

By Nina Ekholm Fry

PHOTOS COURTESY OF NINA EKHOLM FRY

Camp Challenges

Integrating EAL Into Summer Programs

“Do horses like their scars?”

one camper asked. The horse team at a camp for children and teenagers with burns and related trauma noticed the immediate connection the campers made between their burn-related scars and the brands on the horses. (Some horses also had white markings from other scarring.) Interacting with horses became a natural way for campers, especially those with recent burns, to talk about their experiences and also ask questions such as, “Do the other horses care that this horse has a scar?”

Between 2011 and 2014, while the author was leading the equine-assisted mental health program at Prescott College, the Arizona Burn Foundation (formerly Arizona Foundation for Burns and Trauma) contracted with the college to provide equine services for its annual, weeklong camp for children and teenagers with burns and trauma. In the middle of the summer heat, children and

teens come from all over Arizona to a camp in the pines above Prescott. Popularly known as Burn Camp, Camp Courage is free of charge for campers with burns and related trauma. For 23 years, approximately 100 campers are joined by 100 volunteers, mostly firefighters and individuals working in fire services, who typically have been part of the camp for years.

The weeklong camp is truly a world of its own: positive, supportive and fun. Campers from different circumstances, all connected by the shared experience of having a burn-related injury, call it, “a place where I can be myself,” “a place where I am understood” and “my family.” The environment of the camp emphasizes community and inclusion. It is also an opportunity for campers to try activities they might not otherwise have access to, such as rappelling, swimming, riding horses and mountain biking, and, equally important, taking part in ceremonies and being acknowledged for being part of a team.



↑ One of the campers at Camp Courage in Arizona, which is free of charge to campers with burns and related trauma, participating in an equine-assisted learning program.



While the camp is not meant to be therapeutic, the overall camp culture lends itself to intentional strength-based programming. Still, the change from a horse program structured more like a typical trail riding operation, which the camp previously had, to an equine-assisted learning (EAL) program came with both challenges and rewards. In the process of integrating the EAL program into an existing camp, the team focused on three vital elements: ensuring equine welfare, creating an affirming team culture and generating buy-in from camp leadership.

EAL Program

The EAL program, or “horse program,” as it was referred to at camp, was staffed mostly by graduate and post-master program students studying EAL or equine-assisted mental health. After the first year of programming, the author moved into more of a supervisory role and also served as psychosocial staff for the camp. Each year,

a student horse team leader was chosen who received additional experience in group facilitation and team management.

Each camper visited the horse program twice with his or her cabin, which consisted of three to four campers and two camp staff. The first session was a mix of ground-based and mounted activities in small groups; the second was a trail ride. During the last full day of camp, the horse team offered sign-up activities, such as horse painting and mounted games. In addition to programming, horses were incorporated into the camper arrival day, closing ceremony and other special camp events. Riding was also a way for the older campers to get to their off-camp sleepover.

“Learning about ourselves through learning about horses,” was a helpful way to convey the nature of the EAL program to campers and staff. The horse team decided on core themes to guide the programming, such as “integrity” or “leadership” and planned for the camp throughout the year.

Since there was fairly low turnover in camp attendance, new elements of programming were created each year.

Challenge #1: Equine Welfare

Assessing the welfare of equines working in equine-assisted activities and therapies (EAAT) is central to any program. It is crucial to implement both structural welfare assessment (related to program procedures) and continuous individual assessment (of each equine). It is also very useful to view the program's equine management, which impacts welfare, as directly related to risk management and program sustainability. In other words, beliefs about what is best for the physical and psychological health of horses, management practices (this includes daily routine and the practical implementation of physical and psychological health measures) as well as handling and training practices are as important to risk management as more common measures, such as maintaining a specific staff to participant ratio. Three main areas of welfare the camp horse program could directly affect were herd management, housing and handling.

Taking into account the number of campers (100), staffing, the budget and the site facilities, 20 horses was deemed an adequate number for the program. However, it was not feasible to move all 20 horses from the college's herd due to other programming. The horse program team had to decide whether to combine some of the college's herd with other horses or lease all 20 horses from a trail riding operation. While it affected the budget, it was better to bring horses that were used to being together in a herd into a temporary setting like this one. This decision greatly reduced interaction-related stress among the horses and associated risks, even though the horses were unknown to the team at the beginning of camp.

