

[This hand-out is part of the text of a grant that The Circle of Horses submitted for a summer grant proposal. You are welcome to use this to get you started on your own grants.]

THE CIRCLE OF HORSES POTENTIAL YOUTH-AT-RISK PROJECT

Project Detail

In the Fall of 2018, The Circle of Horses received a request from the Mendocino County Youth Project (coastal branch) if we would offer our services to a small group of teens-at-risk who had socioeconomic, emotional and mental health issues. The group had never worked with horses before but they were willing to attend a summer program. We set out to create a structured curriculum that we thought would fit their needs. The group had no knowledge of the benefits of working with horses or the skills involved. During the summer program they were immersed in grooming, ground work exercises, and learning how to tack a horse. Once they showed themselves to be responsible and proficient at those tasks, they were introduced to riding. There was a support counselor present during the sessions but no counseling occurred during the sessions. The counselor, however did review the effect of the program with the group after the sessions ended.

The Circle of Horses creates an atmosphere where those who struggle with relationships and anxiety, depression, and lack of self-confidence are able to accept a horse's honest, non-judgmental presence and eventually learn to be honest with themselves as well as others. It is very difficult to manipulate or bully a 1000-pound horse physically or emotionally. It takes training, trust, patience and respect to get a horse to back up, turn on its haunches and follow cues while on the ground or being ridden.

The project offers an opportunity to provide a healthy, organized outdoor community-based recreation activity. It also offers an opportunity for community volunteers to become involved with our instructors and participants. The participants and volunteers receive positive recognition and spend time in an environment in which teamwork is encouraged. Our volunteers are with our participants every step of the way. They work alongside our participants to help groom and tack our horses in preparation for a horse-riding lesson. During the session our volunteers are very much a part the program and act as a safety net.

The real impact of our program occurs when the smiles, the communication, and the ability to focus, are unrequited. We have watched some of our participants grow from timid to outgoing, from speechless to talking up a storm. We have those who have lost weight to be able to ride. We have had volunteers fearful of our big equines go from being a side-walker to leading them around the arena, grooming them and stealing a hug or getting a nicker.

Today a significant number of therapists and therapeutic communities have discovered equine therapy as a valuable method that can initiate powerful psychological healing for at-risk youths in unusually short periods of time. It is these breakthroughs in self-awareness that enable a teen with unexpressed emotional pain to recognize and finally verbalize his or her feelings. This is the imperative first step in the emotional recovery process.

The kind of relationship humans have with horses is calming and healing. Participants become engaged in this unique interaction, and it encourages them to think positively. Working with our program may be the first time some participants have ever experienced an emotionally powerful bond of unconditional affection and loyalty. Participants learn that having to be responsible can make a person feel good.

This pilot program provided youth the opportunity to build self-confidence, increase attention skills, develop spatial awareness, build positive relationships, develop an understanding of horses, and much more.

The program was a great success and we continued it with the local high school special education department the following winter. Unfortunately, we were unable to repeat the project again for another few years due to a change in venue and the pandemic.

The Circle of Horses applied for a grant for the summer of 2023 that offered potential youth at risk a structured recreational program while teaching responsibility, ability to work as a team, self-confidence and self-empowerment. We put the word out regarding our acquisition of a summer grant to local therapists, counselors, and teachers. The initial response to our request for participants for our program was surprising. The counselors, therapists and teachers referred not just 10 to 16 years of youth age but 7 - 8 years of age. Their issues included, lack of self-confidence, lack of self-esteem, inability to socialize, anxiety, and inability to stay focused. We decided to have two groups. One group serving 7-8 years and one group serving 11 to 15 years.

Our yearly program offers lessons in groups of 1 up to 3 participants. Our summer program for potential youth at risk maximizes the number of participants (6) in a group and offers them, under a controlled situation, the ability to work with a group and make it cohesive. This requires more instructors and volunteers and it is an excellent opportunity for socialization and communication.

Each session begins with group participation that includes: safety discussions, the responsibility of the participants to the horses, basic anatomy and physiology of a horse, and most important, the horses' sensitivities. We all gather near the horse in order to observe the horse's physique and name parts of the horse's body especially for saddling. Participants are also taught the parts of a saddle and how to fit the saddle on the horse. We then break up into three groups and each group partners with an equine and another participant, along with an instructor and one or two volunteers for the remainder of the session. Each group remains with the same equine throughout the sessions for purposes of bonding.

