



Horsemanship Teaches Humanship

By Kathy Lutz

When David reaches the barn door, he stops, takes a deep breath, shakes out his arms and exhales. Then he feels ready to enter his horse's world, a place where his anxiety and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) have less power over him. Here, David feels present in the moment, knowing no one is going to make fun of him. His equine friends are very glad to see him—and the bag of carrots he has remembered to bring with him.

But neither he nor his family refer to this as “therapy.”

At Rocking Horse Rehab (RHR), a pediatric rehabilitation and family wellness center specializing in equine-assisted activities and therapies (EAAT) along with alternative and traditional therapeutic treatments, we have learned to describe our program to participants like David and his parents as a “training program.” Learn to be good with horses and, as a bonus, you will become better with people. Parents

asked that we stop calling it therapy because their children had already been seen by many mental health professionals and were tired of being told they needed more counseling.

The feeling that their relationship with the horse matters, that they can make a difference in the life of that horse and enjoy good times together is wonderful for a person's self-esteem.

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Another parental concern was that the skills learned in our program needed to be generalized so students would practice them outside of the barn and other training periods. Previously, skills their children learned in therapy weren't evidenced in behavior at home or at school. For example, students could be very good at modulating their voices and movements in sessions but would continue to talk too loudly at home and become very agitated in class.

To address these concerns RHR developed a Horsemanship/Humanship Skills Training Program with educational material, exercises and workshops. The program teaches students horsemanship lessons and then shows them how to translate the lessons they learn in the barn into "humanship skills," which they are encouraged to practice at home and school. To reinforce these skills, family sessions are scheduled periodically to review the student's progress.

To further raise students' awareness and engage them in wanting to make these behavioral changes outside of the barn, our program emphasizes the similarities between how horses and humans behave. Children like David, and other students with a variety of mental health issues, including Asperger's disorder, anxiety and mood disorders, frequently find that working with horses improves their attention and focus, reduces anxiety, increases self-esteem and motivates them to improve their social skills. Kids stay motivated because the relationship with a beloved horse is central to all of this work.

Horse Herds and Human Families

As we work with children in the barn, we discuss the connections between horse herds and human families. Children, who are curious about

how horses act toward each other and toward them, can easily relate to this explanation. This approach enables us to enhance their understanding of herd dynamics and family dynamics and further their social skills. They learn that humans are not so different from horses and that, like families, herds need leaders and that we, as humans, are the leaders for our horses. We like to use the phrase "Be the better horse," which means be the leader your horse needs you to be.

Discussion of the similarities between herds and families generally leads to more information about the family as seen through the child's eyes and a greater understanding of their role in the family, how they relate to their parents and siblings, their likes and dislikes and the way feelings are communicated in the family. Children learn that feelings are communicated through body language, and horses, who respond so immediately to this language, are great teachers for the students.

Body Language and Social Cues

Understanding body language is essential to remaining safe with horses, becoming more comfortable

with them and being better able to communicate with both horses and people. Through herd observation and barn tours, students learn how to read horses' communication through body language. Students are taught to pay attention to what the horse is saying with his eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, tail and legs. For example, ears back and down means the horse is annoyed or angry; if his eyes are very wide, he may be surprised or fearful. If his eyes are soft and he is licking and chewing, he may be feeling relaxed. In the herd, students come to learn that Belle is the calm leader, Noggin



The students at Rocking Horse Rehab stay motivated because the relationship with a beloved horse is central to all of the work they do to learn to get along better with other people and with themselves.

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Herd & Family Dynamics

Herd Dynamics

Lead Stallion
Lead Mare
The Rest of the Herd

Qualities include:

Age
Temperament
Size
Fighting
Wither Nibbling
Whinnying

Family Dynamics

Father or Parental Role Model
Mom or Parental Role Model
Siblings, Cousins & Friends

Age
Temperament
Size
Fighting
Signs of affection
Saying hello or calling out to someone

is the mischief maker and Small Fry is anxious. To further emphasize the similarities between horses and humans, we ask our students how they would describe themselves and members of their own family.

