Young people’s relationships with horses can be therapeutic

Source: Fernanda Camargo, equine extension specialist

While COVID-19 has altered many of the traditional 4-H horse shows and programs, positive relationships between youth and their animals may be more important now than ever.

The benefits of human-horse interaction are numerous. For years, horses have been used as therapy for individuals with physical disabilities, but now researchers are seeing that equine-assisted therapy can improve a person’s mental and emotional health too, regardless of their age.

Horses can help young people calm their emotions with their comforting smell, their large presence and their warmth; they are often several degrees warmer than we are.

Since they are prey animals, horses are more attuned to their environment and highly responsive to human emotions. For example, if you come into a barn in a bad mood, a horse can sense your emotions and may stay away from you or become excited. The latter could create a potentially dangerous situation. This is why it is important for individuals to be able to control their emotions as they approach their horses. Since horses are so responsive to human emotions, they can also help young people develop self-awareness and process their feelings.

Horses are unbiased and non-judgmental. They do not care about the brand of clothing you are wearing or how your hair is fixed. They only respond to a person’s behavior and emotions. You do not even have to speak for them to know how you are feeling. For this reason, they may offer a sense of peace and comfort for young people.

Horses and humans have a give-and-take relationship, which provides for a rewarding experience for both. We provide horses with their basic needs, and they allow us to ride them. This relationship creates a long-lasting level of trust.

Grooming and riding horses requires young people to be present in the moment and attentive to their horses and the environment. This can create a sense of calmness and help reduce anxiety and stress from the day.

Horses also provide a sense of responsibility, as they rely on us for their basic needs. Regularly feeding and grooming can help youth build a stronger relationship with their horses and give both a set daily routine. It also gives young people a reason to get outside every day, which naturally improves their moods.

Like people, horses have good and bad days, so it is important for young people to learn and practice kindness and fairness with their horses instead of becoming frustrated. Riders should reward a horse if the horse attempts to follow their instruction, even if it does not succeed at first. Many times, it takes a substantial amount of practice for the horse to learn a new technique. For this reason, horses are a good way to teach young people patience, perseverance and resiliency.

For more information on positive relationships between youth and animals, contact the (COUNTY NAME) office of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service.

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