

# Horse SenseAbility Volunteer Manual



**Wildstar Farm  
16 Nason Hill Lane  
Sherborn MA 01770  
508-744-6774  
[www.horsesenseability.org](http://www.horsesenseability.org)**

Horse SenseAbility is a program of Wildstar Equine-Assisted Activities and Therapy, Inc., a 501(c)3 non-profit organization (EIN 82-2801705). Contributions to WEAAT are tax-deductible to the extent permitted by law.

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# Welcome

Thank you for becoming a Horse SenseAbility volunteer! Volunteers are the backbone of our program. We greatly appreciate your interest and time—and we couldn't do it without you!

We hope that the following information will be a useful reference before and during your tenure. If you'd like more information about horses, therapeutic riding, different abilities, foster care and other topics related to working with Horse SenseAbility, always feel free to ask questions and take advantage of attending the clinics we offer.

Before volunteering at Horse SenseAbility, you or your guardian must review this manual in its entirety and either sign and return the acknowledgement at the end of this document, or sign the online [Volunteer Manual Statement of Completion](#).

*Polly Kornblith*

Polly Kornblith, Ed.M, PATH TRI & ESMHL  
Founder & Executive Director

## Emergency Equipment and Numbers

**In an emergency, call 911. Tell the dispatcher that you are at 16 Nason Hill LANE(!) in Sherborn.**

### Fire Alarms and Extinguisher Locations

- Alarm and extinguisher just inside the entrance of the barn
- Alarm just inside the far exit of the barn
- Extinguisher at the bottom of the stairs in the indoor arena
- Extinguisher in the hay loft

### First Aid Kits

- Human first aid kit is located on the wall to the left of the sink in the laundry area outside the bathroom. An AED is hanging next to it above the sink.
- Equine first aid kit is located on the floor to the left of the sink in the laundry area outside the bathroom. Diagrams that identify what supplies are stored and where in the equine first aid kit are posted above the kit.

### Phone Numbers

Office	508-744-6774
Executive Director	
Polly Kornblith	617-504-5299
Equine Manager	
Sarah Lovett	781-686-7670
Wildstar Farm Owners	
Polly Kornblith	617-504-5299
Mike Newman	617-821-4608

Emergency numbers are posted in the main aisle of the barn, in the grain room and on the first aid kits.

## COVID-19 Protocol

Horse SenseAbility has implemented preventive measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and will be following all the guidelines provided by the CDC and the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. However, Horse SenseAbility cannot guarantee that you will not become infected with COVID-19. Leaving your home and going anywhere increases your risk of contracting COVID-19 due to the contagious nature of the virus.

- Comply with current MA and CDC regulations regarding COVID protocols including out of state travel.
- Properly wear a face mask at all times and maintain a distance of at least 3 feet from others while outside your car.
- Cancel if you are ill or have been in proximity to someone who is.
- Use hand sanitizer or wash your hands before and after every lesson.
- If you have your own personal helmet, put it on upon exiting your car (participants only).
- Stay in the car until someone arrives at the barn doorway to escort you to your lessons (participants only).
- Stay out of the barn except to use the bathroom and minimize use of the bathroom except for handwashing.
- Remain in the car or sit at the outdoor picnic table during the lesson (parents, guardians, and siblings only).
- Leave the facility directly after the conclusion of the lesson, which will end on time even if the participant is late to arrive.
- Email, text or call with questions instead of entering the office except in the case of an emergency.

Volunteers or staff will sanitize reins, saddle grab straps and other equipment as appropriate after each lesson.

### **No Mask, No Lesson**

If an instructor determines that they cannot accommodate a participant's needs while observing COVID-19 safety protocols, the participant will no longer be able to attend onsite, in-person activities. Horse SenseAbility reserves the right to terminate lessons for any participant unable to comply with our COVID protocol, in which case Horse SenseAbility will refund 50% of tuition on a pro-rated basis.

Instructors are not responsible for fitting masks on participants. If a participant wears a mask that does not properly cover the mouth and nose, or the participant removes their own mask during a lesson, the instructor may need to end the lesson early.

If a participant arrives and appears ill, the instructor will send the student home instead of conducting the lesson.

## Benefits of Therapeutic Riding & Horsemanship

Our horses are invaluable educators and therapy partners. A horse doesn't care what we look like, if we can see, if we take medication, or what happened to us that day. We can tell horses a secret and know they'll keep it safe.

Horses live in the moment. They respond to kindness and patience, not appearances or expectations. Gaining the trust and respect of a 1000-pound animal takes self-control and builds self-esteem.

Taking care of an animal, especially a large one, teaches you to accept responsibilities. Learning to work with and ride a horse requires determination, flexibility and perseverance.

The benefits of mounted and unmounted activities (otherwise known as "horsemanship") are many:

- **Behavioral** – You learn to regulate your own behavior, interpret the your own and the horse's body language, recognize changes in behavior and employ coping strategies.
- **Cognitive** – Riding and horsemanship lessons incorporate activities and games designed to achieve specific goals such as following multi-step directions and staying on task.
- **Emotional** – The relationships that develop among participants, volunteers, horses and staff are an integral part of a positive, emotional experience provided by a therapeutic riding and horsemanship program. Overcoming fear and anxiety as well as mastering riding and other skills help participants realize self-worth and increase self-confidence.
- **Physical** – The horse's movement has a dynamic effect on your body. It stimulates brain function, which can lead to significant gains in language, mobility, neurological organization and self-confidence.
- **Sensory** – The sights and sounds you encounter on a farm contribute to the overall sensory experience. Being in nature reduces stress, negative thinking, aggression, blood pressure and heart rate while increasing happiness, productivity and cognitive performance.<sup>1</sup>
- **Social** – Equine-assisted activities provide an opportunity to interact with peers, volunteers and staff in a positive, enjoyable environment.
- **Spiritual** – The horse-human bond grounds individuals in the present and raises self-awareness.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on this research, see *The Nature Fix: Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier, and More Creative* by Florence Williams.

# What We Do

## Mission

Horse SenseAbility's mission is to help underserved or at-risk youth and young adults develop life skills by engaging in therapeutic equine-assisted learning activities in a peaceful, rural setting.

## Participants

Horse SenseAbility serves participants aged 4 years and up. Staff conduct an individual assessment at the outset to determine eligibility and appropriateness for the program. Once accepted into the program, specific goals are established for each participant and progress is documented weekly. Lesson activities may include grooming and horse care, developing basic riding skills, playing games on or with the horses, doing barn chores and exploring our sensory trail.

Many of our participants fall into 2 categories: they've been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) *or* they've experienced childhood trauma with debilitating effects.<sup>2</sup>

## Guidelines for Working with Participants

At Horse SenseAbility, we try to treat everyone—our participants, their parents, our horses and each other—with kindness while being considerate and sensitive to individual needs.

Always encourage a participant to be as independent as possible. Talk to them appropriately for their cognitive age. Use positive rather than negative reinforcement and *never* yell. Be patient; some participants may need extra time to process information.

If you aren't comfortable or capable of handling an issue with a participant, ask the instructor or a staff member for help.

Here are a few basic tips to keep in mind:

- **Ask before you help.** Just because someone has physical or mental challenges, don't assume he needs help. If someone seems to be having difficulty, ask if he'd like assistance and exactly what he'd like you to do. We always
- **Be sensitive about physical contact.** People who have experienced abuse, neglect or other trauma may be extremely cautious and uncomfortable with physical contact. Always ask the participant if it's OK to touch them before you do so in any way.
- **Think before you speak.** Always speak directly to the participant, not their parent, aide or interpreter. Try to establish eye contact and speak clearly.
- **Put the person first.** Treat each individual as a person, not the special need he has. Say "Luke has autism" or "Luke is on the spectrum" rather than "autistic Luke." Note that many people dislike euphemistic terms like "physically challenged" and "differently abled."

Always feel free to ask staff for additional information or training to better support our participants.

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<sup>2</sup> See "An 'Aspie' Tells What It's Like To Live With Asperger's, Autism Spectrum Disorder" on page 32, "What's the Difference Between High and Low Functioning Autism?" on page 35, and "Youth & Trauma" on page 37.

## Our Programs

We run six major programs at Horse SenseAbility, each of which is described in more detail at [www.HorseSenseAbility.org](http://www.HorseSenseAbility.org).

- **Stable Moments** is designed for children who are or have been in foster care. A trained volunteer mentor and a horse meet 1-on-1 weekly with the child for an entire school year to develop life skills such as emotional awareness, self-regulation, anger management and respect for boundaries.
- **City To Saddle** gives 6 to 13 year-olds from low-income families an opportunity to interact with a variety of farm animals, particularly horses, in a relaxing rural setting. This week-long, half-day summer program includes equestrian activities and other barnyard experiences for only a \$15 registration fee.
- **Wildstar Wranglers** is a structured, supportive and supervised job-skill development program for young adults with autism spectrum disorder who are transitioning from school to adult employment. The experience builds and enhances the individual's ability to following directions, complete tasks in a timely manner, pay attention to detail, accept feedback, be a team player and communicate appropriately in a workplace setting.
- **Therapeutic riding and horsemanship lessons** are available for children and adults with autism spectrum disorder; emotional, behavioral, or mental health issues; experience with violence, abuse or trauma; or identified as at risk.
- **Community visits** by Hugo, our specially trained therapy pony, delight young people at local schools, after-school programs and social service organizations.
- **Physical Therapy** incorporates equine movement as part of an individual's treatment plan.

## Our Animals

Our animals are our partners and deserve our deepest gratitude and respect. Always be responsive and caring to our horses and other animals here on the farm. Be gentle yet firm to make sure the animals understand and comply with what you are asking of them.

**Never kick or hit any of the animals!** If you believe a reprimand or additional training is necessary, notify an instructor or a staff member.

