

Riding for smiles

Report for Deprivation Group October 2021

This school brought a group of mixed aged children ranging from reception to year 6. This was the first time we had worked with a group consisting of such varied ages. The children had a variety of additional needs including poor social skills, poor concentration, learning delay, language difficulties and low self-esteem and confidence. Some were on the SEN register and some free school meals. This group also had a child in a wheel chair who had a carriage ride each week. Having the facility of the specialist carriage enabled truly inclusive provision

Over the period of 6 weeks these pupils took part in riding lessons and treks and a variety of stable yard activities. Due to the cross section of ages these pupils benefitted from a variety of interaction opportunities which aided their general progress. It was lovely to observe the older ones caring for the younger members of the group and the younger ones taking confidence from their older peer's guidance.

On the first visit this group of children responded in a variety of ways. Some children were very quiet, reserved and hesitant to speak – clearly overwhelmed by the new and unfamiliar situation. Some were exuberant, loud and excited and displayed poor listening. With a lot of encouragement and guidance, however, the children all successfully mounted the ponies and soon sat in a relaxed position. All returned from the trek smiling, some eagerly chatting about their experience. Those who remained quiet demonstrated their enjoyment with their general demeanour which was more upbeat than when they had

arrived. When looking around the yard some children became generally chattier though they didn't ask any questions related to the situation or what they were observing. They all happily stroked the small pony with support and listened carefully to a description of the activities which they would take part in over the coming weeks.

This group of children gained confidence in riding very quickly and especially enjoyed the riding lessons. One child, who had a tendency at the beginning to present with a sullen apprehensive attitude, soon began to express enjoyment and happiness. With this he began to engage more in conversation, especially with his pony leader. All children were happy to try trotting and tried hard to follow the riding instructions. Success with any of the tasks led to increased self-esteem and confidence with the children being very proud with what they had achieved. Some children vocalised this while others simply showed their feelings when an adult expressed their achievement. Over the weeks the children started to build good relationships with the pony leaders and would often ask for that person to support them. They also began to favour certain ponies although they were happy to ride any.

The group took part in a variety of stable yard activities, such as grooming, cleaning a stable, filling hay nets and water buckets, leading a pony and poo collecting. As they learned what to do they became more confident and could work more independently. Some pupils were able to complete a task with purpose independently while others needed more adult support to keep focused. For these pupils it was beneficial to have short bursts at activities and to change them in order to keep a positive approach. Being physically very active helped achieve the engagement. This group soon learned how to work well together, employing teamwork skills and sharing time, space and equipment without fuss. Adult staff interaction focussed on verbal commentary on and praising good behaviour.

The child in the wheel chair was originally brought to the session alongside his sibling who was able to ride. This allowed the 2 children to both take part in a horse activity. This is one of only a few activities which is accessible enough to allow the siblings to jointly partake. Although the child has a multitude of difficulties, including very little physical movement and no language, his enjoyment could be easily observed. When spoken to about the carriage ride he would smile in response. He would react in the same way and laugh when the horse was made to trot and the carriage moved faster. The physical motion and sounds of the horse's hooves were able to bring simple pleasure and being higher up in the carriage gave a wider view point. On returning to the yard the smallest pony was brought up close to the child. His hand would be held and moved to stroke the pony, which gave sensual satisfaction. This gentle pony seemed to understand the importance and nature of his job and could often be seen snuffling at the child's hands and body. These things, though small and simple, were of immense importance and invaluable in the experience of this small child.

Over the 6 weeks various outcomes were achieved. The group developed increased thinking skills and relevant verbal interaction. Social skills improved and confidence and self-esteem were increased. The pupils' horizons had been widened and they had experienced enjoyment in a new activity.