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Community-Based
Learning With
Miniature Horses



Magnificent Minis



It is easy to forget how fortunate those involved in the equine-assisted services (EAS) industry are to be able to experience the unique and powerful benefits of the horse every day. However, with the advent of COVID-19, those benefits can be more difficult for participants and their communities to access. By partnering with the Miniature Horse in off-site community-based programs, EAS centers have been able to reach participants and communities who are underserved and may not have the ability to easily visit a PATH Intl. center.

Miniature Horses, sometimes referred to as “minis,” are the ideal equine for centers to partner with to bridge the gap between previously unreachable communities and organizations that seek to serve them. Not only are they easy to travel with because of their size, but they are also less intimidating than a regular-sized horse.

Breed History

According to the American Miniature Horse Association, Inc. (AMHA), which was created in 1978, “In pre-historic times, small horse breeds were likely the products of surviving harsh natural climates and limited feed. In addition to the pre-historic evidence of small equids, it is speculated that the Miniature Horse is a result of nearly 400 years of selective breeding of many extracts...It is believed that the American Miniature Horse utilized the blood of the English and Dutch mine horses brought to this country in the 19th century and used in some Appalachian coal mines as late as 1950.”

The pedigrees of some Miniatures today also drew upon the blood of the Shetland pony. Over the years, other breeds were included, such as the Hackney pony for refinement and movement. Horses with pinto markings were included for color.

Miniature Horses are ideal partners for community-based learning to reach populations that are less accessible or underserved.

Miniature Horses are typically smaller in size than many ponies. The AMHA, for instance, only registers Miniatures who do not exceed 34 inches. The American Miniature Horse Registry has two height divisions. The "A" division is for horses 34 inches or under, and the "B" division is for those between 34 and 38 inches high. Regardless of their size, Miniature Horses should still be trained and treated like regular-sized horses.

Training Miniature Horses for Off-site Community Programs

People often see Miniature Horses as cute, tiny horses that can do no wrong. However, they have strong personalities and are quite capable of causing injuries if not handled appropriately. To safeguard participants, it is crucial to make it a priority to work on ground manners with minis. Making sure they are capable of standing still and being patient while being brushed or petted is of the utmost importance. If you have younger minis with more energy, you may want to lunge them before a session or loading them into the trailer for an off-site visit. Lunging helps to channel their extra energy, ensuring they can remain calm and well-mannered.

It is important to desensitize them to different activities in the environment you might encounter when out in the community. Desensitizing the minis allows them to stay comfortable and calm throughout a visit. Dogs, energetic children, large groups, city noises, wheelchairs, etc., are all potential spook factors they might encounter in the community. If you have the ability to complete a community outing before you start your visits, this will help prepare the minis to know what to expect during the program. Beginning this process of desensitizing during your initial outing will allow ample time to change or adjust anything that didn't go as planned before your first official visit.

A big part of a successful community visit is having happy, healthy Miniature Horses. It is more than simply arriving with a well-groomed and trained horse. It's being able to ensure you're prepared to care for them and can mitigate any challenging situations that could present themselves while the Miniature Horses are away from their normal home. Many factors come into play when ensuring they're in prime health physically and mentally before each visit. For starters, always have a well-stocked horse first aid kit in your trailer in case of any health emergencies or issues that could arise during transport or a visit. Making sure you have the ability to rotate your minis, so the same horse doesn't go to every visit, can help reduce the possibility of burnout. Providing your minis with a snack before loading them will allow their stomachs to settle, aiding in avoiding possible stomach issues from trailering. Keeping their hooves well-trimmed and focusing on grooming and brushing beforehand to ensure they are clean is essential not only for their health, but also because they are a significant representation of your organization.

It's essential to make sure your Miniature Horses are comfortable around people. They will be surrounded by new adults and children with high energy, excitement and wide-ranging emotions. Making sure they are as prepared for that environment as much as possible will not only help with burnout, but will also help keep your Miniature Horses healthy and content in their new job.

Benefits of Partnering with Miniature Horses

Everyone can benefit from social-emotional learning (SEL), which is an essential part of educational and human development. SEL is the ability to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show

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Pictured top to bottom, left to right:

Talking with children about how to be safe around the horses can be a gateway to a conversation on how they can stay safe in their communities and establish good boundaries.

A discussion about how important good nutrition, exercise and foot care is for minis is a great way to show children the importance of healthy living.

Learning the parts of a horse can segue into discussing the horse's body language followed by examples of nonverbal cues they may see from each other or adults in their lives.



empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships and make responsible decisions. It is also a skill that schools feel their children are struggling with now that they are returning to in-person classes again.