From an equine welfare point of view, the top three areas to consider when designing housing for horses are movement, constant or near-constant access to fibrous forage and social interaction/group housing. While the camp lacked a horse set-up (such as fencing for housing and an arena), it had access to a small, meadow-like field, a treed area and a formal trail system. In weighing equine needs against the camp's resources, the program decided to use highlining as housing. This involved high-tying each horse to lines extended between trees. Highlining allows horses to move slightly and reach the ground to eat and lie down, while being in proximity to other horses. To satisfy the need for unrestricted movement and further social interaction, the team set up a pen and created a turnout schedule for two to three horses at a time. In addition to creating a regular feeding and watering schedule, team members rotated sleeping near the horses in case of an emergency during the night.

Handling practices are one of the least costly ways to affect welfare and reduce risk. However, it can be the most difficult to maintain consistently. Since the leased horses were mostly unknown to the team, the individual equine assessment prior to camper arrival, as well as continuous assessment throughout the week, was extra thorough. Occasionally, the team would decide to return a horse after the initial assessment or designate a particular role (groundwork or trail riding only). The horses were well habituated to common riding and handling tasks (such as being groomed, tacked up, led and walking in line on the trail). This meant the assessment could be focused on identifying pain and conflict behaviors so that welfare issues could be addressed and risk proactively reduced.

All horse handling practices at camp were based on learning theory. Correct use of negative reinforcement (pressure and release) and avoidance of prolonged, unintended pressure, especially on the head from lead rope or reins, or on the horse's sides from leg aids, was emphasized. Clear expectations, specific discussion and feedback around horse handling were essential in the team culture. Team members showed campers how horses learn, and campers were part of maintaining consistent handling practices. Playing the "bit game," in which campers held a halter or a bridle in their hands as if they were horses and had someone steer them, was a great way to further increase the campers' knowledge about communicating with horses and helped them develop empathy for the horse's experience. If everyone is on the same page when it comes to correct application of reinforcement, correction and habituation practices, risk as a result of inconsistent handling is greatly reduced. Education, not just direction, provides the information needed to help team members adjust their own behavior, creating "self-carriage."

Learning about horses led a 13-year-old camper to say, "Now I understand why the horse kicked my uncle; he was pulling the cinch too fast and too hard." Finding compassionate ways to relate to horses helped campers relate to themselves and others in a kinder, more understanding way. Noticing the relationship between how they and other living beings think and feel was often reassuring.

Challenge #2: Creating an Affirming Team Culture

Practical matters such as activity content and physical set-up are often emphasized when designing equine programming, but what about team culture? The internal culture created and maintained within a team (how staff interacts with each other and with the leadership) and the external culture (how staff interacts with those receiving services) can profoundly affect the quality of services and are interconnected. For instance, if staff members feel

▼ Staff help campers at Camp Courage learn how to bond and communicate with the camp's horses.



that they are being treated unfairly by each other or by leadership, it will eventually affect their ability to serve those participating in the services. Being intentional about team culture can set a program up for success.

A central part of the horse team's culture is often referred to as a "yes" culture. For this program it meant exploring what the answer "yes" would look like to any question. This applies to both internal culture, which ultimately allows for program development, and external interactions with campers, such as modifying experiences to accommodate camper needs and special requests. As long as basic safety policies are not compromised (such as riding without a helmet), it can be surprisingly easy to grant a request, using a bit of creativity. One example involved the rider weight limit, set at 200 pounds for the walk-only trail ride that, occasionally, a teenage camper would exceed. While it was not possible for the camper to go on the hour-long trail ride, she or he could at least experience riding a horse. After assessing the camper's level of physical ability and actual weight, team members would select a horse with good core (abdomen and back) muscles. The rider would mount from a surface enabling her or him to step over into the saddle, which minimized sideways pressure on the spine of the horse from excessive weight in the stirrup. Finally, the horse would walk a short loop without narrow turns or uneven footing.

A "yes" culture tends to go hand in hand with another important aspect of team culture: the ability to give and receive feedback in a group. While each person has her

or his own comfort level with feedback, the team culture can greatly affect whether it is advisable or even safe to offer one's opinion. Being able to discuss difficult subjects while maintaining open communication is a skill that good facilitators develop and model for team members.