We help students compare horse body language to human body language. When we enter the barn, we check in at the feelings chart hanging on the wall—a poster of many faces expressing different feelings. This aids in building our students' feelings vocabulary and gives them a face to help identify the feeling. In working with students in the classroom setting, we discuss what the teacher is communicating through her body language—when she might be kidding, when she might be serious or when she might be getting annoyed—so the students can start to understand how they might adjust their behavior. This requires good listening and observation skills just like we used in the barn with our horses. For example,

we might ask: What does it mean if the teacher is suddenly quiet and is staring at you without smiling? Then we ask them to compare this to a horse pinning his ears back, so they can understand that both are annoyed. Students are better able to make these connections when the information comes from a horse they trust.

Body language awareness is increased through role-play exercises in which students compare their body expressions to their horses' expressions. Then we ask students to do the following role-play with their families.

- Pretend you are a horse and demonstrate how horses express themselves with their bodies.
- Tell your family what a horse is communicating with the body language below:
 - ~ Moving ears
 - ~ Stomping front hoof
 - ~ Swishing tail
 - ~ Wide eyes

- ~ Lifted tail
- ~ Licking and chewing
- See if your family understands what the horse is (you are) saying.
- Next mix up some of the movements and have them guess the meaning.
- Then show your family the same feelings with your own body language and see if they are able to guess correctly.

When we feel the students have a good understanding of body language (both horse and human), we move on to understanding social behaviors.

Social Behaviors

There are many similarities between the social behaviors of horses and humans. This topic is addressed in the first visit to the barn. We discuss the importance of students using an “indoor voice” and review the polite ways to introduce ourselves to a horse, using appropriate touch and respecting personal space. Horses will quickly give feedback if they do not like the way they are approached. This gives students the opportunity to modify their behavior in the barn. For instance, when David first came to the barn and approached a horse in the stall, the horse moved away from him to the far end of the stall. David learned that if he took a few deep breaths to calm himself, he could enter the horse's personal space in a more mindful way, and the horse would stand still and greet him. If a horse turns to bite when a student is adjusting the girth, the topic of appropriate touch may be the focus of that session.

We may ask a student to spend time getting to better know a horse through grooming. Students are asked to find the horse's sweet spot, to discover if there are places where he doesn't like to be touched, all while adjusting their approach according to the horse's body language. We

compare this to the ways we are touched in our families. For example, we might ask students, “Does your mom brush your hair or help you brush your teeth? Is mom gentle or rough? How would you like to be touched?” Treating the horse as a member of the family strengthens the positive bond experienced in this work. Feedback is much easier to hear when it comes from a horse that has a special role in a child’s life.

Emphasizing the importance of personal hygiene for our horses encourages discussion of how our students are taking care of their bodies (or not). It’s so interesting that students will spend time cleaning hooves and mucking stalls but won’t shower or brush their own teeth. We reinforce the idea that our horse depends on us to care for him and taking care of ourselves makes us a better leader for our horse, able to be consistent and responsible.

Clear respectful communication is essential to healthy relationships with both horses and humans and can sometimes be challenging for our students, and this is frequently evident during a riding session. Students may ask their horse for the trot but pull back on the reins. We explain that this is a very confusing message for the horse—he doesn’t know what he is being asked to do. Then we draw a similarity between how humans can give confusing messages to each other. We ask the student, “When you are happy to see someone, are you greeting them while looking at them, smiling and perhaps giving them a high five?” If not, we tell them the other person might think we don’t care that they are there.

Students practice greeting their horse and their instructor with good eye contact, appropriate touch and friendly words. Such practice opens the door to discussing situations students experience with friends, family or in the classroom. By working on these



The social behavior of horses and humans is very similar, which is why horse herds and human families have much in common.

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Social Behaviors

Horses

Greetings

- Use “inside voices.”
- Use the “horse handshake.”

Touch:

- Some horses like to be touched.
- Some horses like to be touched only in certain areas.
- Some horses do not like to be touched at all.

Personal Space:

- Keep an arm’s length away.
- Stalls are like their bedrooms—safe places to be alone.

Personal Hygiene:

- Clean their teeth.
- Brush their mane.
- Brush their coats.
- Pick their hooves.

Feelings:

- Express how they feel through body language.

Humans

- Use “inside voices.”
- Look at someone when speaking to them.

- Some people like to be hugged.
- Others do not like to be hugged.
- Others do not like to be touched at all.

- Stay an arm’s length away.
- Stay out of people’s rooms or places where they want to be alone.

