

Equine Assisted Learning:

how horses can help your students

By **Helen Gorfine**

Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) is a new learning and therapy model that develops social skills and leadership skills to enhance resilience for all students, including those with challenging behaviours and special needs. EAL involves students learning positive ways to connect and relate together through interaction with horses, doing fun and challenging unmounted activities.

Interaction between students and horses facilitates the development of trust, responsibility and respectful communication. Horses challenge students to be congruent and truthful. The activities foster the development of leadership skills based on deep respect and the assertion of appropriate boundaries while maintaining reciprocal and inclusive relationships. Students of all ages and abilities can benefit from EAL. There is no riding involved at all and no horse experience is necessary. Activities can be modified to individual student and group needs.

Outdoor experiential educator and EAL facilitator Cheryl Cruttenden of Windhorse Wisdom comments, "Working with horses requires us to make a connection, to form relationships based on trust, clear communication and understanding. Horses are very much like humans in that they are social animals living within a community, a herd. The main goal of the herd is to maintain balance and harmony. In their herd, horses have distinct roles and responsibilities and like us, have different personalities attitudes, and moods. Participants find that an approach that may work with one horse does not necessarily work with another. Therefore, horses provide vast opportunities for metaphorical learning."

Horses have a unique capacity to assist students with relationship and life skills. "Horses are honest and they have the ability to mirror exactly what human body language tells them," explains Ms. Cruttenden, who emphasises that the focus of EAL is to establish and maintain positive, reciprocal relationships with others. "Horses are sensitive and innately intuitive, so they have the ability to show us intimacy and teach us

about relationships and the importance of creating and preserving personal boundaries. Being with them, and around them, is an empowering experience and encourages students to feel, reach out and to connect with the world."

In EAL programs, students discuss their behaviour patterns and associated feelings that arise through the activities with the horses to gain powerful insights about the way they communicate and relate with each other. Reflection on the experience empowers students to identify strengths they can build on and provides opportunities for change in behaviours that are limiting and non-productive.

Recent findings from an EAL pilot program 'EAGLES', conducted with secondary school students within the Shire of Yarra Ranges, demonstrated significant benefits to students. The program was funded through the Shire of Yarra Ranges School Focused Youth Services. Students who participated had a range of needs, including those wanting to build social and leadership skills, those with self-esteem and self-image issues or anger management problems. Some students displayed at-risk behaviours and needed positive and healthy approaches to deal with difficulties in their lives.

Michelle Jennings, psychologist and EAGLES program facilitator, reports in her evaluation that 100% of student responses described the overall assessment of the experience as useful or very useful. In response to questions regarding what participants learned from the program, Ms. Jennings reports students identified learning about trust, confidence, teamwork skills, how to relax and remain calm, how to make positive and inclusive social connections within the group, gaining self-knowledge and leadership skills.

EAGLES program facilitators Ms. Jennings and Ms. Cruttenden state, "Our aim is to empower students, including at-risk youth, to function in school and become confident and contributing members of their school and wider community by primarily developing respect, problem-solving and communication skills."

The learning process in EAL programs is highly effective due to real experiences, direct observations and meaningful connections. It is an experiential process that allows students to learn from the consequences of their actions, from mistakes and success. The experience is highly motivating, engaging and fun for all students. It is generally more stimulating than traditional social skills intervention programs and therapy, provides deeper learning and engages disenchanted and marginalised youth.

At Horse Sense for Humans in Teven, NSW, EAL facilitators Tiffany Carmichael and Holly Ohlson offer youth programs tailored to school and agency requirements. Youth Connections Case Worker Joanne McNally from NORTEC Youth Service NSW comments on the learning experiences for at-risk youth participating in the EAL program, "Outcomes for our clients include, believing in themselves and their abilities, having a clear vision and direction regarding their education, training and employment pathways, forming positive relationships with their education, family and community, taking responsibility for their own actions and developing positive coping strategies towards managing life's challenges."

Young people with challenging learning issues such as autism and Asperger's Syndrome are equally able to benefit from EAL programs. Dr. Maggie Broom, psychotherapist from Grey Horse Growth and Learning, works with this client group at her property in Smiths Gully, Victoria. Dr. Broom shared this story from Amanda, mother of Thomas – a ten-year-old boy with autism and extreme communication difficulties, who attended weekly sessions working with the horse Glencora.

Amanda explains, "My son Thomas has severe autism. Thomas has very high needs, limited communication and great difficulty attending to functional or play/learning tasks due to sensory processing difficulties. He is in a constant state of high arousal, jumps from task to task and therefore seeks out frequent and intense tactile input in an attempt to regulate his arousal level."

Over a period of five months, Thomas made



steady and significant progress. In describing how Thomas has progressed from requiring total supervision to greater independence, Amanda says, "Thomas is now able to lead Glencora around the obstacle course, looking back to make sure the horse has cleared the obstacles before proceeding."

Dealing with the horse's actions and reactions assisted Thomas to be more aware of the effect of his actions and to become more adaptable; Amanda explains, "I feel Thomas is learning cause and effect. If he twirls the lead rope, the horse reacts. He has learned that he needs to stop and wait for the horse at times. He has learned to greet the horse and thank her and say goodbye. I think due to the size of the animal, it is hard to ignore a horse. I believe these sessions have helped Thomas to focus and develop a connection with a beautiful animal in the most wonderful environment. It is fun. Thomas frequently says 'horse' and 'Glencora' and has begun a new behaviour of napping me, no pun intended, on a Saturday morning to get going on our drive to his session with the horse."

Sharon Furlong, Head of Special Education at Maleny Primary School had this to say about student involvement in EAL programs conducted at Equine Alliance in Palmwoods Queensland, "Participation has allowed each child a creative and unique avenue to communicate their feelings and

emotions with very gentle animals. It has been a chance for the children to monitor and reflect on themselves due to the way the horses respond to their behaviour. We have seen improvements in the children's social and emotional development, as the program has an emphasis on individually based development processes that require them to problem solve at a social and cognitive level with the horses. Helen Sorensen (EAL facilitator) and her team and the beautiful horses provide an innovative and invaluable experience that supports each child holistically, and the kids absolutely love it. The Special Education Unit at Maleny Primary would recommend it (EAL) for any school."

EAL programs developed using the EAGALA (Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association) model are facilitated by a trained team of specialists comprising accredited mental health professionals and equine specialists. The team are trained to assist students to connect the horse responses to their behaviour and different styles of communication and social interaction. Horses are naturally tuned into subtle emotional and behavioural changes in people. Horses give immediate responses and consequences to students' emotions and actions, which means there is no delay in seeing the effect their actions and choices have on others. A change within

the student is signified by a change in horse behaviour. This occurs because horses instantly sense any emotional-psychological shifts that occur for students; for example, when students develop new constructive beliefs about themselves and others and their actions are congruent with these beliefs, the horses respond with trust, respect and cooperation.

Horses provide students with honest, non-judgemental feedback and the ensuing experiential process enables students to gain powerful insights about their interaction style, leading to greater self-awareness and self-understanding. This deep shift in awareness assists students to understand how their beliefs and choices affect their social experience. EAL increases student capacity for emotional self-regulation, and motivates students towards positive behaviour choices to create solutions that work for mutual benefit. EAL offers all students the fundamental components of resilience and social skills for life.

Equine Assisted Learning programs are offered by trained specialists around Australia and program listings can be found on the EAGALA website: www.eagala.org.

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