

The following article appeared in the July, 2009 Issue of Midwest Horse Digest

Equine-Assisted Learning
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Many of you will be familiar with therapeutic riding, also termed *hippotherapy*, where people with physical and other disabilities ride horses for the physical benefits of riding which include: flexibility, range of motion, strengthening of muscle groups and self-confidence. You might not be as familiar with new types of programs, termed equine-assisted therapy, that utilize the horses herd behavior and prey status to help humans emotionally. The Chaps program has had almost unbelievable success with suicidal and "cutting" adolescent girls. Based in Shiocoin, Wisconsin in the first two years of operation, girls who had been hospitalized at least 4 times (think about that 4 times!) in the previous year for suicide attempts received equine-assisted therapy facilitated by a licensed therapist. In a two year follow-up none of the girls had been: hospitalized for a suicide attempt, had only minimal legal involvement and none were pregnant.

Any horseman or woman knows the power of the horse to heal, to take emotions and just release them. Their calming nature is well-understood. Many of us know what our horses have taught us about self-confidence, standing up for ourselves, or just doing what is right. There is a new form of experiential learning (meaning learning through doing - not reading a book) that uses that ability of horses to teach. It is called equine-assisted learning or equine-assisted human development and again uses the horses herd behavior and prey status to help people learn about themselves and each other.

Typically in this kind of program, horses meander freely through an arena while humans work individually or in teams to solve problem-situations that are designed to mimic problem-situations in personally or professionally. Communication, negotiation-skills, creativity, patience, discipline, setting appropriate boundaries and self-confidence are the types of skills that are readily taught.

I believe that there are many well-adjusted, caring horsemen and women who, with a little training, can help other people via equine-assisted learning. I have had several groups out for the training, most of them experienced horsemen and women, and found that they go out and do wonderful things for the people in their community. Some of the kinds of things that they do with their horses, once they have the skills, is to: develop team building programs for corporate groups, work with people who have been abused, develop leadership in adults, teens and children, empower people and families to act in their own best interests, and help people heal from trauma.

It is important to note that this type of work is not "counseling" but rather supporting the interaction with the human and horse in such a way as to provide growth. Oddly enough, there is very little riding involved.

Equine-assisted learning is a wonderful opportunity for horsemen and women to help others benefit as we have from the wisdom of the horse. At Pegasus we say, "the power of the horse is the herd....the power of the herd is the horse."

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The following article appeared will appear in the February, 2010 Issue of Midwest Horse Digest

Equine-Assisted Learning (EAL): Mother - Daughter Relationship Building
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At the last Pegasus Certification training some of the participants decided that they did not want to utilize their last day of training at our arena using each other as participants, but wanted instead to develop their own seminars and have me observe and provide feedback to them at their arena with their own seminar. They each decided on their client group, their goals and objectives specific to that client group, which horse-human activities that they would use, and marketed their seminar.

Mary Severson and Mariah Wedig, both from the Madison, Wisconsin area, decided to team up and offer a mother-daughter relationship building event. Both are fine horsewomen in the traditional sense, both showing themselves and supporting their children in that venue. They decided to take the Pegasus Certification training in order to learn about EAL and how this approach could help them develop new client bases. Both women are excellent examples of the Pegasus view that many horse people have an understanding of the horse-human connection and the healing power of horses that, with a little training, could be channeled into helping others who have a variety of human development needs.

Mary had already been working with special needs children using the horses in a fairly traditional therapeutic riding format. Mariah knew that this was an area she wanted to expand into and had some ideas about the client group she would be able to serve. Both are mothers, both had a keen sense of how horses had enriched both their life and their children's lives and wanted to share this with others.

To market the event they contacted several social service areas, talked to people they knew, and distributed fliers. A small postcard was sent out outlining the goals of the seminar: improved communication, a deeper connection, a shared experience and new ways of dealing with conflict.

My own work with Pegasus primarily involves team and leadership development with corporate groups and especially Women's leadership development; however, for sometime I had been thinking about a mother-daughter leadership program. The mother-daughter relationship sets the stage for the daughter's adult development as a woman, as a leader, and as a citizen. At the same time mothers are highly influenced by the innate wisdom of their daughters as they grow and develop.

I was very excited to see what the pair had developed and how it would play out in the arena with the horses and the mother-daughter teams.

They had three horses moving freely in the arena and started by letting everyone get comfortable with the horses. They explained that the horses would be doing the "teaching" by providing behavioral feedback to the participants and that part of the participants job was to watch each other and the horses. They then proceeded with challenges that required that the mother-daughter teams work together. One activity involved moving the horse through a sort of obstacle course that had many distractions for the horse such as feed, narrow passages, and small jumps. The teams were not allowed to touch the horse or use any sort of lead line. Another activity involved the daughters being taken aside and given a few props, like a spool of thread, and directions as to what the mothers were to accomplish with the horses. However, the daughters could not communicate verbally with the mothers and the mothers had to make assumptions about what they were to do and to check that assumption with the daughter.

There was much laughter and warmth in that arena. In the processing, I was particularly taken by the daughters protectiveness of the mothers. In one case, one mother was not seeing that she was not really hearing her daughter and just moved ahead with what she thought she should do. As we gently prodded the mother to see this behavior, the daughter became increasingly more protective both verbally and physically - moving close to her mother and justifying her behavior. This genuine caring was so evident that eventually some tears were shed at the sheer tenderness of the moment.

I was excited and humbled by this event. Though I was there to observe and provide feedback I became a participant-observer. I realized that some of the mother-daughter conflict issues that played out in the arena were my own issues with my own daughter. I came back with changed behavior - to the benefit of my daughter and myself.

No mother-daughter relationship is perfect at all times; however this shared experience, a quiet time to reflect and change behavior did accomplish a self-awareness in the participants of their own strengths and needs as well as the strengths and needs of the other. It was EAL at its finest and I want to thank Mary and Mariah for this opportunity and for the important work that they will continue to do.

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