# Volunteer Qualifications and Responsibilities

## Eligibility

Volunteers must:

- Be 14 years of age or older<sup>3</sup> (see “Volunteer Jobs” on page 9)
- Complete and submit the online Horse SenseAbility Volunteer Packet
- Attend an orientation

## Commitment & Availability

Most roles require volunteers to commit to a minimum of 2 hours each week on the same day at the same time for a term or for a full week in the summer. Please block out this time on your calendar.

If there is an emergency and you are not able to make your scheduled day and time, please try to give us at least 48 hours in advance. If you’re canceling less than 48 hours ahead of your shift, please also call the instructor directly.

If you can, offer to volunteer another day to make up for your absence.

## Physical Considerations

Some of our volunteer opportunities are physically demanding. Please inform staff if you have a condition that may prevent you from performing certain activities or assisting in an emergency situation. In such case, we will try to identify a way in which you can support our programs without overstressing your own body.

## Conduct & Behavior

As a volunteer, you represent our organization and should set a good example for our participants. It’s crucial to follow safe, consistent procedures because participants learn by watching you.

Inappropriate language, disruptive behavior or behavior that threatens the safety of others is not acceptable and will not be tolerated. If you are subject to or observe inappropriate behavior by persons or horses (biting, kicking, etc.), please notify staff immediately.

After a first attempt to correct behavior on the part of humans, offenders will be asked to leave the premises by a staff member and dismissal will be immediate. Possible reasons for dismissal or removal include but are not limited to:

- Failure to obey safety regulations
- Creating a disturbance during a lesson
- Breach of confidentiality
- Failure to show up or multiple cancellations
- Disregard for program policies
- Use of alcohol or illegal substances before or while at Horse SenseAbility
- Aggressive or abusive behavior or language directed at oneself, other participants, volunteers, staff, instructors or our horses and other animals

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<sup>3</sup> Exceptions to this age requirement may be made for active members of the U.S. Pony Club.



## Volunteer Jobs

Here are some of the ways in which you can support our programs<sup>4</sup>:

- **Barn/farm helpers** work directly with staff to care for the horses and keep their environment safe and clean.
- **Horse leaders** walk with and manage the horse during the lesson. Your responsibility is the *horse*, not the rider. The leader should always be aware of the entire team and directions given by the instructor. A leader must have significant, recent experience with horses.

Horse leaders should arrive 10 minutes before each lesson to check for last minute changes, get out any necessary equipment and help prepare the horse for the lesson. (See “Tips” on page 22 for specific suggestions on how to be a safe and effective horse leader. )

- **Horsemanship helpers** assist participants doing unmounted therapeutic activities such as grooming, learning about equine body language, doing arts & crafts and engaging in educational games.
- **Office helpers** assist staff by doing administrative tasks, organizing an event, designing a flyer, posting on social media, contacting local organizations and more. Volunteers with special skills are encouraged to make staff aware of these talents. Office helpers must be at least 16 years old.
- **Side walkers** walk or jog alongside a mounted rider and provide support as required by the instructor. Assistance may entail direct physical support, verbal support to reinforce the instructor’s directions or acting as a spotter. One or two side walkers may be assigned to each rider depending on the participant’s needs. The side walker’s responsibility is the **rider**, not the horse.  
Side walkers should arrive at least 10 minutes before each lesson. (See “Tips” on page 22 for specific suggestions on how to be a safe and effective side walker. )
- **Stable Moments mentors** meet 1-on-1 weekly for an hour with the same participant and a horse for an entire school year. Horse SenseAbility provides special training, activities and ongoing support to mentors. Stable Moments mentors must be at least 21 years old.

## Policies and Procedures

### Accidents

If you witness or are involved in an accident on the property, report it immediately to an instructor or staff member. Once the situation is under control, a staff member must prepare an incident report and may need to speak with you about what happened.

### Alcohol & Illegal Substances

The consumption of alcohol or illegal substances prior to being at or while at Wildstar Farm is prohibited. A violation of this policy will result in immediate dismissal.

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<sup>4</sup> Note that exceptions to age requirements may be made for active members of the U.S. Pony Club at the discretion of program staff.

## Arrival & Departure

### Arrival

1. Please arrive 10 minutes before the lesson starts and plan to stay until the horse(s) is back in its stall or paddock.
2. Sign in and pick up your name tag lanyard.
3. Greet and escort the participant if requested by the instructor.
4. Check that the participant's attire is appropriate and safe for working with horses. (See "Attire" on page 10.) If necessary, adjust the participant's helmet so it fits properly. (See "Helmet Fit" on page 15.)
5. If the lesson will include mounted riding, help the participant groom and tack up the horse to the best of their ability (if applicable).

### Departure

1. Make sure all tools, tack and equipment has been put away.
2. Double-check that all gates and stall doors are closed and latched.
3. Notify staff of any concerns or if something needs to be fixed.
4. Return your name tag lanyard.

## Attire

### Clothing

Wear comfortable clothing that allows you to move freely but won't interfere with or get caught in the horse's equipment. Do not wear pants that drag on the ground.

Dress appropriate to weather conditions. In the summer months, the barn and arena stay relatively cool. Shorts of appropriate length are acceptable attire when the temperature is above 80°.

During the winter months, wear layers, gloves and hats. We also recommend Hot Hands™ Insole Foot Warmers (available at Amazon).

### Footwear

Comfortable boots or sturdy shoes with a ¼" heel are preferred at all times in the barn, arena and within 20 feet of an equine. Sneakers are acceptable but not as protective. Loafers, high heels and open-toed shoes or sandals are **never** allowed.

Also, **do not** wear shoes or work boots with steel toes around horses because your toes could be crushed if a horse steps on your foot.

Horse SenseAbility always uses safety stirrups for mounted lessons.

### Hair & Accessories

If your hair is long enough to put in a pony tail, please do so when you're around the horses.

Do not wear dangling earrings or bracelets when working with the horses.

### Scents

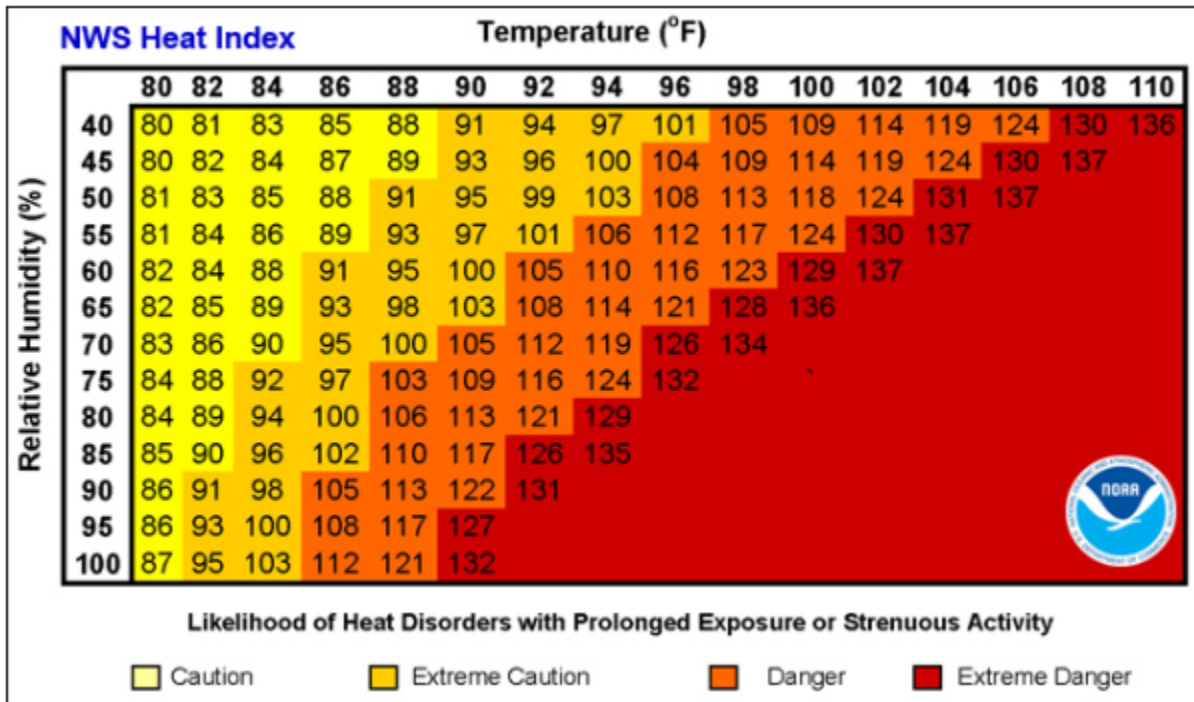
Avoid strong perfumes and colognes because they may irritate the horses as well as individuals with allergies or sensory issues.

## Cancellations

### Weather Cancellation

No mounted activities or lessons will occur if and when the daytime temperature is expected to be below 15° or above 90° in Sherborn MA. Please check the weather report at <https://www.horsesenseability.com/weather-cancellation-policy> if you have any question.

In addition, no mounted activities or lessons will occur if the heat index (a measure of how hot it really feels when relative humidity is factored in with the actual air temperature) exceeds 90 according to this table:



In the event of other harsh weather, riders may participate in horsemanship activities in the barn instead of having mounted lessons in the arena.

We follow the Dover-Sherborn Public Schools (<https://www.doversherborn.org/>) for weather closing and delays.

## **Volunteer Cancellation**

Volunteers are critical to the success of our programs. Please cancel only in the case of a real emergency and notify staff as soon as possible so we can try to find a replacement instead of cancelling the lesson. If you have a last-minute emergency, please also call the instructor you're volunteering with.

## **Participant Cancellation**

Staff will make every effort to notify you by phone or text if a participant cancels and your assistance won't be needed. Please make sure we have all your phone numbers on record.

## **Cell Phones**

Turn off or silence your cell phone and car alarm when you're on the property; they can startle both participants and horses.

