leave us and were vocal in expressing their pleasure and happiness in taking part.