

Riding for Smiles – April 2022

Research and Development of RfS' Mental Health Programme – Funded by the National Lottery Community Fund

Stephanie Hind PGCE, BA – Riding for Smiles' Special Educational Needs
advisor and project liaison officer

Dr. Geoff Cutts PhD, MSc, BSc – Chair of Riding for Smiles' Trustees

1. Introduction

Riding for Smiles is a charity offering inclusive and innovative equestrian-based activities to disabled and vulnerable children, young people, and adults. This includes those who have physical, social, learning, behavioural and emotional/mental disabilities, or multiple needs and those who are disaffected, excluded, or marginalised. Riding for Smiles collaborates with schools, special schools, behaviour units, disability sports clubs, adults with mental health issues and other charities to bespoke projects to meet individual and group needs.

Riding for Smiles sessions and activities provide enjoyable, enrichment experiences and recreational opportunities which develop confidence and self-esteem, self-regulation, positive social interaction, motivation, calmness, thoughtfulness, resilience and provide physical exercise and emotional and verbal wellbeing.

Riding for Smiles delivers four programmes in partnership with the Coloured Cob Equestrian Centre and local schools.

1. The Mental Health / Deprivation Programme for Mainstream Schools
2. A highly flexible Programme developed for SEND schools.
3. A Programme to enable RfS to work with other charities for the benefit of their beneficiaries.
4. A Programme designed for groups of adults with mental health problems.

This paper describes the research and development for the Mental Health Programme.

2. The Mental Health Programme.

The Programme was planned in accordance with the Well-Being Pathway guidance which Includes Promote (environment supporting emotional growth), Identify (individuals needing support), Assess (specific needs for appropriate intervention), Provide (interventions to match specific needs), Review (how needs are being met and next steps, and Celebrate (reflect on positives, efforts, and success).

2.1 Identifying Risk Factors

After studying the wealth of material available from mental health organisations Riding for Smiles identified the key risk factors known to cause poor emotional health and mental health issues in children. The head teachers from the participating schools identify the children to take part in the programme who all have one or more of these risk factors. Indeed, some children are complex cases and suffer from a combination of factors. Riding for Smiles therefore decided to include a list of these factors in the assessments to record which are relevant to each pupil and compare them with their presenting problems. Riding for Smiles can then analyse the findings on final assessments and outcomes and see if there is a correlation between successful activities and strategies and the possible cause of mental health issues.

The main identifying Risk Factors Include:-

Genetics	Parental lack of emotional warmth
Low IQ	Parental psychiatric illness
Specific developmental delay or neurodiversity	Parental criminality
Communication problems	Parental alcoholism or drug use
Difficult temperament	High family stress level due to low income
Physical illness	Family stress due to sick relative / sibling
Academic failure	Parent with personality disorder
Low self-esteem	Death and loss (including friendships)
Overt parental conflict including domestic violence	Bullying
Family breakdown (including in care)	Discrimination
Hostile rejecting relationships	Deviant peer influences / Peer pressure
Failure of parents to adapt to child's changing needs	Socio-economic disadvantage
Physical, sexual neglect or emotional abuse	Homelessness

2.2 Areas of emotional and mental health concerns.

The children chosen to take part in the programme present with a wide range of problems which are severely affecting their positive engagement in learning and therefore reaching their potential. For most their poor emotional health also has an impact on their ability to function proactively in society.

All the children involved in this programme present with several the problems listed below:

Insecure about own worth	Poor externalising behaviours (fighting, aggression, violating rules)
Unable to articulate feelings	Internalising behaviours (anxiety and depression)
Withdrawn (sometimes showing discomfort)	Persistent state of anxiety or arousal preventing learning taking place
Unable to form good meaningful relationships	Depression/low mood / withdrawn
Unable to behave appropriately to social environment	Conduct and eating disorders
Attachment issues	Self- harm
Poor school attendance	OCD
Signs of offending/challenging behaviours	Unable to accept praise
Lack of engagement in activities at home and school	Refers to self in negative terms
Poor emotional literacy (identifying and labelling emotions, recognising physical and emotional cues or emotions, verbalising emotional experiences)	Poor care of property
Low confidence and self-esteem	No responsibility for behaviour / accepting consequences
No pride in own work, behaviour, or achievements	Unable to accept criticism/ frustration
Unable to deal with emotions	Does not express feelings appropriately
Poor empathy skills	Lack of empathy
Angry outbursts / disruptive behaviour	Finds it difficult to start / complete tasks
Attention seeking	Poor organisation / attention, involvement, and concentration
Poor child / parent relationship	Mood swings
	Lack of motivation
	Negative attitude
	Feelings related to stigma (isolated, ashamed, blames self)