**Never** use a phone during a lesson except in the case of an emergency.

## **Children**

Do not bring children who are not participants with you when you are scheduled to volunteer. We are not in a position to supervise them and cannot guarantee their safety.

## **Communication & Questions**

We value your observations. The instructor cannot see everything that goes on in a lesson. Talk to your instructor after class to share accomplishments by or concerns about your participant.

## **Confidentiality**

We are committed to protecting the confidential information of our participants, staff and volunteers. Confidential Information includes all personally identifiable information, such as last names, telephone numbers, mailing and email addresses, diagnosis and medications.

You will be told everything you need to know to keep a participant safe, but not their diagnosis (except in the case of a seizure disorder).

Do not disclose confidential information to anyone other than staff unless you have explicit permission from the participant or parent/guardian and it directly relates to the participant's safety (for example, a history of diabetes, severe allergic reactions, fainting or seizures).

## **Discharge Guidelines**

A volunteer may be discharged for the following reasons:

- Threatening or becoming excessively disruptive or uncontrollable to the point of harming themselves, the horses, participants, volunteers, staff or facility.
- Falsification of information on the Volunteer Packet or other forms.
- Absence for more than 2 lessons in any given term for non-medical reasons.
- Tardiness by more than 10 minutes for more than 2 sessions in any given term.
- Failure to complete annual paperwork.

## **Driving & Parking**

Observe the 5 mph speed limit at all times and park only in designated areas.

## First Aid

Alert staff or the instructor in the case of any emergency or unusual behavior by a participant or horse.

- The first aid kits for humans and for horses are located in the laundry area just outside the bathroom.
- A landline phone is located in the main aisle of the barn.
- Emergency numbers are posted in the main aisle of the barn, in the grain room and on the first aid kits.
- Fire extinguishers are located in the main aisle of the barn, in the arena, and in the hayloft.

Note that all staff members are certified in First Aid and CPR/AED. Please do not hesitate to ask for help!

## Food

### Participants

**Never** offer food to participants because they may have allergies, diabetes or other medical conditions.

### Horses

Always ask a staff member whether it is OK to feed a treat to a horse. Some of our horses are on special diets; others may already have had enough that day.

If you get permission to feed a treat to a horse, put it in one of the special blue treat buckets and then hold it out to them.

Handfeeding horses is strictly **prohibited**. It can lead to aggressive behavior and injury.

## Hydration

Every volunteer receives a refillable water bottle to keep at the barn. Be sure to drink from it often!

If the participant you're working with exhibits any of the following signs, please give them water immediately: dry mouth, tired or sleepy, or dizziness. If the person is mounted, bring the horse to the center of the arena and ask someone else to get the water for you.

## Illness

Volunteers with a cold or the flu should stay home from the barn until they have been without fever (under 100.4) for 24 hours without having taken Acetaminophen (i.e. Tylenol) or Ibuprofen (i.e. Motrin) to avoid spreading illness to others.

If you're coughing or sneezing, please do so into your elbow or a tissue. Also, please wash your hands with soap and warm water regularly and dry them thoroughly.

Volunteers who have uncontrolled, severe, or bloody diarrhea and fever or vomiting, should be symptom-free for at least 24 hours before returning to the program.

If a volunteer has pediculosis (head lice), please notify staff immediately particularly if the person has used one of the Horse SenseAbility helmets.

## Noise

As prey animals, horses can "spook" or startle easily when they hear loud, unexpected noises. Always use a quiet "inside" voice around the horses and remind participants to do the same.

## Off-Limits Areas

No participant should be in the barn with the horses without an instructor, volunteer or staff member.

Obeys signs indicating areas of the barn that are not open to the public. Similarly, respect the privacy of the equine manager, who lives in the upstairs apartment.

## Pets

Dogs and other animals who don't live on the property are not permitted on the grounds. Please leave them at home where they will be safe.

## Photographs & Videos

Ask permission before taking any pictures or videos of participants or other volunteers. In the case of children in state custody, sharing their images on social media or with others can compromise their safety.

## Restroom

During construction, a portable toilet is available just outside the entrance to the barn. When the new barn is finished, an accessible bathroom will be located behind the laundry room on the right side of the main aisle.

## Smoking

Wildstar Farm is a non-smoking facility. For the safety, health and pleasure of all the people and animals who spend time here, smoking is **never** allowed on the premises. If you must smoke, do so in your car with the windows closed and leave the extinguished cigarette/cigar/pipe there. Similarly, no open flames are allowed on the property.

# Helmet Fit



- 1. Place the helmet on the participant's head.**

The helmet should fit all the way down, and cup the participant's entire skull. The helmet should be snug but not uncomfortable. Be particularly aware of any excess pressure on the participant's ears and along the temples. It is unlikely the helmet will loosen, so if it is too tight now, it will always be too tight.

If the fit is close but not quite right and helmet has a fitting mechanism, try to adjust it.



- 2. Make sure the helmet is level.**

The helmet should sit straight on the participant's head, with the brim level and about 1 inch (or 2 fingers) above the eyebrows. If the helmet sits higher than this, it is too small and won't protect the participant's head; if it's too low and it will block the participant's eyes.



- 3. Check the fit.**

Before you buckle the chin strap, have the participant shake their head vigorously side to side and then up and down. Grab the brim and try to pull it up and down. If the helmet slides around, it is too big.

The shape of the helmet also affects the fit. If the helmet is tight across the participant's forehead but still rocks side to side when the participant shakes his or her head, it's too round. If it fits at the sides but slides front to back, it's too oval. Keep trying helmets until you find the right one!



- 4. Buckle the chin strap.**

Adjust the chin strap so that it fits snugly but comfortably under the participant's chin against the throat. The participant should be able to chew or yawn easily.

## Safety Around Horses

As wonderful as our equine partners are, they are still 1000-pound beings with minds of their own. For the safety of our staff, volunteers, participants and horses, please review and abide by the following safety precautions.

### Always...

- Approach a horse from the side, avoid quick movements and speak in a quiet voice.
- Use a rope with a clip when leading horses. Hold the lead with your right hand and fold the excess in your left (see photo below).
- Walk next to the horse between its ear and shoulder (not ahead or behind it) when leading.
- Respect the horses' personal space and reinforce good manners.
- Be alert. Horses have a fright/flight instinct and can move quickly if startled.
- Call "RAMP" in a loud voice before starting down the ramp or "DOOR" before coming in or passing by the side door to the arena.
- When leading or riding, keep at least 2 horse lengths between horses.
- Open the stall door completely when bringing a horse out to the aisle.
- Use a lead rope and halter to bring a horse from the stall to the crossties and vice versa.
- If for some reason you need to walk behind a horse, talk calmly and stroke its rump on approach and keep your body close to it so you don't get kicked.
- Remove halters from horses in stalls and turnout.
- Ask questions when in doubt—staff members are happy to help!

### Never...

- Let horses sniff each other.
- Leave a horse standing on the cross ties or bridled in a stall.
- Leave a horse unattended when it's not in a stall or a paddock.
- Run, make sudden movements, shout or scream around horses. Always speak firmly and calmly so the horse has confidence in you.
- Wrap the lead rope around your hand, wrist or body.

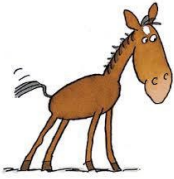


Dangerous

Safe



- Leave equipment (grooming or otherwise) lying around. Whenever you get equipment out, it is your responsibility to put it back in its proper place.
- Walk under a horse, duck under its neck or walk under or over a tied lead rope.
- Sit or kneel on the ground next to the horse; squatting is the safest way to work on the horses legs.
- Hit, yell or yank on a horse's lead to correct it.
- Play with a horse's mouth
- Hand-feed treats. Instead, put treats in the horse's bucket.
- Let reins or lead lines hang to the ground.
- Offer food to participants or horses without permission from staff.



## Horse Safety Rules for Children



- 🐾 Always walk—don't run—around horses.
- 🐾 Don't make loud noises or sudden movements around a horse.
- 🐾 Approach a horse from the side, not the front or the back.
- 🐾 Never stand or walk around the back of a horse.
- 🐾 Talk to the horse as you get near it.
- 🐾 Pat the horse on the neck, not the face.
- 🐾 Beware of your feet—it hurts to get stepped on by a 1000-pound animal!
- 🐾 Hold your hand flat if it's near the horse's mouth. Fingers can feel like carrots to a horse!

## Emergency Procedures

Despite following every safety precaution, a horse can spook (startle), branches can break, snow can slide off the arena roof, and so on. It's important to work quickly and as a team to keep everyone as safe and secure as possible under such circumstances.

In an emergency, the instructor or a staff member is in charge. Listen carefully for directions—do **not** try to handle the situation by yourself.

If instructed, exit the facility, go to the tennis court and await further information.

### Emergency Supplies

- The first aid kits for humans and for horses are located in the laundry room on the right just in front of the bathroom.
- Emergency numbers are posted in the main aisle of the barn, in the grain room and on the first aid kits.
- A landline phone is also located in the main aisle.
- Fire extinguishers are located in the main aisle, the hayloft and the arena.

### Fire

The facility is equipped with a fire alarm that will automatically sound throughout the building and notify the fire department. The Sherborn Fire Department is trained and equipped to handle equine emergencies. If a fire breaks out during a mounted riding lesson, help participants perform an emergency dismount. (See “Emergency Dismount” on page 20.)

Evacuate everyone from the building immediately and meet in the backyard of the house. If you are a side walker, stay with your participant until his or her parent/guardian/caregiver arrives. Do not leave the premises until a staff member has been notified.

Do **not** interfere with or attempt to assist staff members who are evacuating horses from the barn.

### Medical Emergency

If a participant is injured or has a medical emergency during a lesson, halt all horses and stop all activities. **Never** try to move the participant if they can't do so on their own.