The curriculum begins on the ground learning how to groom, and tack. The participants learn to work on ground exercises with the horse to encourage trust for both horse and the participant. It is important that the horse accepts the participant as his leader, as he would in a herd to keep him safe without being abused. Horses should be led in a manner that encourages them to walk beside the leader's shoulder and speed up and slowdown in response to the leader's body language and rhythm. These are all exercises that build and strengthen self-confidence in the participant. The ground work that is taught with a horse establishes the nonverbal communication between participant and horse. The most beneficial purpose for the participant during groundwork exercises is to establish oneself as the leader.

The students also learn an informal type of "dressage" as a structured discipline because it helps to improve motor coordination, organization, and planning skills. Astride a horse, the student becomes a participant in a sport in which few, if any, of his or her peers have any experience. Equitation, regardless of the level of expertise at which it is being practiced, carries with it overtones of elegance, grace, and power that few other activities can claim. But mostly self-confidence.

The participants establish a connection with horses based on equine body language and behavior. They build a relationship with a chosen equine partner based on mutual trust and respect. The participants are able to build self-awareness and a positive self-image through interactions with the horse. Each session provides activities and discussions with an emphasis on forming a relationship with a horse.

Example Curriculum

Session 1

Discussion about what the participants know about horses and their experiences with horses. Discuss their comfort level about being around a horse. Explain about horses in a herd and how they act.

Horse safety: How to: approach a horse, walk around the horse, how to stand near the horse when grooming, horses blind spots and where they can/can't see. Educate on loud noises and fight or flight instincts in the horse on the external environment; use of good judgment; explain how the horse is mirror image of your emotions. Explain the horses' senses: hearing, sight, smell, stimulation, emotional regulation. Compare them to humans. Listen to heart beat.

Use simple diagram of horse's body parts mostly those parts of the horses that they will be touching when grooming. Learn to tie a safety knot when tying up the horse

Learn about the tools used for grooming: Demonstration of how to groom a horse using different brushes. Learn to use a pick to clean hooves, and learn about the frog.

Session 2

Review: last lesson and observations of your horse (personality traits). Discussion on groundwork with a horse.

Divide into 3 groups. (two participants to a horse, one to two volunteers and an instructor for each group if possible) Each group will be working with the same horse each week to encourage bonding. Remind participants to practice safety, good judgment and awareness when working with their horses. Halter, tie-up and groom horses.

Groundwork in the arena: Leading horse, speed up\slow down. Teach how to lead a horse with an emphasis on how to communicate with the horse. Leading position when leading (where to hold lead), walk on, halt, turn left, turn right, back up.

Session 3

Tacking

Learn parts of the saddle. Learn to tack a horse, saddle, bridle, reins.

Break up into same groups. Lead horses into arena (strong emphasis on closing gate).

Tie up and groom horses

Work on ground exercises: Flex/soften; turn head left then right (5 times each side). Lower head: push down with hand on poll/ hold base of lead and pull down. Turn on haunches: turn horses head to the right with lead in right hand and point or push just past girth. Horse should turn right in circle with back legs crossing over. Same exercise on left side.

Learn to mount a horse properly. Learn to dismount.

Session 4

Discuss balance and proper seat on a horse. Learn how to use the reins to control a horse.

Break up into groups. Groom and tack horses. Partners take turns leading horse around the arena. Partners take turns riding. One partner rides horse while the other leads.

Instructors review basic use of reins and balance. Walk on Whoa, steering left and right through cones. Emphasis on relaxing and staying in the moment. Volunteers walk alongside rider for support.

Session 5

Review: balance (posture) a good balance begins with a good seat in the saddle, direct rein control of horse (the most basic).

Break up into groups. Groom and tack horses. Partners take turns leading horse around the arena. Partners take turns riding and leading horse.

Learn to do exercises while balancing on horse (put hands on head, touch shoulders, knees, toes). Learn to do two-point.

Lead horse in and out of cones. One participant rides and uses reins while the other participant holds onto lead for support and directs movements. (walk on, stop, left turn, right turn) Volunteers walk alongside horse.

Meet back in discussion group and talk about experience working with horses.