2.3 Objectives and outcomes

Riding for Smiles will determine the desired objectives and outcomes for the programme alongside the head teachers. Once the head teachers have identified the participating children, planning discussions will take place to outline the key issues and needs and how the schools hope that sessions will help.

Once the assessments have been completed at the beginning of the programme further discussions will then be held to determine more specific objectives and outcomes which are related to the assessment results. Achievement targets are then planned with rosettes and certificates presented at the end of each block of sessions. Targets are always set in small achievable steps to foster positivity and build self-esteem.

Below are common objectives and outcomes, though each group will have their own individual set dependent on needs and difficulties.

Development of social skills	Improved child / parent relationships
Increased self-confidence and self-esteem	Reduction of inappropriate behaviour
Development of self-worth	Increased motivation, enthusiasm, positivity, and inspiration
Improved responsiveness to others	Increased ability to deal with uncertainty
Development of self-respect and pride in own achievements and behaviour	Reduction of stress and anxiety
Development of respect for others and for nature	Development of resilience to challenging situations and environments
Development of language and communication skills	Development of independence and the ability to work with others
Development of positive relationships with adults and peers	Increased positive engagement in activities

2.4 Project Delivery and Strategies

Due to the complex nature of the problems associated with the children involved Riding for Smiles believes it is vital to believe and adhere to the following six principles:

- Children's learning/presentation needs to be understood developmentally.
- Each group should be offered a safe place to develop.
- Nurture is important for the development of well-being.
- Language is a vital means of communication.
- All behaviours are communication.
- Transitions are important in children's lives.

The aim of the programme sessions is to provide the children with an enjoyable alternative approach to learning vital social and emotional skills. Riding for Smiles will promote a learning style which uses a powerful combination of visual, physical, and naturalistic ways of learning. The primary activities are riding, and horse related tasks.

A full list of activities is included as appendix A.

These function as a conduit for practising and achieving various social, emotional, physical and language skills. The chance to take part in a special extra-curricular activity, free of charge and otherwise not accessible to the child, acts as a motivator to keep the child engaged. To achieve the best results, however, Riding for Smiles realises the need to adopt a very caring, patient, and nurturing approach to the sessions.

Due to the complex nature of the mental health of these children, sessions are planned to adhere to school nurture group strategies by providing the following:

- Consistent explicit and predictable patterns.
- Nurturing, comforting and affectionate staff.
- Expectation of behaviours clearly discussed.
- Providing a safe space where children feel protected and are given some choices and a sense of control.

Riding for Smiles appreciates that many of the children taking part will start very warily and be either withdrawn, apprehensive, defensive or display difficult behaviour. By remaining consistent, firm but caring, the aim is to form positive and trusting relationships with the children. By allowing them to be immersed in an accepting and warm environment, where calmness and care towards humans and animals is observed, any missing or distorted early nurturing experiences can begin to be replaced.

By understanding the emotional issues of each child, Riding for Smiles plans activities around individual needs to enable fulfilment of planned objectives and outcomes. During the session, in all activities, Riding for Smiles staff will proactively model giving examples through actions and speech, and drawing attention to appropriate behaviour, social skills and constructive interaction. Children will be encouraged to take turns, wait patiently, use non-verbal and verbal cues, speak politely, accommodate differences, pay other compliments, have a positive approach, and enjoy celebrating. When observed to be acting in these ways children will be commended and praised.

To help build each child's feeling of self-worth Riding for Smiles will aim to make them feel valued and part of a group. Group identity is vital to a feeling of belonging and security. To achieve this, the Pupil Voice will be used in planning activities, where everyone can say what they would like to know/learn/take part in, and the goals they want to achieve. In that way they take ownership of their participation and learning. To build interpersonal skills children will be encouraged to help motivate and praise each other.