The instructor is responsible for managing the incident, including applying any necessary first aid. You may be asked to get the first aid kit or find a staff member for assistance. **If there's any question about the condition of the participant, call 911 immediately!**

The instructor will assess the situation to see whether the participant is able to resume the activity or needs further assistance. If the participant isn't injured but prefers not to continue, return the horse she was working with to the barn and untack it.

If the rider is in serious condition, the emergency plan goes into effect. The instructor will create a safe space around the participant and make sure **the rider is not moved in any way until medical personnel arrives.**

## Emergency Plan

The emergency plan goes into effect if a rider has a suspected serious injury or loses consciousness. The instructor will take charge and give you instructions.

If 911 is called, you may be asked to stand at the end of Nason Hill Lane to direct the emergency personnel to the property and participant. Other people and horses should move to a safe location to clear the way for the emergency vehicle.

## Emergency Dismount

If an emergency dismount is necessary, the horse leader should immediately halt the horse and stand in front of it while the instructor or side walker assists the rider. As soon as the participant is off, the leader should move the horse away from them.

If you are a side walker, make sure the rider's hands and feet are free from reins, stirrups and other equipment and then ease the participant down to the ground. Stay with your rider until further instructions are given.

The horse leader should **not** leave or let go of the horse for any reason.

## Fallen Rider

If you are a leader and your rider falls off, stop the horse immediately and move it away from the participant. The side walker or another volunteer should stay with the rider until the instructor assesses the situation.

**Do not** attempt to help your rider; this is the instructor's responsibility. Once the instructor is with the rider, be prepared to go for help. Know where the first aid kit is, where the phone is, and where the emergency numbers are. (See "Emergency Equipment" on page 3.)

If a rider on another horse falls off, bring your horse to the center of the arena or another safe area, stand beside or in front of it and try to keep it calm. **Do not** try to assist the other rider; the instructor will ask for assistance if needed.

## Loose Horse

If a horse gets away in the ring, the leader should bring the horse to the center of the arena and have the participant dismount.

If the horse is running loose on the property, yell "loose horse" and walk or yell to get a staff member. Do not try to approach or catch the horse under any circumstances—let the instructor and staff members handle the situation. If the horse leaves the premises, call 911.

## Excited or Spooked Horse

If a horse spooks (startles) during a riding lesson, do not leap or grab at the participant; it will probably make the problem worse and may unseat the rider. Talk quietly to the horse to try to calm it down. The instructor or side walker will help the rider dismount if necessary. Be prepared to take the horse out of the arena if asked to do so.

## Thunderstorms

If it starts to thunder and lightning, all mounted participants should dismount and wait for further instructions.

## Arena Etiquette

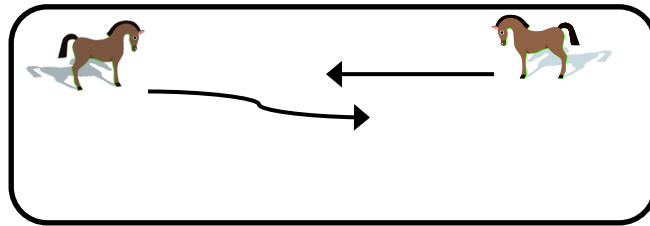
- When entering or exiting the arena from either the ramp or a side door, announce “ramp” if you are using the ramp or “door” when entering through or passing by one of the side doors of the arena in a loud voice.
- Close all gates when entering and exiting the arena.
- Use the space between the block and the ramp for mounting only. Do not lead a horse and participant through there.
- Tight turns are uncomfortable for the horse and can unseat the rider. Please make wide turns and large circles unless you are specifically directed otherwise.
- Someone taking a lesson always has the right of way.
- Cell phones should be on vibrate/silent or off and **never** answered in the arena or barn aisle.

## Rules of the Rail

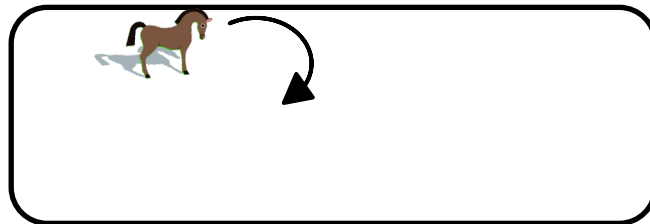
If you are riding or leading a horse in the arena, always leave at least:

- 1 horse length in between your horse and the next one
- 6 feet away from another horse if you’re passing it and announce yourself before you do so

When approaching another team head to head, pass left to left just like you would when driving a car.



When circling or changing direction, always turn away from the wall and circle to the inside.



**NEVER** leave manure in the arena—  
Pick it up and place it in a muck bucket to preserve our  
riding surface!

# Tips

## For Horse Leaders

- When you bring a horse into or out of the arena, be sure to close and latch all gates behind you.
- When a rider is mounting, lead the horse to the mounting block or the ramp and then stand in front of the horse's head. Remain standing in front of the horse and keep it as still as possible during mounting.
- Stay between the horse's head and shoulder. Always look up and toward where you want to go. Wiggle the rope to ask the horse to move faster or slower—do not try to drag a 1000-pound animal!
- Hold the lead rope with your right hand about 8" from where it attaches to the halter or bridle with the right hand closest **Never wrap the rope around your hand, wrist or body!** Instead, keep any excess rope folded in your left hand.
- Never put your hand in your pocket while leading.
- Maintain a steady pace. Avoid sharp turns or abrupt changes of tempo and gait. Stay on the rail unless directed otherwise. Do not cut corners.
- Pay attention to the instructor so you always know what the horse and rider should be doing. Be calm, alert and in charge. Don't chat with other volunteers while the class is in lesson.
- Keep at least 2 horse lengths between horses at all times. If you are getting too close, either make a circle to the inside of the arena or cross the ring to another position with more room.
- Do not pull the horse's head toward you, particularly at the trot; it may make the horse crooked and unbalance the rider.
- Stay far enough from obstacles and fences so the horse and any side walker have enough room.
- Encourage the rider to control the horse instead of depending on you.
- When halting, have the rider say "whoa." If the horse does not stop, tug it slightly backward, release and, if necessary, repeat.
- Do not stop on the rail unless instructed to do so. If you or the rider need to tie a shoe, take off a layer of clothing, etc., go to the center of the ring so the instructor can help you.
- If you need to protect yourself from a "mouthy" or "nippy" horse, hold the noseband at arm's length but make sure you aren't pressing the horse's face or pulling on the tack.
- If a horse isn't respecting your space, twirl the lead rope so it can't crowd you.
- In the case of any problem or general emergency not involving your horse or rider, bring the horse to the center of the arena. Stand in front of the horse and listen for instructions.
- If an emergency occurs with your horse or rider, immediately stop the horse and let the instructor or side walker assist the participant. **Do not let go of the lead rope or leave the horse for any reason.**
- Do not let a horse graze while tacked up or a participant is mounted.
- After the rider dismounts, loosen the girth, pick the horse's hooves and return it to its stall or paddock.

## For Side walkers

- Be aware of your rider at all times even when they aren't mounted. Remember, you are responsible for the **person** not the horse.
- Assist the instructor while the rider mounts. You may be asked to stand on the other side of the horse while the rider mounts. When the rider is ready, prompt them to tell or signal the horse to "walk on."
- When leaving the mounting ramp, remain at the rider's knee. The rider should not put their feet in the stirrups until the horse has left the ramp area. Walk to the center of ring so the instructor can adjust the stirrups and re-check the girth.
- Never put your hand in your pocket while side walking.
- If a rider has only 1 side walker, the leader and side walker should walk on opposite sides of the horse and refrain from unnecessary conversation.
- If a rider requires 2 side walkers, only 1 person should communicate with the rider at a time. Too much input can confuse or overwhelm a rider.
- If the rider needs help balancing while mounted, place your closest arm over the rider's thigh and grasp the front edge of the saddle. Tell the rider what you are going to do before you do it. Find out how much pressure is comfortable while still providing the support the rider needs.
- Learn the "hand over thigh" hold: face front, fingers holding front or flap of saddle, forearm resting on rider's thigh. For extra stability, you can place your other hand on the rider's ankle. For less support, just put your hand on the back of the rider's ankle.



Ankle hold



Thigh Hold



Ankle + Thigh Hold

- Do not put your hand on the rider's back unless told to do so. Instead, encourage the rider to use their trunk muscles.
- During the lesson, reinforce the instructor's directions but don't distract the rider. Give the participant time to process the instructions.
- Never leave your rider's side. If an object falls on the ground, ask the instructor to pick it up. If your arm is getting tired, have the other side walker cross to your side and then you cross to the other side.
- If the rider slides toward you, try to gently push them back to the midline using the thigh hold.
- When walking near hay or grass, softly take the cheek piece of the horse's halter in your hand to avoid "snacking."
- If a rider or a horse behaves inappropriately or in an unsafe manner, notify the instructor or a staff member immediately!

- At the end of the lesson, wait for the instructor to assist with the participant's dismount. If appropriate, walk the rider back to the adult they came with and then share any pertinent horse or participant issues with the instructor or staff.



## Our Horses



### Calli

Calli is a stunning dark bay Thoroughbred who raced for 3 years on the Eastern seaboard. She's 20 years old and 16 hands tall. Calli is the princess of Wildstar. She relishes being pampered in every way—grooming, muzzle trimming, glitter pedicures, massages, braiding—you name it, she loves it!



### Cecil

At 28, Cecil aka Chubby Checker is an older gentleman. Our barn manager Sarah has ridden Cecil since her teenage years. Cecil is very eager to please. He joins us with many years of experience as a therapeutic partner.



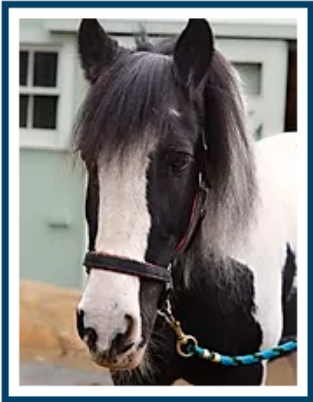
### Dazzle

Dazzle is our dazzling 14-year old, 16 hand American Warmblood mare. She's had a career in show jumping before joining the herd at Wildstar Farm. Dazzle is sweet as can be and just wants to be "in your pocket."