Finally, the horse program decided to engage and serve other camp staff as an intentional part of team culture. Two staff accompanied each group of campers throughout the day assisting them with activities, including at the horse program. While camp is fun, the activities can be exhausting. The horse team decided to not only provide a shaded seating area for staff to take a break but also give them explicit permission to do so. When staff members wanted to be engaged, the team strived to make this as fun and informative as possible. By creating a win-win situation with other staff, the horse team maintained a positive environment in the program.

Challenge #3: Creating Buy-In From Camp Leadership

After initial meetings with camp leadership, the following goals were created for the program:

- » integrate horse program with the rest of the camp
- » provide programing that supports ethically sound and relational equine interactions with "learning about yourself through horses"
- » provide programing that prioritizes risk management and equine welfare considerations
- » create a program culture that supports student facilitation and professional development, with clear roles and empowered action in those roles

An early request from camp leadership was for a clear chain of command in the horse team (as with other teams at camp). They asked that any communication to or from other team leaders, camp leadership, camp visitors, etc., always happen directly with the horse team leader. At first this was awkward for team members who felt it contradicted the sense of an empowered team member role. However, it was crucial in order to integrate into overall camp culture and ultimately created clarity in the horse program.

The resolution of one specific issue illustrates how the horse program not only achieved buy-in from camp leadership but stayed true to its culture. Camp staff wanted to ride during the camper sessions as they had done so in the past horse program. With other camp activities, such as high ropes, rappelling, or zip-lining, staff could participate after campers had their turn, if there was time at the end and the activity staff was available. However, with up to 16 campers arriving each horse session, neither staff ratio, number of equines, equine workload nor the weight limit could support riding for all camp staff during typical sessions. The horse program had the following three rules:

1. Campers come first.
2. Rider weight limit is 200 pounds.
(Exceptions can be made for campers.)
3. Camp staff may ride at the discretion of the horse team leader if appropriate and rested horses are available. Horses need a break too!

In accordance with the team's "yes" culture and desire to be of service to the staff, the horse team was able to create an opportunity for camp staff who met the weight limit to go on a trail ride back from the older camper off-camp sleepover. However, the horse team was not willing to compromise equine welfare or program policies to accommodate camp staff in each session.

The horse team generated buy-in from camp leadership through constant communication, sharing of anecdotes, presentations handouts and participation in pre-camp meetings (which had not been attended by previous program staff). Most importantly, the horse team staff clearly and explicitly provided reasoning for the three program rules and the overall program culture. They explained that the horse program was not like the other activities at camp in that horses are living beings whose welfare must be considered. This, coupled with the team's explanation of risk management, a concept well known to anyone working in fire services, brought camp leadership on the program's side in concerning camp staff riding.

Providing actual reasons instead of simply saying "This is how we always do it" gave credibility to the program. The result was a well-liked and integrated horse program with no camper incidents all four years. In fact, the best compliment an annual EAAT camp program can receive is campers saying that they have been looking forward to coming back to the horses all year. A close second is being called the "camp whisperers" by other camp staff in reference to the program's ability to create engagement and positive interactions among campers, staff and horses. Giving participants at Camp Courage the opportunity to experience real-life problem solving and programing within a remarkable camp environment has truly been rewarding for everyone involved in the program.

Nina Ekholm Fry is the director of Equine Programs at University of Denver's Institute of Human Animal Connection (IHAC) and leads the new Equine-Assisted Mental Health Practitioner Certificate graduate and post-master program. She is a PATH Intl. Equine Welfare Committee member and a PATH Intl. Certified Equine Specialist in Mental Health and Learning. She is an executive board member of the Certification Board for Equine Interaction Professionals (CBEIP), the editor of the *Scientific and Educational Journal of Therapeutic Riding* and a practitioner member of the International Society of Equitation Science (ISES). Between 2010 and 2014 she led the equine-assisted mental health programs at Prescott College. She can be reached at nina.ekholm-fry@du.edu.

Smarter Joint Supplements

GUARANTEED TO WORK

senior horse















horse in heavy work

horse in light work



With seven unique formulas, there's a SmartFlex for a young futurity contender, a champion reiner, a retired trail horse and everything in between — and they're all Guaranteed to Work! Order any SmartFlex in SmartPaks and if you don't see results in two months, we'll give you your money back.



SMARTPAK

SmartPak.com/SmartFlex | 1-800-461-8898