To help children, build their self-confidence and resilience they will be gently encouraged to try new things out of their comfort zone when they feel ready and to adopt breathing, relaxing, and visualising to reduce anxiety, impulses, and strong emotions. Riding and indeed even being near a horse, is usually something the children have never done before and so fear of being close to large animal is understandable. Riding for Smiles know that often children learn that once they have taken the first step and face their fears, they have a feeling of immense pride and euphoria. At all times, every child will be treated as an individual with their own steps to achievement.

Most of the children understand their own difficulties and frequently voice these. Riding for Smiles' staff will be mindful of the key factors which children state as being important to their own good mental health, such as having a key person to talk to, having a time out space, distraction activities, being included, making, and keeping friends and having smooth transitions. The project sessions will allow for all of these. The physical nature of riding and access to the quiet scenic environment, alongside therapeutic animal contact, will allow the children the opportunity to relax and be away from their worries. Often these children find social interaction difficult and therefore are excluded from groups or have few friends so being part of a project group helps them to feel a sense of belonging and, with adult support, to make friends.

At the beginning, end and throughout the sessions children will be encouraged and helped to express their emotions in an appropriate way by practising and developing emotional vocabulary. They will be asked how they feel about certain activities (worried, scared, excited, apprehensive, ecstatic etc.) and what things would change that feeling. Activities will also be managed to help children empathise with others by recognising their feelings as well as to understand how their own feelings and behaviour impact onto others. Reflection is an important part of discussions with the aim of helping children understand the consequences of actions and to make a positive choice in actions for the well-being of themselves and others.

Many of the children involved in the project have low self-esteem, a poor self-image, and negative expectations. Staff will always display a positive attitude and demeanour, talk in a happy tone, and emphasise a “can do” approach and a perceived favourable outcome. Rosettes and certificates will be used as awards on a regular basis to mark achievements, no matter how small, to foster pride and good feelings. Overall, the approach Riding for Smiles will be positive praise, attention, and reward.

The mental health programme will provide:-

- Time and space for relaxation.
- A ‘time-out’ from stress and worries.
- A safe and relaxing environment giving the opportunity to talk.
- Improved ability to assess risks and make sensible informed decisions in dealing with situations.
- Development of physical health and an increase in mental wellbeing.

The Programme will comprise weekly visits to the stables Ideally over a single term. The planning is to deliver twelve sessions for each child over this time.

2.5 Assessments, Monitoring and Evaluation.

To assess the effectiveness of the Mental Health Programme it was necessary to develop a robust assessment system which can be used by all schools participating, therefore giving a consistent standardised score and comparable scoring system. This will help define the effectiveness of the project when analysing the assessments and documented observations at the end of each block. Furthermore, it will also help to determine useful activities and strategies for desired outcomes and will identify shortfalls, hence helping to improve facilities and provision in the future.

A wide range of materials and information is available from various places, which are concerned with identifying and managing emotional and mental health and well-being, behaviour, and social and physical engagement, including the following:

- Derbyshire County Council – “Emotional and Mental Health Toolkit”
- Derbyshire Clinical Commissioning Group – Qwell Xenzone (Mental Health Toolkit for schools)
- The Stirling Children Well Being Scale
- The Warwick – Edinburgh Mental Health well-being scale (Health and quality of life outcomes)
- MIND “Get Set to Go” Toolkit
- Boxall Profile
- Emotional Progress Tracker – KS1 and KS2 (Derbyshire County Council Schools)
- Mental Health England – Mental first Aider Training

The Boxall profile assessment is a standard assessment tool used by schools and will be used with all participating children at the beginning of the project which gives an outline of basic problems and issues faced by the children. This will help identify any useful activities which can be aimed at developing necessary skills or attitudes. Results of these scores and the desired outcomes determined will be discussed with the head teachers at the beginning of the project. This will then be repeated at the end of the project and scores compared.

A pupil questionnaire has been devised which uses information gained from the other material. This will be completed in school at the beginning and end of the project and again scores and answers analysed to ascertain the effectiveness of the project and specific progress made by the children. Riding for Smiles has also produced a simple "riding/activity" questionnaire, along the lines of the MIND "Get Set to Go" questionnaire.

The Boxall Profile is the most popular measurement tool used in schools to identify children's mental health needs and has been highlighted in the Department for Education 2018 "Mental Health and Behaviour in Schools" advice. It will be completed by school staff on each pupil involved before and at the end of the project.