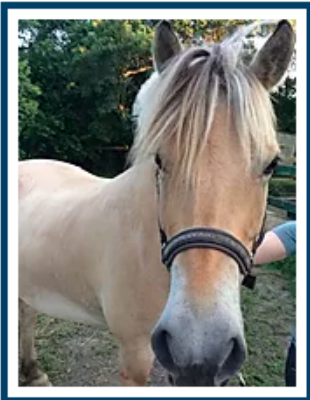
### **Diesel**

Diesel is a big boy with a big heart. He's 11 and a Gypsy Drum, which is a cross between a Gypsy Cob and a Shire draft horse. He's our "steady Eddie" gelding and loves everyone and everything!



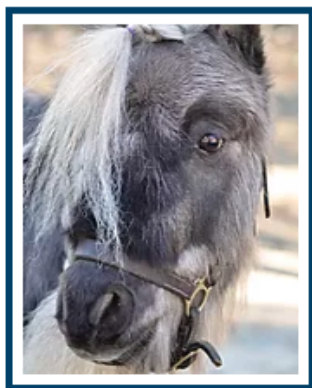
### **Glory**

Morning Glory is our "glorious" Gypsy Cob mare who has a heart of gold. Glory is 20 years old and the mother of Pippin (see below). Glory is the perfect mount for anyone aged 2 to 102! Glory's bountiful hair is only surpassed by her son's. And don't let Glory's small size (14.1 hands) fool you—she's a mighty girl who's bodacious from behind!



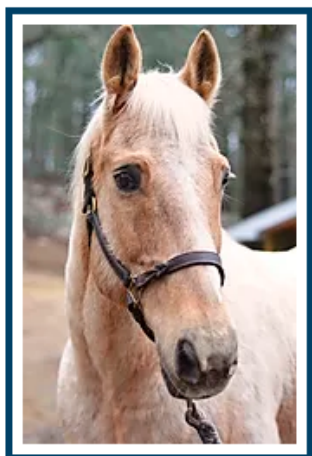
### **Hailey**

Hailey is a Fjord, a type of pony that originally came from Norway, with a classic two-color mane and subtly striped legs. Hailey is 8 years old and LOVES people.



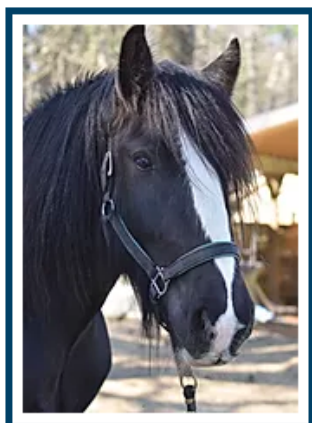
### Hugo

Hugo is a purebred UK Shetland Pony and is on long-term loan to Horse SenseAbility from [Personal Ponies](#) specifically for visiting people who might benefit from animal-assisted therapy. Although Hugo is small—he's only 32" at the shoulder—he has a huge personality and lots of love and comfort to give. Polly and Hugo are a registered therapy team with [Pet Partners](#) and visit schools and organizations in the local area.



### Patrick

At 25+, Patrick is the patriarch of the herd. Standing 16.1 hands, Patrick has a graceful, large stride suitable for both beginners and advanced riders. In addition to being an all-round good guy, Patrick's schedule includes hunting regularly with the [Norfolk Hunt Club](#).



### Pippin

Pippin, aka Wildstar Eclipse, is the home-grown baby of the farm. Born on Cinco de Mayo (May 5th) in 2014, Pippin is now in training under saddle. It's hard to keep Pippin away because all he wants to do is snuggle. At 5, Pippin is still too young for mounted work in our programs but perfect for horsemanship on the ground. Like his mother Glory, Pippin is a Gypsy Cob.



### Romeo

Romeo, Romeo, where art thou Romeo? At Wildstar Farm, of course! Romeo is the newest addition to the Horse SenseAbility herd. He is a Fell pony, which is the same type of pony that Queen Elizabeth rides.



### Ruby

At 11 years old and only 13.1 hands, Ruby is the perfect mount for our smallest riders. Like Glory and Pippin, Ruby is a Gypsy Cob with a super sweet temperament.

## Grooming Tools & Procedure



Use the curry comb in a circular motion to loosen dirt and hair from the horse's coat.

Do not use the curry comb on the horse's head or legs—use a soft brush instead.



Flick the hard brush in the direction of the hair to remove surface hair and dirt.



Make long smooth strokes with the soft brush to put the finishing touches on the grooming,



Softly use the face brush to clean sensitive areas of the horse.



Spray detangler on the horse's mane, tail and any leg feathers and then use the mane and tail brush to remove shavings and dirt out of the horse's mane, tail and any leg feathers.

Tightly squeeze the tail just above the area you're brushing to avoid hurting the horse and/or pulling out the hair.

Divide a thick tail into sections and brush them until your fingers can glide smoothly through the hair.



Use the hoof pick to clean dirt and stones out of the horse's hooves before and after each lesson.

If you don't have experience or are uncomfortable picking hooves, ask an instructor, more experienced volunteer, or staff member to do it for you.

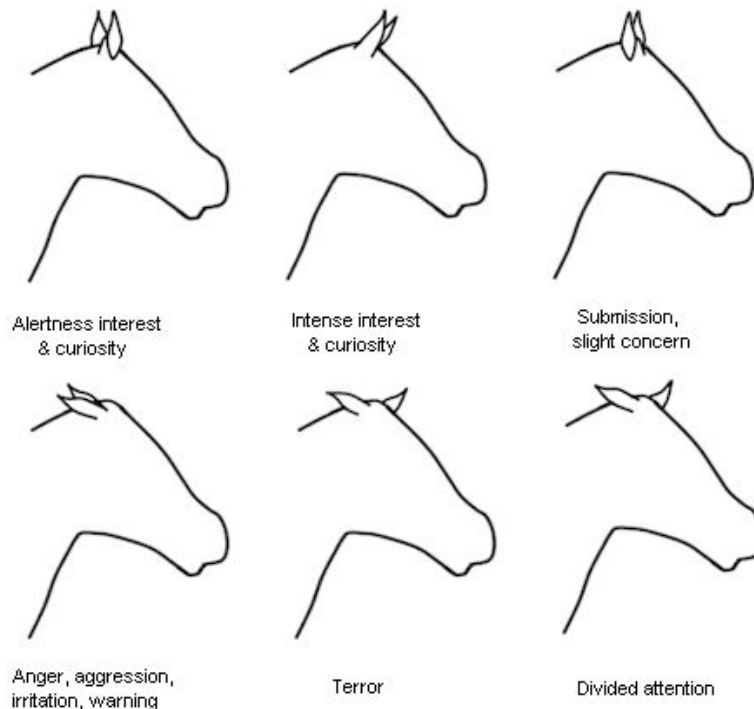
## Equine Senses & Communication

When developing relationships and working with horses, communication is key. Understanding horses' senses, instincts and implications is the first step in predicting behaviors, managing risks and building positive relationships.

### Hearing

A horse's sense of hearing is very acute. A horse combines its sense of hearing with sight to become familiar with new or alerting sounds. "Hearing but not seeing" is often the cause of the fright/flight response.

When working with horses, note the position of the horse's ears. Ears facing forward or flicking back and forth communicate attentiveness and interest. Drooping ears indicate relaxation, inattentiveness (i.e., can be easily startled), exhaustion or illness. Flattened ears indicate anger, threat or fear. Ears flicking back and forth indicate attentiveness or interest. Watch your horse's ears for increased communication.



### Sight

Horses' eyes are geared to finding danger. They don't have very accurate vision close up, but they can detect even a tiny movement at a distance. Horses' eyes are set on either side of the head so they have good peripheral (sideways) vision, but poorer frontal vision.

The lens of a horse's eye doesn't change shape as human eyes do. Instead, a horse focuses on objects by changing their head position and raising and lowering its head. Horses are thought to see quite well in the dark due to the large size of their eyes. There is still controversy as to whether or not horses see in color.

A horse's visual memory is very accurate. A horse may notice if something in the arena or out on a trail is different. If so, give the horse an opportunity to stop and look at the new object. Introduce new props that the horse may be unfamiliar with. Because a horse has better peripheral vision, slowly loosen the rein so it can move its head to the side.

The best way to approach a horse is at its shoulder. Although a horse has good peripheral vision, it may startle if you approach from behind or directly in front. A horse is also unable to see around the mouth area, which is why we don't allow handfeeding.

## Touch

Horses are very sensitive to touch and pressure. Although they are large, horses can detect even a single fly on its body. Each horse has sensitive areas, such as the flank and belly, and it is important to be familiar with them.

Touch is a means of communication between horses and between horses and people. Horses may also use touch to examine strange objects. They look, sniff and feel an object with their muzzle. The tongue, lips, and gums of the mouth are particularly sensitive places so it's important to be extra careful when a horse has a bit in its mouth.

Horses are trained by applying and removing pressure and are very sensitive to soft or rough touch. Leaders should treat the horses gently but firmly. Remind riders not to squeeze the horse with their legs constantly.

## Smell

A horse's sense of smell is very acute and allows it to recognize other horses and people. Smell also enables the horse to evaluate situations. Give horses the opportunity to become familiar with new objects and their environment by smelling. Do not carry treats in your pocket because horses may try to go after them.

## Taste

Taste is closely linked with the sense of smell and helps the horse distinguish palatable foods and other objects.

A horse may lick or nibble while becoming familiar with new objects and people. Be careful because this can lead to nipping!

