

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy and Healing Hearts with Horses...



drawn to a mare who, unbeknownst to the girl AND to us, had aborted her foal many years previous. The girl would pour tears into the mare's mane, saying, "She is just so sad....."

I offer free sessions in "Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy" (EAP) to at-risk youths ages 12 to 18 who live in group homes. I don't know the histories of the youths - just that they're from group homes run by Children & Families of Iowa in Des Moines and Youth Homes of Mid-America in Johnston. Some of the youth have no family to turn to, some have behavior problems, while others are recovering from a crack cocaine habit. Many have been sexually abused, and some have shown a weakness for weapons and law-breaking. I come to understand a little about each teen during weekly visits to my outdoor horse arena.

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy incorporates horses experientially for clients' emotional growth and learning. It is a collaborative effort between a licensed therapist and a horse professional. Although EAP has been around for over 20 years, it has recently becoming a viable therapy for growth and change, comparable to the ropes courses used by therapists, treatment facilities, and human development leaders, all around the world.

By Deb Hoyt

In desperation and out of ideas, Jamal lay down on the ground. The horse finally showed some interest in the boy and came over to investigate.

Not your normal training technique? That's for sure, but not your normal set of circumstances either!

Healing Hearts with Horses and Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP)

My name is Deb Hoyt, and I run Healing Hearts with Horses, a Christian-based nonprofit Intervention Program for troubled youth and for rescued horses. The program is headquartered on the Hoyt Farm in Runnells, Iowa. What started as a foster home for troubled youth, and a rescue facility for animals, and a lesson program for teaching kids how to own their own horse, melded into a single program that was beyond my wildest dreams!

Initially, we kept the rescued abused and/or neglected horses that were skittish and ill-tempered away from the at-risk

teenagers who came to the farm for healing. But the teens tended to be drawn to the most troubled horses. As it turns out, the teens were drawn to the horses that were most like them. For instance, one girl who had kept a very recent abortion a secret was

"Catch and Halter" - an Example of EAP

In 2008, a group of boys that lived in a residential treatment center, most of which had never been on a farm, let alone touched a horse, were scheduled for the program.



...Mending Lives One Step at a Time

These were some pretty rough kids, as this group home could only take kids who had been in trouble with the law. I was a little apprehensive myself and so we started the day with introductions and explanations of the days' activity. There was some resistance but finally we got all the boys into the arena.

The first session, called "catch and halter," is a problem-solving and confidence-building exercise. With ten horses/ponies in the arena and 10 various-sized and -colored halters hooked to the gate, each participant is to pick a halter and lead, and pick a horse or pony to halter. The idea is for the participants to solve the haltering "problem" on their own. This can become quite hilarious, when you realize how many ways a halter can actually go on a horse! Additionally, the variety of sizes in both equines and halters can lead to some humorous (and frustrating) moments.

At the end of the allotted one-hour session, all but one of the boys had caught, haltered, and led around their horse/pony.



"The Kiss"

halter on the same as other boys did? How did they feel when they finally got their halter on, etc? We continued to keep an eye on Jamal, and when he finally haltered Spirit, he kissed the horse's neck and caressed him, talking softly. The therapist looked at me in disbelief and said, "Did he just kiss that horse?!"

I said yes, and that it was the second kiss! Here was a kid who had been in lots of trouble with the law, involved in a gang, not wanting anything to do with the "stupid horse stuff," and now he was kissing and caressing with gentle tenderness "his horse." It brought tears to my eyes as I watched this tender moment between fearful horse and troubled human. Jamal later told us that he picked Spirit because he looked

proud, was beautiful and was strong: many qualities that he valued in himself. After this first session, Jamal LOVED coming to "horse therapy," and he continued to work with Spirit, even though the horse's own fears continued to make him a more difficult horse than some of the others. When Jamal wrote a rap song for Spirit, we knew that the rough façade of a "gang banger" had begun to melt, and that a gentle, loving and caring young man was beginning to emerge. As a bonus, Spirit's fear of men was melting as well.

Please visit my website, at www.healingheartswithhorses.com, to learn even more about this program. The horse rescue site is at www.horseheavenviti.com



SUCCESS at the end of a "Catch and Halter" session

Jamal (*not his real name*) was still hard at work in the arena. He had picked a beautiful buckskin gelding who had been severely abused by a man, very much disliked men, and was a horse that was very hard to catch by strangers. We watched as Jamal kept his cool, trying over and over during the hour to catch Spirit. When the boy finally lay down on the ground, Spirit showed some interest, but was certainly not yet willing to be haltered! Jamal was not willing to give up, so we allowed him extra time as we discussed with the other boys why they picked a certain horse, how they felt they did on haltering, were they (in their minds) successful, even though they didn't have the



Jamal continues to work with "Spirit," "His Horse," on a regular basis