

Horses plus girls = improved self-esteem at local learning camp

By Daniella Limoli



Photo Credits: Photo by Dustin Franz.

Photo Caption: Girl Power campers pet a horse after their lunch break during their equine-assisted learning camp in Albany on Tuesday, July 23.

A camp program sponsored by a local agency is teaching girls to feel better about themselves, with a little help from horses.

The Athens County Children's Services (ACCS) Girl Power Program held its second equine-assisted learning camp for six Coolville Elementary girls last week in Albany.

Laci Carsey, an ACCS social worker and the school outreach worker for Federal Hocking, said that the objective of the equine therapy is to help fifth- and sixth-grade girls build self-esteem and feel empowered. The Girl Power Program, which runs all year, is designed to help at-risk girls with matters ranging from self-confidence to family dynamics.

"Living in Appalachia, almost all girls are at risk for something," Carsey said. "The main goal is empowering girls to make them feel like they can become a leader, self-regulate, and hopefully have higher self-esteem."

She went on to say that many of the girls have bonded outside of their weekly meetings. "It's good because it gives them that consistency, it gives them something to look forward to, it makes them feel as if they're part of a group."

Tammy Baumgartner, a counselor certified to practice equine-assisted therapy, facilitates the four-day camp at the Osage Corral in Albany. She explained that she pitched the idea to use her farm for the camp because she thought it would be a good fit for the Girl

Power Program.

She said it gives the girls a chance to practice the skills they've been working on throughout the year.

"They're going to be learning a whole range of self-care skills—how to take care of themselves emotionally, how to set boundaries, read non-verbal communication, how to observe your environment to gather information, how to work together as a team and rely on the strengths of your friends," she said. "So these are all being presented as tools that they can use to keep themselves emotionally."

The gist of equine-assisted psychotherapy, Baumgartner explained, is that instead of coming to a counselor's room and talking, her patients undergo therapy with the horses. She has found it to be much more effective than any talk therapy she has done, adding that some of the progress the girls made on the first day would have taken weeks in a traditional setting.

"The idea is to help them with their relationships out in the real world, to know when it's a good time to approach, to be observant and pay attention to how other people are feeling and to have empathy," she said.

Carsey said that she completes pre- and post-testing with the girls, and found last year the camp last year to be successful.

"We do a self-esteem index and on their personal security scale, which kind of gauges whether they feel safe, (and) we saw an improvement on their personal security scale, which is a subset of that actual index," she said.

ACCS retiring director Andrea Reik, who volunteered at the camp, said the girls also gain a sense of respect and boundaries.

"You have to see how you approach the horse," she said. "And they talk about the way the horse communicates with its ears, with its tail, with its head, so you start observing behaviors that can help you in your life, too."

"We all deal with the world around us, so people aren't always able to communicate how they feel. But if you can be observant you can pick up how people are feeling."

Jill Schermacher, who served as the equine specialist for the camp, said she helps the girls understand "how to read the horse's body language, which helps to notice people's body language."

Caitlin Pierce, 12, said that during the week she hopes to learn "how horses sense what we're feeling. It seems like when you're nervous the horse is nervous or when you're calm the horse is calm. They know what you're feeling."

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