## Sixth Sense

Horses have a "sixth sense" for evaluating the disposition of those around them. Horses are hypersensitive in detecting the moods of their leaders and riders. A good therapy horse is chosen for its sensitive response to the participant. Sometimes, there may be a personality conflict between a human and a horse. It is important to let the instructor know if you're having a difficult time relating to or getting along with a particular horse.

## Prey Mentality

Always keep in mind that horses are prey animals. They are always on high alert in case of danger and want the protection that comes from being in a group.

### **Flight as a Natural Instinct**

If frightened, a horse would rather turn and run away from danger than face and fight it. At a sudden movement or noise, the horse might try to flee. A frightened horse being held tightly may try to escape by pulling back. If you relax your hold, usually the horse will relax. If flight is not possible, the horse may either turn to kick out or face the problem and rear, especially in a tight area like a stall. If a horse appears to be frightened or fearful, immediately alert staff and speak to the horse calmly.

### **Herd**

Horses like to be in a group with 1 or 2 dominant members and a clearly defined pecking order. Some horses may not like being alone. This is particularly important to keep in mind when horses are leaving the arena or a horse loses sight of the others while on a trail ride. If the horse starts to fall behind, it may decide to trot or canter to catch up. If 1 horse spooks (startles) at something, others may also react. For safety, always keep at least 2 horse lengths between horses to respect their space and pecking order.

# The Power of Horses to Heal

By Tim Hayes<sup>5</sup>

Today men, women, and children afflicted with severe emotional damage are making dramatic recoveries by receiving the simple love, understanding, and acceptance that come from establishing a relationship with a horse, not on their back, but on the ground. It's called equine therapy.

Everyone knows someone who needs help: a husband, a wife, a partner, a child, a friend, a troubled teenager, a war veteran with PTSD, someone with autism, an addiction, anyone in emotional pain or who has lost their way.

There is now scientific, psychological, biological, and experiential evidence that equine therapeutic programs have become one of today's most effective cutting-edge methods of healing and are available to all of these disparate groups of people.

Humans are predator animals existing for about 2 hundred thousand years. We have survived by killing all other predators including other humans. Horses are prey animals existing for about fifty-five million years. They have survived by running away from predators. Remarkably 2 evolutionary equine survival traits have specifically enabled horses to assuage the suffering of humans in acute psychological pain.

The first is hypervigilance. Born with super human sensory abilities – in order to stay alive, horses are aware of their environment and everything in it for literally every second of their life.

Those suffering from PTSD, including war veterans, adults and children from homes with alcoholism, divorce, emotional or physical abuse, children with autism who are hyperspecific, at risk youth as well as others with similar emotional wounds immediately see and identify with the hypervigilance of a horse. At the same moment, the horse also sees and identifies with the hypervigilance of the person. This immediate and simultaneous identification creates a mutual interspecies experience of safety, comfort and trust.

From that moment, the natural desire of horses to want to be with others and increase their chances of survival causes them to accept the horse or human and create a herd of 2.

This is the second evolutionary equine survival trait, and along with hypervigilance, enables horses to assuage the suffering of humans in acute psychological pain.

It's known as equine herd dynamics, the horse's natural ability to live in large groups and excel at getting along with each other. This trait is established and practiced in all equine herds with the greatest principles of love – expressed with tolerance, acceptance, understanding, kindness, justice, patience, forgiveness and most importantly compassion.

When a hypervigilant, emotionally wounded person identifies with a horse and feels immediate safety, comfort and trust and then goes on to feel acceptance without judgment or criticism because the horse wants to be friends and create a herd of 2 – an amazing breakthrough of human psychological and emotional healing occurs. Deep feelings of shame, inadequacy and low self-esteem are met with a profound and immediate experience of unconditional acceptance.

A horse doesn't see a veteran who has either done or seen unimaginable horrific things – the horse just sees and accepts a person he wants to be with in his herd of 2.

A horse doesn't see a child with autism who has often felt that others wanted her to be different than she is – the horse just sees and accepts a child he wants to be with in his herd of 2.

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<sup>5</sup> Adapted from "The Kentucky Derby and the Power of Horses to Heal," which originally appeared on Fox News ([www.foxnews.com](http://www.foxnews.com)).



Countless times men, women and children with emotional wounds have reported that it was this experience of interacting with a horse which gave them a feeling of love, acceptance and self worth they had never felt before.

For thousands of years, horses have been unequalled in their contribution to human survival. They have been a source of food, a means of transportation, a provider of physical labor, and an instrument of war. And now when trauma, addictions, shattered families, and technological advancements all conspired to depersonalize twenty-first century humans, the horse yet again comes to our rescue.

This remarkable creature cannot only continue to serve humanity but can help heal our wounded, remind us of our connectedness to others, and ground us with love for ourselves and for all living things. The power of the horse will not just be found by sitting on his back. It will be felt on the ground from his heart.

Today when traditional talk therapy or pharmaceutical medications fail to heal those with debilitating emotional wounds, hopefully they will now know that there's another way.

# An 'Aspie' Tells What It's Like To Live With Asperger's, Autism Spectrum Disorder

By Gabi DiCiollie <sup>6</sup>

When I was diagnosed after my testing, my neuropsychologist said I had textbook Asperger's. She pointed out the following traits as examples.

- **Extreme social awkwardness.** I take things literally & at face value unless I consciously focus on observing for signs of subtext. For example, yesterday my dog's vet asked if my blue hair was natural. Without thinking I responded no, but my dark roots were... of course, 1 nanosecond later I realized he HAD to have been joking- cue the wave of embarrassment!! I avoid unstructured social situations whenever possible and have serious difficulty making friends or relating to people in person. I do not spontaneously share my interests with my coworkers and prefer to be left alone to my own devices as much as possible while working. I also sometimes have trouble with auditory processing and hear English sentences as mere sounds; movies are best watched with subtitles for this reason.
- **A love of knowledge, facts, lists ..., & objective data.** I've collected binders of information since I was a child, and I recall once spending my hard-earned class points on an enormous complete, unabridged English dictionary in 3rd grade. I would read encyclopedias and product labels for fun, especially when my parents grounded me from reading books as punishment for my frequent rebellion.
- **Narrow, obsessive interests.** For me this is genetics, animals and their behavior/psychology, human sexuality, speed & efficiency/time management, and matters of social justice. If I contract a disease or medical condition, I pore over all of the credible information I can possibly find on it. And before I purchased one of my first house bunnies, a mini lop named Pixie, I read 7 or 8 books and a plethora of websites on raising house rabbits to ensure I could give her the best life possible. I can also spend several hours on a single task I find interesting without a break; some Aspies are known to get so highly absorbed in their projects they need to be reminded to eat!
- **Enjoyment of routine.** I take the exact same route to and from work, and clock in/out at the exact same time. (If traffic delays me a minute or 2, I feel far more stressed than is logical.) I also plan ahead my workday and break up time into chunks assigned to completing certain tasks. **If my time allotment is intruded upon by a chatty stranger, I have to stifle very strong feelings of anger and annoyance.**
- **Penchant for self-soothing, repetitive behavior.** ... I have satin-lined baby blankets from my childhood that I physically manipulate to calm myself down. This could include scratching the satin, tying knots in its strings and rubbing them against my fingers or upper lip, or spraying it with good smells and covering my face with it. I also jiggle my right foot constantly and have mild restless legs syndrome at night.
- **Over-sensitivity.** **If someone suddenly yells loudly right behind me**, as is wont to happen at a pep rally for example, **it literally feels like someone jabbed a needle of sound into my eardrum.** It HURTS, and I have to suppress a disturbingly violent urge to retaliate to the perceived attack. On some days when I feel especially drained, voices are so stimulating and exhausting to process that even the sound of my fiancé's voice irks me. (To prevent damaging our relationship, I warn him to leave me alone in advance when I start feeling like this. Zoloft helps somewhat.)
- **Sensory cross-wiring.** Some ASD people experience forms of synesthesia, so they might read numbers as colors, "see" music, or have words provoke entirely unrelated mental images. I have a

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<sup>6</sup> This article originally appeared on Quora (<https://www.quora.com/>).

mild degree of this. I enjoy repeating certain words I read outloud quietly to myself because I can almost "taste" them and like the way they feel in my mouth. In childhood, a friend once caught me softly repeating the word "cake" and when I couldn't explain myself I felt very embarrassed. I also involuntarily associate certain words with images completely unrelated to their meaning. I theorize this is due to the fact that autistic brains have more neural connections (and often in inappropriate places) than neurotypical folks.