Partnering with the Miniature Horses is a great way to work on these skills in a fun, interactive environment. Topics such as communication, safety, boundaries, health and more are all subjects that are easily relatable from child to horse. Partnering with the minis to discuss communication allows children to work on their verbal and nonverbal skills. A great way to introduce the topic is to have children observe the horse's body language through their ears, tails, head movements, etc., followed by a discussion on how the children think the horse is feeling. Be sure to include examples of body language and nonverbal cues they may see from each other or adults in their lives. This will give them the tools they need to improve their understanding of communication and their ability to effectively communicate with others.

Safety around horses is key to a successful, enjoyable Miniature Horse program. Talking about how to be safe around the horses can also be a gateway to a conversation on how the children can stay safe in their communities. This topic also goes hand-in-hand with teaching about boundaries. Discussing how everyone has personal space and how their personal space should be different with strangers than with their family is an important piece of learning proper boundaries. Teaching the children that horses also have personal space bubbles by having them observe the horses' reaction as someone comes into the Miniature Horse's personal space is a great activity to demonstrate these topics.

In addition to communication, safety and boundaries, health and nutrition are also both vital aspects of a child's life. Using the Miniature Horse program to teach them about what horses eat and how they exercise, as well as their overall nutrition, can be a perfect gateway to discussing their own health and nutrition. In a world primarily geared toward technological advances, it's easy to see children and adults become consumed with electronics. So many children are fascinated by social media and electronic and digital games that they're losing the importance of outdoor exercise and how to manage their energy in healthy ways. Discussing how the Miniature Horses eat healthily and exercise regularly to stay well is a great way to show children the importance of healthy living.

In addition to schools, other community settings can also benefit from Miniature Horse programming. This could include assisted living facilities, group homes, inner-city youth programs, church groups and youth camps.

Curriculum and Community Connection

When developing any Miniature Horse community-based curriculum, it should meet your community and its organization's unique needs. In creating programming for schools, the author asked the schools what they believed their students needed and could benefit from the most. With COVID affecting children across the nation, impacting their school attendance and overall education, it was determined that the vast majority were lacking in communication and SEL skills. After conducting thorough research, the author based her curriculum on teaching a wide range of topics in partnership with the minis to make the subject information easier and fun to learn. Most children didn't grow up around horses, may have only seen them from afar or in movies or on television and never had the opportunity to see them up close or been given access to learn from them. Developing a core curriculum to meet the school's identified needs centered around expanding the children's knowledge of horses to teach valuable lessons while strengthening their communication and SEL skills.

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When reaching out to schools, it can be easier to connect with after-school and/or summer programs. Their curriculum is often more open to incorporating new activities and experiential learning. Summer programs, in particular, are keen to embrace activities that help children learn about and connect with their physical needs and the natural world.

After a successful visit has been completed, teachers, parents and even the children who participated can help spread the word and connect your organization with other programs both within and outside of their school district. For instance, the Miniature Horses from Heartland Equine Therapeutic Riding Academy (HETRA), a PATH Intl. Premier Accredited Center in Gretna, NE, are the center's ambassadors and often seen at events within the community. Staff members are always happy to bring them along to special events, and they're quick to grab peoples' attention. This not only helps desensitize the horses, but also brings them together with community members and opens the door for future possibilities. It's not uncommon for people to ask about including the Miniature Horses in their own programs after spending just a few minutes with them, so make sure and bring brochures and business cards to each event. Capitalizing on that interest will not only benefit your organization but also positively impacts your community as a whole.

Funding Your Program

While the potential benefits and need for a community-focused Miniature Horse program are significant, finding funding may be an initial challenge. However, by reaching out to new and more diverse populations and communities you can broaden the scope of your funding. After-school and summer school programs often have funds allocated to them to bring in unique, educational activities. Communicating with your local schools and tapping into those resources will help bridge the gap between needs and expenses.

Another funding avenue to pursue is local grants. Reaching out to your local foundations and introducing them to the benefits of a Miniature Horse program can potentially open the door for more grants and other funding options. It is a process that can take time, but suitable funding sources are available to bring you, your organization and your Miniature Horses closer to your community.

Community-based learning through the Miniature Horse could be just the vehicle your organization needs to reach populations you may not have thought were accessible. Funding will take time to receive, but there are local organizations looking for new and distinctive ways to help the children in your area. The journey and work to creating a Miniature Horse program will not happen overnight, but the outcome will benefit your organization and community.

Cassidy Fredrickson joined Heartland Equine Therapeutic Riding Academy (HETRA) as a volunteer in 2014. She started working at the PATH Intl. Premier Accredited Center in Gretna, NE, as a PATH Intl. Certified Instructor in 2018 and as an occupational therapist since 2019. She developed the curriculum and leads the community outings with the Miniature Horses community-based learning. She is also involved with the Life Skills Program and has been a part of HETRA University where she has created many short educational videos and webinars. She can be reached at cfredrickson@hetra.org.

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