- Brush your teeth.
- Brush your hair.
- Take a shower.
- Cut your nails.

- Express how you feel.
- Ask for help.

social behaviors with horses, students are able to work in a safe environment because horses don't judge, they quickly forgive and they want to be social.

Issues and Interventions

Horses, of course, have issues just as humans do, so in the program we normalize them and show students that horses have some of the same limitations and issues as humans. Students get to know the horses in the barn, some of which don't work in the program. They are able to identify those with anger management problems and issues with personal space and or attention. We ask students to choose the horse they feel is most like them and we discuss the reasons why the horse may be acting this way and what the student and horse have in common.

Small Fry, a Miniature Horse, is one of the horses with issues with whom our students can relate. Because he looks different from the other equines in the barn, he is often treated poorly by them. They put their ears back when they see him and show their teeth as if they are going to bite him, acting very much like bullies. In addition, Small Fry is frightened by those humans who don't bend down to his eye level. With his concerns about the other horses and bigger people, Small Fry has two issues: bullies and anxiety.

Our students can relate to Small Fry because they share some of the same experiences. When walking Small Fry through the barn, students have opportunities to practice protecting someone, using calming words and touch, making good decisions and managing conflict. In addition, we help them practice calming exercises (body scan, deep breathing or muscle relaxation) while sitting outside of Small Fry's stall. Students find that the more they regulate their mood and behavior, the more likely Small Fry

will come hang his head by them. This is the wonder of the feedback that horses share with us.

The coping strategies we use to help our horses are often the same as those used by humans. For example, Noggin is a horse with a nipping problem. He nips at everything and can't seem to stop this behavior. We explain that if he were a human, we could let him know that these thoughts about nipping are not in control of him and he could choose to behave differently. We could let him know that nothing bad would happen if he would stop listening to those thoughts. He could use distractions from these thoughts to help stop the behavior and that's what we have our horse handlers do for Noggin: they distract him from his thoughts. If students are going to groom Noggin, we will brainstorm with them ways to distract Noggin if the nipping thoughts try to take over. Through this process students learn strategies that work well for managing anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder and some autism spectrum disorders.

Finally, we teach students that the following traits/strategies are needed for both successful relationships with horses and successful relationships with humans:

- **Patience**—Horses have no sense of time, just the here and now.
- **Calmness**—We can't rush horses.
- **Willingness to use all senses**—Horses use all theirs, so we, too, must in order to communicate with them.
- **Trustworthiness**—Consistency builds trust with horses and humans.
- **Honesty**—Horses learn they can count on us for care; parents learn we can handle responsibility.
- **Belief in teamwork**—It takes a village to raise a child and many caretakers working together to

tend to horses.

- **Practice role reversal and seeing other people's points-of-view**—Being able to see the world as horses see it, or thinking like a horse, helps us communicate better with our equine partners.
- **Be in the moment**—Horses need handlers who stay grounded and are mindful.
- **Be clear and concise**—Horses do not respond well to lengthy, mixed messages.

Relating the similarities between herds and families is engaging and motivating for students, and parents often share that the work with the horses is the only activity their kids attend willingly. The feeling that their relationship with the horse matters, that they can make a difference in the life of that horse and enjoy good times together is wonderful for the child's self-esteem. Caring for such an animal promotes competency of skills, self-confidence and the ability to work with others—just ask David.

Kathy Lutz is a licensed clinical social worker, licensed clinical alcohol and drug counselor and certified psychodramatist with more than 30 years of experience. Additionally, Kathy is a PATH Intl. Certified Registered Instructor at Rocking Horse Rehab (RHR), which draws on the expertise of specialized staff—speech, physical and occupational therapists; a licensed clinical social worker; music and art therapists; and therapeutic riding, yoga and martial arts instructors. Lutz developed RHR's equine-assisted mental health services, which include social skills groups for those struggling with ADHD, anxiety, depression, bi-polar disorder, Asperger's syndrome and PDD. She provides social skills services to visiting schools, including emotional regulation, understanding body language, self-monitoring and team work; and has authored a training manual, *Horsemanship/Humanship Skills: How Horses Make Us Better People*. Kathy can be reached at Kathy@RockingHorseRehab.com or KathyLutzLCSW@verizon.net.