- **Generalized lack of coordination & strange posture/gaits.** I have very little proprioception, so I have a hard time telling where my body is in 3D space. *Learning dance moves is extremely hard*, which is a shame because I find dancing beautiful and a great stress outlet. My fiancé has had a difficult time teaching me correct postural form at the gym too. I also speed-walk *everywhere* I go while keeping my eyes tunnel-visioned directly towards my goal, a mannerism I know baffles my coworkers. (The doctors sure do appreciate my speed, though!)
- **Extreme stubbornness and insistence on routine.** I'm not comfortable eating in public, and I employ various rituals at meals to ensure a maximally satisfying culinary experience. I can be illogically inflexible sometimes since control and routine make me feel safe, but since I am lower on the spectrum, I am self-aware of this and can consciously work to combat it after the initial rush of "NO!!!" feelings subside. I am also very, very strong-willed and persistent once I decide something is worth my time, with an obsessive, single-minded focus on my goal.
- **Indifference toward authority.** My teachers both loved and hated me since I was simultaneously studious and subversive. I relished correcting errors with (cringeworthy) characteristic Aspie bluntness, fulfilled in the knowledge I was objectively *improving* the accuracy of our notes; the trifling detail of the speaker's status was irrelevant to the pursuit of objective truth, *obviously* the greater issue at hand! If I judged the status quo deserving of correction, I used to boldly say so immediately no matter who my audience. (I did eventually learn to discern when self-preservation mandated holding my tongue.) My authoritarian father frequently grounded me from reading and electronics for "insolence" and "disrespect," so I dabbled in light hacking to disable his imposed time-limiting/monitoring software. I developed a strong rebellious streak, *especially* against perceived tyranny or abuse of power, which leads me to →
- **A strong sense of justice, penchant for honesty, and unwavering loyalty.** I've stood up for the "underdog" since the first day of kindergarten recess and am easily incensed by needless pain at the hands of others. After multiple liberal arts and social justice classes in college, I became passionately socially liberal, at odds with my Fundamentalist Christian family (but what else is new?! The way this Aspie sees it, I could have just as easily have been born in anyone else's place on this planet, so doesn't it just make sense to at least *attempt* to understand others whilst advocating for their fair treatment as much as my own? I abhor the "might makes right" mentality as particularly odious and have even gone so far as to remove such subscribers from my life if possible. (I'm sure you can estimate my level of antipathy for such brash, bullying types as Trump!)
- **Tendency for anxiety.** I have social phobia during most face-to-face interactions with anyone not in my inner circle. (I will say Zoloft makes it noticeably easier to cope, but I still do not seek new interactions out often.) And due to the aforementioned hyper-sensitivities combined with this social anxiety, many Aspies live their public lives perpetually uncomfortable due to the combination of unpleasant stimuli, interpersonal fears, and the expectation to "act normal." Unfortunately, this can influence some people on the spectrum to "snap" at others or develop a reputation for getting easily frustrated; I was particularly notorious for this during childhood, but learned coping skills with age and education.
- **A deep love for animals.** From my earliest memory, I have held an intense fascination with our fellow multicellular lifeforms. I became known as the "animal expert" among classmates, and even today randomly resort to reciting zoological facts during conversational lulls. It's been suggested Aspies prefer the company of animals because they are easier to understand, and it's certainly

possible. There are few things more fulfilling in my life than understanding an animal's mind, bringing it joy, and witnessing the manifestation of their reciprocated love in their native "language!"

- **Constant mental preoccupation and over-analysis of recent ideas and actions** . My thoughts are numerous, abstract, and lightning-quick since they don't have to be in words/"spoken internally" as some NTs prefer, so while I am verbally consulting a coworker I may also be flipping between actively monitoring my body language/expressions to ensure they fall within the expected range, extracting lessons from a previously committed faux pas, and listening to a song on repeat in the "background", so to speak. As such I am often told I tend to "live in my head," and it's true the majority of my energy is directed internally. Being 100% present in the physical world takes willful effort, although I now know when it's most appropriate to try hardest. For me, this preoccupation arises from a compulsive desire to understand as much about my interests as possible— ranging all the way from myopic details to the broader perspective— so I am constantly chewing on some interesting idea or another and analyzing it from new angles. I have heard it said many Aspies demonstrate advanced mental maturity despite relative emotional immaturity, and this habit seems a possible contributor.

Of course, people with Asperger's technically fall along the Autism Spectrum<sup>7</sup>, so the degree with which ASD people exhibit these symptoms is highly varied! Many have learned coping mechanisms with age as well that mask or alleviate the severity of their internal discomfort, such that some people can't even tell they're on the spectrum.

Neurotypicals may also experience a sprinkling of these personality traits without necessarily qualifying for spectrum placement. I believe it is the intensity with which you express the aforementioned qualities that is most definitive, and I recommend consulting a licensed professional neuropsychologist for testing and possible diagnosis if you think you may qualify.

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<sup>7</sup> The original difference between Asperger's and Autism was that Autism is associated with language delay and potential mental retardation while high functioning Asperger's usually isn't. Quite the opposite; many Aspies are recognized as "gifted/talented" in school and tend to (although not always) score highly on IQ & standardized tests. A large percentage of Aspies are verbosely loquacious while others such as myself voracious readers, and unlike those with severe Autism, the basic desire for human connection remains despite a considerable handicap in expressing it.

# What's the Difference Between High and Low Functioning Autism?

By Lisa Go Rudy <sup>8</sup>

People with autism are often described as being "high functioning" or "low functioning." But there are no such diagnoses in the diagnostic manual. This means that the difference between high and low functioning autism can, in many cases, be based on the personal perspectives of a practitioner or teacher. In fact, many people simply pick a term to simplify the process of describing their child's symptoms to friends and neighbors.

## What's Wrong with Using the Terms High and Low Functioning Autism?

The terms high and low functioning are simply confusing. Is a person high functioning if he's verbal and bright but has such severe sensory challenges that he can't stay in school or hold down a job? Is a person low functioning if they can't use spoken language but is a successful visual artist? The terms can cause miscommunication and confusion because:

Neither term necessarily describes Intelligence, special talents, anxiety level, or level of sensory challenges.

Neither term gives you really useful information about whether a person can function successfully in a public venue. There are people with "low functioning" autism who can sit through and enjoy a movie, for example -- and there are people with "high functioning" autism who find the crowds, smells, sounds, and other sensory challenges to be impossible to manage.

Neither term tells you whether a person is likely to do well in a job. There are people with "low functioning" autism who are happily and gainfully employed, and quite a few people with "high functioning" autism who are not able to find and keep a job they like.

Perhaps most significantly, aggressive behavior, while relatively rare, occurs in autistic people at all levels of severity. Even people with very high functioning autism, who have strong language skills, can "melt down" under certain circumstances.

## Defining Autism Based on "Normal" Behaviors and Strengths

Despite problems inherent in the terms high and low functioning autism, they are in common use, usually by people who are not autistic.

And they are used to describe the degree to which someone on the spectrum is (or appears to be) similar to people who are NOT on the spectrum. In other words, autistic people who are or appear to be closer to "normal" are considered to be high functioning. Thus, for example:

High functioning people use spoken language to communicate. Low functioning people are more likely to use technology or picture boards and may have limited or no spoken language.

High functioning people are more likely to be able to manage the expectations of an academic setting. This is often a result of having a better handle on spoken language and a greater awareness of the expectations of others.

High functioning people are usually more aware of social conventions. For example, they are more likely to use tools and utensils typically, greet others appropriately, etc.

Low functioning people generally look and sound very different from their typical peers. In other words, their disability is more visually and aurally obvious to the casual observer. High functioning people are more likely to appear typical (until some event or conversation makes their autism more obvious).

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<sup>8</sup> This article originally appeared on Verywell Health (<https://www.verywell.com>) and was updated on 3/1/2018.

Low functioning people are less likely to be included in typical classes or activities and are more likely to be in a "substantially separate" academic settings. High functioning people are more likely to be included -- with or without support -- in general classrooms and out-of-school programs.

All of these distinctions, however, are artificial, and they are by no means absolute. That's because autistic people behave differently in different situations, and every individual has a range of strengths and challenges.

While it's handy to describe autistic people based on their similarity to typical people, such descriptions can be misleading. That's because low functioning people may be successful where high functioning people are not, and vice versa. For example, the "high functioning" person who appears "normal" (or even exceptional) in a college classroom may find it impossible to function at a party.

Meanwhile, the "low functioning" person who can't use spoken language to chat may be more than capable of leading a conversation online.

### **"Levels" of Autism in the DSM5**

The ability to use spoken language is not a sign of intelligence. The ability to function well in a classroom is not a guarantee of strong social skills. To get around this reality and provide some type of differentiation in diagnosis, the DSM 5 (the newest diagnostic manual) now includes three levels of autism based on necessary levels of support. People with level one autism need the least support, while people with level three autism need the most.

While this diagnostic approach sounds logical, it has not proved to be particularly useful. That's in part because the need for support varies for so many reasons. For example, the same individual may need minimal support in the home, significant support at school, and a great deal of support in a novel, unstructured social situation.

# Youth & Trauma

By Rebecca Miller Britt<sup>9</sup>

Many of the young people who participate in our programs have experienced significant abuse and/or neglect resulting in trauma. The following are provided to help you better understand the long-term effects of such trauma and how horses are uniquely suited to working with this population.

## Early Childhood Trauma

Early childhood trauma (also called developmental trauma) occurs as a result of abuse, neglect and/or abandonment at some point during crucial childhood development. Children who have experienced early childhood trauma develop feelings of core worthlessness.

A 3-month-old who cries to no avail in a dirty diaper with no food for 8 hours starts to believe “It must be me. I am not worth basic care.” A baby doesn’t have the reasoning to think “Mom is being irresponsible again and she’s going to regret not taking care of me.” All the baby knows is her cries are not effective, nobody cares. This is the norm for these children. Their foundation is built on feelings of unworthiness woven into the fabric of their being.

Children exposed to early childhood trauma can suffer cognitive, neurological, psychological, emotional and developmental delays because they didn’t get the vital nurturing and stability needed for healthy development. Children who have experienced early childhood trauma are often grossly misunderstood, underserved, misdiagnosed and improperly treated.

## Impact of Trauma on Human Development

Children who experience abuse, neglect or abandonment miss crucial milestones in development. The seemingly silly games parents play with their children, such as cooing and peek-a-boo, are innate ways parents aid in their baby’s development. When a parent mimics a baby’s facial expression, the baby feels validated, develops emotional awareness and starts to understand the experience of others. Most importantly, for the children we serve, this type of relationship leads to a secure attachment to their parent.

One of the most compelling examples of the impact neglect can have on infants is Dr. Edward Tronick’s “still face” experiments. In the experiments, which you can view online<sup>10</sup>, you see a parent cooing, clapping and engaging with the baby. The baby seems to be happy, mimicking the parent’s expression. Next Dr. Tronick has the parent briefly look to the side and then back at the baby with no facial expression or a “still face.” Immediately you see the baby try to engage the parent and, without success, become dysregulated, anxious and upset. In one video, the baby arches her back forward, slumps, looks away, cries and continuously tries to get her parent’s attention before resorting to self-soothing sucking on her hand. Finally, the baby completely disengages...all within a matter of minutes.

