

FREEDOM TO GROW PROGRAM AT JESTER PARK EQUESTRIAN CENTER

The school bus arrives at the stable early on a crisp fall morning. The first group of students off the bus is excited. Their senses are alive with new sights, sounds and smells. The second group of high school students disembarks wary of this new experience, perhaps wondering what they've gotten themselves into. In the weeks to follow and through their work with horses, these two groups will develop trust, build confidence, and new friendships will blossom.

Freedom to Grow is an innovative program that combines the therapeutic riding and at risk youth programs at Jester Park Equestrian Center. The program is in its fourth year of operation. Three or four sessions will be conducted in 2011.

The special needs riders are supported by the high school students by sidewalking, doing activities such as crafts, and spending social time together.

Freedom to Grow begins with a meet and greet at the special needs school. Ice breaker games are played while both sets of students tentatively begin engagement with each other. By the end of an hour, there is laughter in the air, conversations are initiated...the beginning of relationships.

The next step is for the at risk students to take horse safety and behavior training. The upcoming riding sessions with the special needs students is described with emphasis on responsibility, expectations for their involvement with their riders, and commitment to the program. The at risk

students ride the horses to experience what it will feel like for their special needs rider. They also watch a therapeutic riding session in action.

Once a week, for the next 4 weeks, riding sessions take place. Experienced adult volunteers lead the horses. These amazing people also take it upon themselves to promote conversation which enhances interaction between the at risk youth and special needs riders.

Skill development in sequencing, following directions, task completion, and focus is promoted in *Freedom to Grow*. Both groups of students benefit from peer interaction, confidence building, trust, responsibility, and empathy. One of the results of the program is the participation of high school students assisting with the regular therapeutic riding program.

Each session begins with a game of "popcorn". The students throw a beach ball to each other, stating their names. The 15 minute game promotes relaxation and familiarity.

The participants are divided into pairs and assigned a horse. They brush and saddle their horses with assistance from volunteers. It is during this critical time that the instructors can observe comfort levels and become aware of any hesitancy or reluctance to be around the horses.

The entire group of at risk students, special needs riders and volunteers lead the horses into the arena. They lead around the arena

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together until it's their turn to mount. This can be beneficial to increase the comfort levels of everyone involved. No one is ever forced to participate. Alternate activities are offered to the youth if they are uncomfortable or unable to participate. Or until they are able to participate.

During the at risk youth training Rod declared that he "didn't touch animals". He even shivered to prove his point. He was allowed to keep a comfortable distance during the training. On the first day of riding, he was asked to take pictures. When he was done with that task, he sat outside the arena for a few minutes. Shortly he was requesting to be able to help and walked next to a horse the rest of the day. He and the instructor spent some time alone with one of the horses before the next session. Rod set his own pace and eventually asked to be able to ride. He brushed the horse, took a break to consider his position, and rode the horse. He was able to fully participate in the program after that.

Tara is a special needs rider who had a bad experience prior to *Freedom to Grow*. This was unknown to the staff. Tara was unable to verbalize about that experience. When it was her turn to mount the horse, she grew increasingly agitated. The decision was made, with Tara's input, that she would not ride that day. The next week, when it was Tara's turn to mount, she stunned everyone by simply and quickly stepping onto the horse. She was supported by 2 side walkers, an instructor, and a volunteer until it was felt that she was relaxed enough to ride with

less direct supervision. Tara has ridden every session since that day.

Social interaction is emphasized in *Freedom to Grow*. The students eat lunch together before they board the bus and return to their schools. The at risk youth develop and implement an activity, such as a hoof painting as a memoir of their experience, complete with pictures. The group frequently takes a walk in the woods with time taken to observe the natural surroundings. A horse-drawn wagon ride is taken by everyone during one of the first sessions.

The at risk students return to Jester Park Equestrian Center by themselves to ride horses. They either ride in the indoor arena or take a trail ride. Sometimes the Des Moines Mounted Police ride with them, but that's another story!

It is probably an understatement to say that what was initially thought to be a good idea, has blossomed into an exceptionally successful program. Each session is processed by instructors, staff and students for adjustments that need to be made. Flexibility is the key to the positive outcome of the program.

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