



## Horse Sense by Terra N. K. Pugh

# Real-World Application of Principle #7

*“There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man.”*

*– Winston Churchill*

A boy stands in a field of horses. His assignment: to introduce himself to all four of the horses in the pasture in any way that feels comfortable. This is not the first equine assignment that the boy has been given. This assignment is part of his curriculum in the Horse Sense program Running with Mustangs, a youth development program for incarcerated youth who—aside from being delinquents—have been tagged as being involved or at risk of becoming involved in gang activity.

The boy works his way into the herd and easily introduces himself to three of the horses but has problems connecting with the fourth. The remaining horse, Sugar, a Thoroughbred mare, came to Horse Sense as a starvation case. Her halter had grown into her head, as is

common in many rescues. Her history left her timid, unconfident and very much an introvert.

Sugar keeps another horse between herself and the boy. After several unsuccessful attempts, the session’s facilitators pose a question to the boy: “What is Sugar in your life?” The boy turns, looks at them and responds: “Sugar’ is my heart. I’m not going to let anyone get close to that.” Immediately Sugar drops her guard, comes over to the boy and places her head on his heart. The session is over.

Principle #7 states that “Horses teach riders, riders teach horses.” In its original context, the idea behind Principle #7 is that you pair an experienced horse with a green rider and a green horse with an experienced rider. Upon expansion, Principle #7 is about the reci-

procity of experience. Within a moment the roles of teacher and student can be reversed and then revert back again. Experience is the ultimate teacher. It is the moment that dictates who the teacher is.

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Shannon Knapp, Parelli student and founder and president of Horse Sense of the Carolinas, found her way to horses because she “missed having a connection to something outside herself.” “It was always about the relationship and nothing else. I just didn’t know that the relationship was what I wanted,” says Shannon. In 2003 Shannon and her husband Richard founded Horse Sense of the Carolinas as a national provider of Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) and Equine-Assisted Learning (EAL) services and as a leading resource for equine-facilitated therapy professionals worldwide. “Horses teach you how to get a relationship,” says Shannon. “I believe that every person’s inherent desire is to have a relationship. Horses are facilitators.” Horse Sense’s business model is to rescue “throwaway” horses, rehabilitate them and pair them with clients in need of therapy for mental handicaps, professional development and/or social development. The goal is “to allow the horse and human to have an exchange in which the client learns to moderate, regulate and change [his or her] behavior to get a change in the horse’s behavior.”

In the case of the Running with Mustangs program, the first task is to catch a horse in a stall and bring the horse into an arena. The task is intentionally open-ended, with no instructions, to see what the clients try. It isn’t about the task; it is about the process. Horses provide the feedback. There are four components to the program: Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy, vocational training, POETIX (poetry), and natural horsemanship. Horses are the medium for two of the prongs. In the curriculum, psychotherapy identifies what tools clients already possess, and natural horsemanship teaches them how to use their toolboxes. The goal is never to instruct. People use what they need. Psychotherapy identifies what they use. Natural horsemanship is where they put it all together.

In truth, psychotherapy and natural horsemanship are only tools; horses provide the breakthroughs. A boy came to the program from an abusive home, “the type of abuse,” Shannon says, “that would put you on your knees.” The session started with four horses: two geldings loose in the arena and two mares in open stalls. One gelding in particular was playful and acted out. Though we would look at the horse as a Left-Brain Extrovert, the boy viewed the horse as menacing. In psychotherapy, it isn’t about the horse. It’s about the client’s perspective. When asked what that horse was in his life, the boy identified him as his father. The non-dominant gelding that was being pushed around he identified as himself. One of the mares in the stalls was a weaver. The boy saw the dominant gelding, saw her weaving and decided that she was distressed. He identified the mare as his sister. When asked what he wanted to do, he walked over and shut the stall door of the weaving mare. He had protected her in a way in which he had never been able to protect his sister.





**Right:** *The Running with Mustangs team at Horse Sense: Liza Sapir (LPC eligible), Josie Mouser, Richard Knapp, Valerie Krall (LPC), and Shannon Knapp.*



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Ultimately, clients learn to identify their behaviors through horses. They learn that while they can use force, fear and intimidation, the principles of love, language and leadership are better options. The concept that Horse Sense tries to put forth is called "phase 1 leadership." First the client practices with a horse, then transitions to applying the techniques to his or her life while at the detention center, then continues that practice in real life. For example, a boy had a tendency to get into fights because he didn't know what else to do. His pattern was that if he felt any pressure, he'd get into a fight. When asked about the situation, he responded, "I don't know. I just went all Right-Brain on him." He was then asked what he would do if this happened with a horse. "I would send him backwards and sideways," the boy said. Another question was then posed to him: "What is your backwards and sideways?" He learned to identify and correct his own behavioral patterns.

While Horse Sense appears to be human-centric, horses are the heart and soul of the business. "It is difficult to stand next to chaos," Shannon says. "A horse has to be sound in body, mind and spirit." At Horse Sense it is never okay to help people at the expense of the horse. A guiding operational principle is that horses have permission at all times to give feedback and protect themselves. The idea isn't to have crazy horses that never get better. Rather, the goal is that humans and horses heal each other. And at Horse Sense, the stories go both ways.

Horse Sense had acquired Change, a horse that had been hog-tied and beaten as a yearling and had never fully emotionally recovered. During a session Change was paired with a young man Horse Sense had found challenging to help. Change was in his stall, and a little of his story was relayed to the boy—not the whole story, but enough to create the opportunity for empathy. The young man was asked to catch and halter Change to whatever degree he felt was appropriate. The boy approached Change. He slowly put the lead rope around his neck, rubbed him, took the rope off and walked away. When the facilitators asked him what had happened, the boy remarked that he had only gone as far as Change was comfortable.

It is Shannon's dream that programs like Horse Sense will be available for kids everywhere. Her hope is that one day the industry will shift from intervention to prevention. While the fulfillment of Shannon's dream requires growth in the number of practitioners, she cautions to not practice outside one's scope. "A horse and a curry comb are not a license to practice therapy," says Shannon. More information on EAP/EAL programs, certification and how to become more involved can be found at [www.eagala.org](http://www.eagala.org).

"The skills to become good with horses, the skills of emotional and social intelligence, are the skills that are not traditionally taught," Shannon says. "Becoming a good communicator with horses make us better people." The lessons set us free. As one POETIX client, "Lost Soul," phrases it in his poem "Freedom."



*"Freedom  
doin' what you wanna do  
bein' looked up is like a bad drug  
mess up your whole life  
Freedom is like an antidote  
just knowin' that it's there  
  
like a cancer patient being told that they're cured  
  
like a wild horse that's been contained  
  
being  
  
released" 🐾*