



The Healing Therapy

about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man”.

“Justin” is only 3 yrs old and arrives for his first visit at Vanderbrook with his parents. He is carried screaming from his car over to the arena, where Trinket, a small black and white pony waits already saddled, to take him for a ride. She appears like the staff, relaxed and oblivious to the tantrum, with a “this is just fine” attitude; this seems to give some relief to the worried parents. The staff are privileged to have spent time with Rupert Issacson, father of an autistic son, author of *The Horse Boy* and founder of the Horse Boy Foundation. Issacson’s candid and from the heart sharing on how to create a fun and positive learning environment for autistic children means there are few rules, and that flexibility in any situation is key.

The parents are visibly stressed by the child’s behavior and his lack of interest in the pony. Justin is indicating that he wants to be in his car, his “safe” place. In following Issacson’s flexibility principle, the parents are asked to take the child back to the car, where he happily plays peek-a-boo with the staff. Trinket is brought to the car and joins in the game. Before long, Justin is stroking the pony’s nose through the open window, and he is calm and laughing. His parents apologize for the child lack of interest in riding the

Looking out into the field, they appear as randomly pieced patchwork quilts, laid out carefully over the gently rolling pasture and enjoying the late afternoon sunshine. They are all colors shapes and sizes, sewn together by the very nature and needs of the herd. If you watch them for a moment, you may discover the intricate design of this herd’s dynamics. Conversation flows between them, for the most part, in a low chatter which you can see if you watch closely. Every flick of an ear, every swish of the tail, every bite whether playful or not says something. They have an assortment of stories to tell about themselves, injuries both physical and emotional in nature, stories of neglect and abandonment, and in some cases they are outcasts that are a result of a breakdown in the horse/human relationship. This motley crew of unique horses are team players in some very unique therapeutic programs.

Vanderbrook Farm and Natural Horsemanship Center is located near Killaloe, Ontario, snuggled into the gently rolling hills of the Ottawa Valley. It is home to over 20 of their own horses and boarders, promoting a natural living environment and barefoot (horse) lifestyle. Adhering to natural horsemanship principals, Vanderbrook has developed a reputation for helping horses and their owners improve their working

relationship. Vanderbrook Farm is also host to the Hope Reins Equine Assisted Therapy Program. Hope Reins is open to the needs of the community, and has created some very individualized programs. They offer therapeutic programs for autistic and developmentally delayed children and adults, at risk youth, and even offer leadership development programs to the business community. Although they have taken a new and less travelled path of equine therapy, the results have been incredible. Children, adults and families come, sometimes with their therapists to engage with the horses, who seem to have an immeasurable restorative effect on humans, as in the words spoken by Winston Churchill “There is something



Power of a Horses Love with a Twist and a Saddle

by Alison Vandergragt

pony and for going over the allotted time. These things don't matter, there are no expectations at this point other than for the child to leave on a positive note.

Justin returns to Vanderbrook for more sessions. Sometimes there are tears, but mostly there is laughter. He likes to end his visits playing for a few moments with the other kids and pets milling about the yard. The dogs, cats, rabbit and the odd pony drifts over to see if treats might be handed out. Justin's mom leaves smiling, she sees good things happening with her son, and that no matter how the sessions go, Justin is welcome and accepted here.

"Billy" and his parents have been seeing a therapist for some time. Their sessions have become stagnant, and they are not making much progress. They are here for an Equine Assisted Therapy (EAP) session. EAP takes the traditional therapy session out of the office and into the arena. The Equine Specialist (ES) typically gives the client(s) a task involving horses. The ES and therapist observe the interaction

between the client and the horse and create metaphors that allow the client(s) to relate to their personal issues. This modality of therapy is proven to be very effective, as the horse offers honest feedback during the interaction. This gives the client a visible clue to problem resolution.

This is Billy's third session at Vanderbrook having had one session with his dad, and one with his mom.

Vanderbrook Farm offers therapeutic programs for autistic and developmentally delayed children and adults, at risk youth, and even offer leadership development programs to the business community. The Equine Specialist has noted two very different sessions and two very distinct styles of interaction

depending on which parent is present. This gives the team a clue to the state of the families' relationship, and about the inconsistencies in parenting. The ES suggested that having both parents in this 3rd session is crucial.

The family has been given a challenging task, and it will require that they work together and be clear and effective with communicating. They receive a set of rules to follow while completing the task, and are offered a few moments to create a plan of action. Within minutes, the family is falling apart. They do not take time to create a plan, and go off to do the activity. Two of the family members refuse to take the task seriously, and there is plenty of joking around. Rules are broken time and time again. Billy and his mom are deliberately sabotaging Dad's efforts, and the frustration level escalates, quickly. Before long



the family is "done", the task is "impossible" as one member says. This gives the therapist plenty to work with. He works through the issues, just like he would in his office. It becomes very emotional, as the issues boil to the surface. Direct reference to actions and reactions during the activity allows the family to see how destructive they have become. The therapist offers strategies and resources to help the family, things they can use right now, and later when they are on their own.

The ES calls the family back to the activity, and changes a couple rules that will ensure a successful end to the activity, if they pull together. They will need to implement their "new strategies" offered by the therapist, right here, right now. They get off to a shaky, but much better start. They make a plan, and respect each other's ideas. Working very hard together, they accomplish the "impossible". Jubilant, not only do they throw their arms up in victory, but



so does the facilitating team.

The session ends with the family gathered around the horse, stroking and scratching his itchy spots. This has not been an easy session for Dakota either, he was in the middle of this families' breakdown. Yet Dakota is able to discern when it is him that has something to learn and when it is the human who is in need of the lesson. His dignity may have been compromised a bit during the session, but the attention he is now getting makes everything just fine.

Horses are excellent partners in undertaking the enormous task of this broad based teaching and personal healing, having to be and provide the mirror to what is going on inside. It is incredible how the horse can adapt to the needs of the moment, like a sixth sense that is sometimes beyond comprehension. Why are our Asperger's (autism spectrum) clients drawn to Snort, who skeptical of most humans? How does Phoenix know to be gentle as a lamb with a very young rider yet "speaks up" to a surly teen who "knows it all"? Why does Gracie at almost 17hh (almost 6ft at her shoulder) park herself in the middle of a group of

9yr olds to have her belly and legs groomed, when from most adults she'd rather walk away? Why does a woman, lost in grief, bury her head into the comforting neck and mane of a horse and try to make sense of it all, then walk away with a renewed spirit? Why is Trinket unbothered by the tantrum of an autistic child? Why is Tucker such a good sport about allowing a boy to leave his walker behind while tossing balls into a basket? That is the nature of the horse.

The colorful stories that this patchwork herd of misfits hold inside, often goes unspoken, verbally anyway. But when you watch them doing their part as co-facilitators in the therapeutic process, hints of their past are visible. It is incredibly fascinating to see when and where these insights reveal themselves and the impact it leaves on others. **

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