With striking examples such as these, we can only imagine the implications of severe, long-term neglect, let alone when it’s coupled with abuse and/or complete abandonment.

When babies and young children are denied the vital interaction necessary for proper human development, it not only affects how the brain works but also its actual structural development. This maltreatment results in higher levels of anxiety, diminished or non-existent self-worth, inability to process social cues and sensory stimulus and an overall hypersensitivity driven by constantly being in survival mode.

One of the trademarks of healthy development is a secure attachment with your parents or other caregivers. A healthy child feels she can depend on her parents for everything and she trusts them to keep her safe even when they are exploring more independent activities.

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<sup>9</sup> Adapted from *Stable Moments: Changing the Trajectory for Children in Foster Care*.

<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apzXGEBZht0>.

Take the common game of “now you see it, now you don’t,” where a parent shows the baby a teddy bear and then hides it behind something and says “Oh! Where did it go?” This is a fun game to play with the baby because of her stunned reaction when the teddy bear is removed from sight; she believes it has truly vanished. Then she is amazed when it reappears and the parent announces, “There he is!” This game helps children develop object permanence, which is the concept that objects exist even when they can’t see them. For example, the room doesn’t exist because you walked into it—it’s there whether or not you are. Object permanence is key to fundamental stability. People find security in knowing that their house, their mom and their things will be there the next time they look for them.

So now consider a child who is neglected, who never plays the teddy bear game and may only see her parents on a sporadic basis. The parents may be high and emotionally unavailable or only home for 3 days and then gone for a week. A friend may pop in to check on the baby just once a day. This is a very sad version of the teddy bear game: mom is the teddy bear but she doesn’t always come back and, when she does, everything is not OK.

Repair is another crucial lesson in human development that children raised in healthy environments with secure attachments receive. No parent is perfect. Healthy, loving, secure parents make mistakes, sometimes big ones. It isn’t unheard of for a parent to forget a child at the store, overreact and be unreasonably harsh, leave the child near a hot stove or drop the child by accident. The difference is in the repair. This is what heals the piece of the relationship that was damaged by the neglect. A traditionally nurturing parent will swoop in, hold the child, make sure she’s OK and admit fault. “Oh, honey, I’m so sorry you got hurt. That must have been so scary for you. I should have been there to protect you.”

This dialog is the assurance a child needs when bad things happen to still feel stable, secure and safe. Children suffering from neglect and abuse not only endure moments of terror, pain and instability, but are also unlikely to ever get the validation that this is **not OK**. Abusers aren’t attuned to the children’s needs and rarely, if ever, take responsibility for their actions. They don’t reassure the children that they are undeserving of such abuse or neglect and are worth so much more.

When trauma occurs repeatedly with no repair, children learn that their environment is not OK, nobody is going to make it OK and it is up to them to survive. Furthermore, they believe they don’t deserve care or love and develop a core belief that they are intrinsically worthless.

Core feelings of worthlessness often become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Any attempt to show a child with core feelings of worthlessness that she is worth something, that she is loved, and that she is lovable is rejected. Words of affirmation and expressions of love are threatening to these children’s very truth and are often met with behavior designed to prove it to be false.

### **Why Horses?**

Horses are known for their partnership with humans across time. Equines have an intuitive nature that’s been described as spiritual and a healing presence recognized by all horse enthusiasts. On the most basic level, horses are great for work with at-risk populations simply because of their ability to sense the energy in their surroundings and deliver a level of understanding most people can’t receive from other people.

Horses are particularly fitting for children who have experienced early developmental trauma due to the specific correlations between their characteristics. Because horses are prey animals, they are always in survival mode. Horses constantly scan, sense and assess their environment for threats and flee if one exists. Horses are in survival mode so much that they often sleep standing up and they’re instinctively ready to flee if they need to.

As predators, people have often failed to acknowledge horses’ nature and have used force to train these majestic creatures. Horse trainers historically have done whatever it takes to get a desired result from a horse without taking into account its actual experience. Trainers have used horses’ predilection for flight to manipulate them into performing for humans. Unfortunately, the horse ends up completing most tasks out of fear, which prevents a healthy, true partnership from developing.



This approach is nearly identical to how most of society interacts and intervenes with children who have early developmental trauma. We don't understand their survival mentality, think they are responding irrationally and defiantly, and don't take a moment to see the world from their perspective. To get the desired results, we become more punitive and more shaming in the hope that these children can be scared into conforming.

### **Parallels Between Natural Horsemanship and Trauma-Informed Practice**

One of the basic principles of natural horsemanship is understanding the horse's experience. First and foremost, that means knowing that survival means life or death to a horse. When a horse feels threatened, he believes he is about to die.

As a student of natural horsemanship, you learn early on the difference between a horse's thinking/rational brain and his survival brain. You can only teach a horse when it is in thinking, curious and playful mode. If he is in survival mode, it's impossible for him to learn and he cannot build a relationship with you.

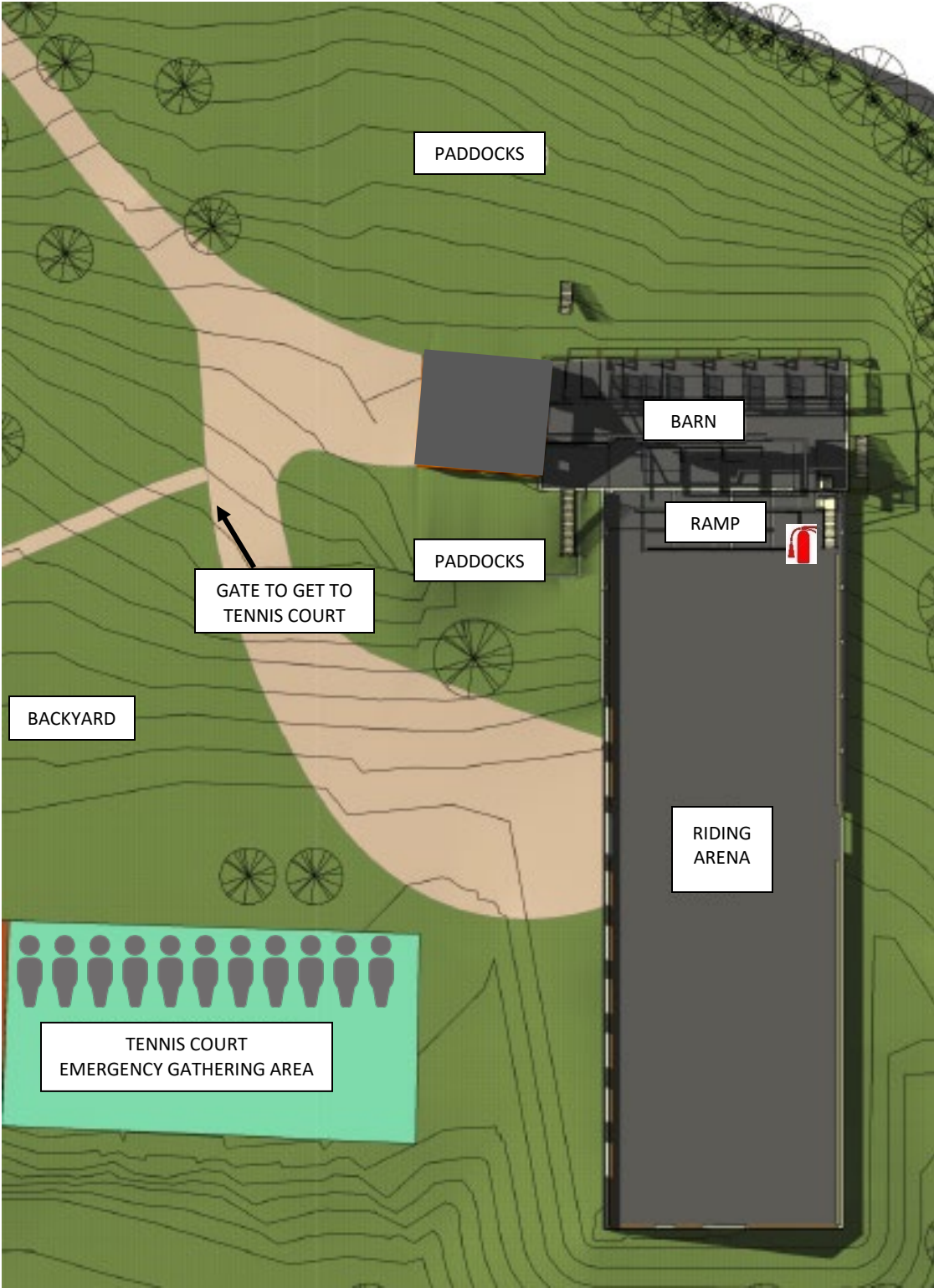
It's a trainer's job to prove to the horse that she will not hurt him, to be clear in what she wants from him and reward him through release of pressure every time he makes the right choice. Contempt, irritation and anger are always detrimental to the training process. Understanding, empathy, curiosity, clear boundaries and positive feedback are what builds a true partnership with the horse.

This philosophy is nearly identical to best-practice interventions for children who have experienced early developmental trauma. Just the term "trauma-informed" implies that there is some understanding of the child's experience—that we understand how trauma may affect a child and therefore don't expect his responses in everyday life to fit the traditional mold of societal expectations.

This piece is so crucial to another core element of natural horsemanship and trauma-informed intervention: **The relationship is your main priority.** If you are going to have any agenda at all, have it be the relationship.



# Site Map



## Statement of Completion

I have read the Horse SenseAbility Volunteer Manual in its entirety.<sup>11</sup> I have asked any questions I had about the content and am confident that I now fully understand it. I am prepared to start volunteering at Horse SenseAbility and have signed this document in the presence of a staff person.

Volunteer's or guardian's  
signature:

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Volunteer's name:

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Date:

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<sup>11</sup> You may sign the [Volunteer Manual Statement of Completion](#) online if you prefer.