



Together we are riding for smiles

A case study of a five-year-old child who had recently been taken into care and then fostered. This child had two siblings who had also been fostered, together, with a different family. The five-year-old had therefore recently suffered considerable trauma, first in the original home setting, and then being separated from his siblings.

The child presented with a variety of emotional and learning difficulties. He was quiet and withdrawn and had limited verbal engagement with adults or peers. He was timid and reticent to involve himself in any shared activity and therefore lacked basic social skills. After discussion with the school, we decided that we would offer him access to our provision alongside his two siblings which would give them all the opportunity to be together while taking part in an enjoyable activity.

This gave them vital social contact with each other while offering them a chance to learn and develop new skills. For all three children we hoped that taking part would increase their confidence and self-esteem and begin to heal their emotional difficulties.

They would have chance to practice social skills in a positive and relaxed environment and situation as well as to begin to observe and use interpersonal skills appropriately. We also believed that the five-year-old, if enjoying the non-threatening and exciting activity, would begin to open up and engage in verbal communication. We knew that small, positive, encouraging steps would be needed and it would be paramount that the child felt safe and secure and worked at his own pace.

The child attended the first session extremely shy and anxious. He clung to his teacher and withdrew from social interaction, hiding his face when spoken to and refusing to verbally engage. He had an air of wariness about him, though it was possible to detect an interest in what was going on around him. He clearly had no confidence and was reluctant to take part in any activity. However, he did watch and listen intently. As we expected, he was too anxious to actually ride the pony on the first week, but with a great deal of encouragement, and having observed his siblings riding, was willing to take part on the second week.

Observing the interaction between the three siblings was emotionally very moving. They clearly missed each other and benefitted from the emotional strength of being together in a positive environment undertaking enjoyable activities. The two older children were physically warm to their brother and were eager to take care of him. Their support and encouragement helped him to overcome his fears around riding and horse related activities and slowly he began to copy them. Over the weeks he slowly grew in

confidence and became more willing to take part in every activity we presented him with, eventually without the assistance of his siblings. He began to work in simple terms alongside his peers on such tasks as cleaning a stable, sharing equipment and taking turns. As he became more secure with our staff, the location, and tasks he became more talkative.

By the end of the sessions, he was offering verbal communication in the way of commenting on tasks and telling us what he had done. He was also beginning to engage verbally with his peers in a limited way when encouraged. Over the weeks he started to display a real enjoyment for riding and having a tactile experience, stroking, and brushing, with the small pony. He would engage with this quietly, and with a lot of thought, but his facial expressions and body language displayed a much calmer attitude.

By week five this child could often be observed smiling and laughing which was an encouraging sign. He had built up a good relationship with the pony he usually rode and showed a caring attitude towards it. His growth in confidence had led him to be willing to challenge himself physically in riding lessons, learning to trot and control the pony around markers. This then led to him feeling very proud of his achievements and hence a growth in self-esteem. Furthermore, as the weeks progressed, we saw a more relaxed interaction with his siblings as they all enjoyed the activity sessions together, from which they all clearly benefitted.

We believe our sessions had been proactive in helping emotional scars to begin healing and in providing an alternative enjoyable activity which enabled learning to take place in a comfortable, happy, and safe manner. For the child and his siblings outcomes had surpassed our expectations and made us all proud of what we provide for these and all our children.

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