

Example of Engagement with Client

Upon entrance into services at Mending Arrow Ranch, students and their parents are encouraged to create SMART goals to be accomplished by the end of the semester. One of my students in the Dream Catchers program had a goal of being more assertive, so we collaborated to create the following SMART goal: Will lead horse at a walk once around the round pen without assistance. This goal would help her improve her ability to communicate what she wants by telling the horse where she wants to go.

At her first session, she was very quiet and did not know how to lead the horse around the round pen. To begin, I groomed the horse with her and started to build rapport by introducing myself and talking about her interests. Then I discussed how horses communicate with each other and some mindfulness breathing exercises to use if she gets nervous. After that, I asked her to lead the horse through some cones in the round pen while walking beside him. She spoke very softly and was being pulled around the pen by the horse wherever he wanted to go. I told her that she needed to be firmer with him and pull him where she wants him to go. I also discussed how voice tone with a horse makes a difference, and scolding should be spoken differently than sweetly praising the horse to allow for better communication.

I could tell she started to get upset with me because she did not want to scold the horse when he was ignoring her commands. I pulled her aside and said “why don’t we talk about this. What is it about telling the horse what to do that makes you feel upset?” She noted that she thought it was mean to scold the horse and she did not want to be mean. I had a long discussion with her about the differences between being passive, aggressive, and assertive. I told her that if she does not scold the horse sometimes, he will never know what she wants or needs. I stated that this can lead to her getting upset and internalizing those feelings until one day she bursts. I also mentioned that just because she scolds him during the session does not mean he will not like

her and want to be her friend. I used myself as an example and told her that I have to scold him all the time and yet he still likes me.

After our talk, she was able to speak up more and scolded him some when he was going the wrong direction. He responded to her commands and followed her instructions better. I congratulated her and told her that she should tell him he did a good job. He nuzzled her and she got a big grin on her face. I said “See? He still likes you even though you scolded him”. By the end of the semester, she was able to lead him through the trail course with no issues whatsoever. She was able to scold him when necessary without any instructions from me.

Some people may question how accomplishing a simple task such as leading a horse and/or scolding when necessary can lead to emotional change in my client. Well I knew from my client’s intake paperwork and discussions with her mother that she had issues with her brother treating her poorly and she never did anything back or said anything to him (basically internalizing). She also had problems with becoming very defensive and getting angry towards some of the kids at school when misunderstandings happened. Therefore, I know that she tends to internalize her anger until she later explodes, and she does not know healthy ways to express her negative emotions or ask for what she needs/wants. By working with her to take charge of the horse and scold him when necessary, I was able to show her how important communication is, even “negative” communication. She was able to see that there are appropriate ways to express your feelings, and that it is healthy to be assertive. Using horses is the best way to express this since 1) they are like giant children who try to get away with stuff and do what they want, 2) they are quiet and trusting of others, 3) they are loving and responsive to instruction, and 4) you can see immediate effects of your behavior and words.