It identifies the levels of skills which children possess to access learning and is in a 2-part check list – Developmental strands and Diagnostic Profile. It helps to set individualised achievable targets which reinforce target behaviour and skills and then tracks progress. In terms of the Mental Health Programme, it will help identify the issues of emotional and behavioural difficulties faced by individual children and show areas of improvement over the period they have been involved in the sessions.

The Boxall Profile consists of a list of statements which give a score which can be compared to standardised emotional literacy scores of "completely functioning" children of similar age. Each section has three descriptive items, which sets individual achievable targets for social and emotional aptitudes. Once these are identified at the beginning of the project these targets are built into the learning outcomes in the riding and horse related sessions and activities employed take these into account.

The Developmental Strand includes aspects of the child's learning development, for example, how they organise their learning and how they internalise controls. Examples of statements in this section include "disengaged," "gives purposeful engagement/attention," "is competent at managing own needs."

The Diagnostic Profile describes behaviours which inhibit or interfere with the child's satisfactory involvement in school such as undeveloped behaviour and unsupported development. These are directly or indirectly the outcome of impaired learning in early years. By identifying such issues, the aim is to focus intervention based on redressing social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties, by patient and supportive interaction. Once these areas have been identified discussion between school staff and Riding for Smiles will take place to outline useful strategies and activities which will help address the issues and assist individual development.

Questionnaires were the subject of lengthy discussions with head teachers on aspects of children's behaviour and presentation which are linked to a form of emotional or mental health problem. It was decided to design a targeted questionnaire which will be completed for each child. A simple grid was designed which identifies all areas of concern and identifying risk factors, in addition to recording the child's own understanding. This will give a quick overall view and a score which we can compare at the beginning and end of the project and help to analyse how the activities have been effective in dealing with their issues. The questionnaire also includes the child's own views consists of statements such as "I have been dealing with problems well," "I've been feeling good about myself," "I've been feeling loved."

A Riding for Smiles questionnaire based on the physical and sporting side of the project has also been designed. These questions on the MIND "Get Set to Go" Toolkit which looks specifically at the link between good mental health and physical/sporting activity. Questions include "How often do you take part in physical /sporting activities each week?" and "Are you confident around horses?" This questionnaire will be completed at the beginning and end of the project and answers analysed to see if there has been any meaningful change in attitude and behaviours. This questionnaire helps us as a charity to evaluate our provision.

Schools administer the Boxall Profile and questionnaires at the beginning and end of the project. Children are not named on the assessment sheets; a coding system is used to allow each child to be identified. All scores will be collated, and assessment /analysis will take place between Riding for Smiles and the head teachers to discuss the findings and involvement of all children.

A report on the findings, including any changes deemed necessary for future projects will then be written, and made available to participating bodies.

3. From planning to Implementation

The first groups of children have now completed their 12-week programme. Early findings look positive with considerable progress reported.

Detailed analysis is now underway. A paper reporting the results will be published later in 2022.

Appendix 1 Activities which make up an Equestrian Experience

- Pony trekking through Creswell Crag, an enclosed limestone gorge occupied during the last ice age.
- Carriage riding also through the Crag.
- 'Formal' riding lessons where the children develop muscle strength and flexibility by practicing their balance, riding with arms outstretched, controlling the pony by riding in circles, changing rein etc, and many learn to ride at trot. The lesson to trek ratio varies from child to child.

The above activities provide a one-to-one opportunity to talk to the children and listen to the children as they ride through the Crag with its wide selection of flora and wildlife. E.g., The swans nest and cygnets, ducklings, hyena.

Stable yard activities designed to develop social interpersonal skills and language skills include:-

- Pony grooming, the use of brushes etc and safely approaching and being in proximity with a large animal.
- Cleaning and learning about tack and the need to look after valuable belongings.
- Looking after ponies – feeding, filling hay nets and water buckets.
- Poo picking – looking after the environment, sharing wheelbarrows, using tools safely etc.
- Practicing listening, understanding, and following instructions leading to the appreciation and understanding of a challenging, dangerous environment.

All the activities are aimed at allowing the children an opportunity to challenge themselves and to build their confidence and self-esteem.

