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STRAIGHT FROM THE HORSE'S MOUTH:

Teens with Autism Learn the Secrets of “Social Thinking” from Experts in the Field – Horses and Cows!

by Dr. Sandra R. Wise, Licensed Clinical Psychologist



Students with Aspergers enter the bovine world.

Who could be better at teaching subtle non-verbal communication skills than living, breathing beings who depend solely on such skills for survival and success in a socially complex community? Equines and bovines have perfected the use of “body language” and demonstrate exquisite non-verbal communication skills in their own social exchanges. Perhaps more striking, however, is the fact that they, as animals of prey, have also learned to use these skills to operate in a world that is alien to them – that is, the world of humans, who happen to be predators. That accomplishment, indeed, qualifies them as experts in the field.

And so, on a recent sunny summer day, eleven enthusiastic high school students, who have been diagnosed with a form of high-functioning autism called Asperger’s Syndrome, left their base camp at College Internship Program’s summer retreat in Melbourne, Florida and headed out to their temporary “home on the range,” that is, the Crescent J Ranch on the grounds of Forever Florida, a 4,700-acre wilderness preserve in central Florida. They were ready for their first lesson in social graces – equine /bovine style.

The students, who came from locations as far away as Germany, were participating in a summer camp experience hosted by the Brevard Campus of College Internship Program (CIP), a post-secondary educational experience that prepares young adults with Asperger’s, ADHD and other learning differences for success in life. The students are coached in the necessary skills to live independently. One of those skills is called “social thinking,” which is what we do when we interact with others – that is, we think

about them and about what they are thinking. This influences how we behave, and how we behave, of course, drives the responses we get from others.

Social thinking deficits are common in individuals with autism spectrum disorders and similar diagnoses. People with such deficits are often perceived as rude and self-centered, as they have difficulty detecting when their conversational partner is becoming bored or when someone has extended a kindness to them that should be acknowledged. Hence, they are often negatively perceived and can easily become targets of bullying, which can lead to social isolation and depression.

THE BEGINNING OF AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH: Teaching Social Thinking Skills with Horses

To address such deficits, experts in various fields, such as education and mental health, have developed methods to build social interaction skills in students and adults. Some learning programs involve classroom lectures and discussions with accompanying cartoons or story boards; some employ role-play; others focus on watching and debriefing movies and videos of human interactions. All of these approaches attempt to teach individuals how to process social information and recognize how their own behaviors are being perceived.

As I observed one of these “social thinking” classes at the Brevard CIP campus, I was struck with the thought that students with Asperger’s might be able to learn these skills, which are primarily non-verbal, much more



Asperger's student is approached by untouched foal.



Dr. Wise and Lizzie.



effectively if we could remove the verbal component of social exchange during the actual learning experience. This would eliminate the need to decipher the subtleties of spoken language (idioms, etc.), which are often confusing for this population, and would bypass the need to formulate a verbal response, which can easily pull individuals with Asperger's off task. Since many of the difficulties that these students run into in social situations involve missing important non-verbal social cues, I thought to myself, why not pair them up with the non-verbal experts I had been associated with for the past ten years – horses and cows?

Hence began the planning for "Social Thinking Skills – Straight from the Horse's Mouth."

Why Horses and Cows?

One only needs to look to the work of Temple Grandin, who, despite her autism, has earned a Ph.D., distinguishing herself as an expert not only in the field of animal science, but also in the field of autism treatment, to understand the potential benefits of immersing oneself in the equine and bovine world.

The sole method of communication in that world is body language. As noted above, it's important to remember that horses and cows are animals of prey – a characteristic that has required them to develop uncanny skills in detecting and sending precise non-verbal signals.

It made sense to me to turn these students with Asperger's over to the "experts in the field." So on that sunny summer day, we literally headed out to the "field" far in the back of the Crescent J Ranch.

The Students Strike Out to Find a "Home on the Range"

The students received no specific instruction as they rode in a safari coach to a pasture about three miles back into the beautiful natural setting at Forever Florida. Here the students entered the non-verbal world of Tequila and his herd of mares. A number of colts had already been born and numerous other mares were still pregnant. The students were simply told to "go mingle" and communicate with these beautiful animals, who are quite social, despite the fact that the majority of the mares had never been trained or had any type of restraint placed on them. The colts were born naturally in the field and had never been touched by humans. The students spent about 45 minutes in this pasture, then visited a second pasture where a similar cohort of mares and colts, led by the stallion Pretty Boy, was living communally with a herd of cattle and calves, headed by one very large bull.

So what happened when these students, who have difficulty with social thinking skills, introduced themselves to the experts in the field? One young student, Bryson, described his experience with the stallion Pretty Boy: "We had a conversation in our heads but we disagreed. He knew I was only there for the experience so he let me be there and didn't give me too much trouble. He said to me, 'You are out-numbered. I'm glad you're here to visit because we aren't that different from each other. Horses like us like to run. People like you like to relax. And relaxing is kind of like running.'" Bryson's efforts were clearly aimed at trying to read what Pretty Boy might have been thinking - that's the essence of social thinking.

Bryson continued, "The horse's head was cutting off the circulation in my arm." When asked why he didn't move his arm, he stated, "Because I was feeling the love from the horse. He had love for me and I had love for him." Bryson was profoundly affected by this interaction with the stallion. In the debriefing he repeatedly spoke about how his arm was falling asleep under Pretty Boy's head but he was so happy to be holding him that he didn't mind so much. He also talked about how calm and clear his mind felt just being in the "wide-open spaces" of the natural wilderness. He reported that he has a hard time learning in other environments because there are so many distractions, but out at the ranch he felt like he could take it all in and "everything made sense."

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To view a touching video of the debriefing interview with these two students visit: <http://www.naturalhorse.com/media/matt-video.html>

This interview took place four days after the session with the at liberty horses, and yet the student Bryson perfectly mirrored the placement of his hands on the horse--signifying how deeply embedded that experience with the horse was for him.

Sarah, who will be attending CIP full time in the fall, told us, "I want to be with the horses because they help me learn about human behavior with their bodies. I want to teach special education and I need to know about body language for that. Horses are therapeutic. They make us feel more comfortable than sitting in a classroom." Another student added, "I can learn out here. With the horses there's less distraction."

Horses and Cows Prove to be Great Teachers; So What's Next?

Due to the success of this summer camp venture and other similar CIP student and staff visits, The Equine Education Center, Forever Florida's division that directs the equine-assisted mental health programs, is currently staging a weekly equine-assisted learning experience as part of the social thinking curriculum for a number of CIP students beginning this fall semester.

Our hope is that these special students will gain confidence in their ability to learn and practice social thinking skills by interacting in a non-threatening environment where non-verbal language – which is, after all, the true language of relationships – is the *only* language expressed and comprehended. They can then build on this confidence to develop the full range of social communication skills needed to navigate in that seemingly alien world of human relationships. ♡



About the author:

After teaching graduate-level psychology courses and working as a clinical psychologist, Dr. Sandra Wise began training horses full-time in 2002. She now employs at liberty horses and cows to help her mental health clients hone

their skills and strengths to lead happier and healthier lives. The many hours she has spent studying the natural traits of equines and bovines have convinced her that they offer the perfect feedback system for teaching non-verbal social and communication skills to individuals with autism, since a natural horse or cow will let humans know immediately just how effective – or ineffective – their skills are.

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