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Accommodating Youth with Disabilities in 4-H Horse Programs

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Accommodating Youth with Disabilities in 4-H Horse Programs

Abstract

Including and accepting youth with disabilities in horse programs is an important part of our positive youth development mission. There are some inherent dangers and concerns in working with horses that create some unique challenges for volunteers and Extension staff providing an inclusive and inviting program. This article discusses how inclusion of youth with disabilities in educational programs benefits youth with and without disabilities, and strategies we have found successful in our efforts to increase the accessibility of our 4-H horse program to youth with disabilities.

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Introduction

This article provides a basis for accommodating youth with disabilities in 4-H horse programs. These guidelines are based on the experiences we have had and what we have found to be successful in the Indiana Horse Program. They are all based on the pedagogy of inclusion.

Inclusion as a Philosophy

In the Indiana 4-H Horse and Pony program, we are committed to the inclusion philosophy to make 4-H more accessible to youth with disabilities. There is an extensive body of educational research indicating that the inclusive philosophy maximizes learning for youth with and without disabilities. Integration has been found to improve social acceptance, self-esteem, and social skills for all youth involved (Wolfe & Hall, 2003) when it involves the active mixing of youth with and without disabilities (Rafferty, Boettcher, & Griffin, 2001). All youth can benefit from the opportunity to become more aware of differences and more tolerant and accepting of others (Killoran, 2002).

Youth with disabilities have been found to benefit from interaction with their peers in a multitude of ways. The range of activities they can participate in is expanded, providing them with more opportunities to learn and interact, resulting in greater preparation for the real world (Rafferty et al., 2001).

Youth without disabilities reap social and academic rewards, as well. The primary results of an integrated education for youth without disabilities are in the areas of friendship, social relationships, and tolerance for diversity (Fisher, 1999). In the Fisher (1999) study of students' perspectives of inclusion, while several students spoke to the rights of students with disabilities to be with their non-disabled peers, one student expressed that he has a right to benefit from a class with a diverse student population and that includes students with disabilities.

Our Experiences

Over the past several years in the 4-H Horse and Pony program in Indiana, one of the major barriers to inclusion expressed by volunteers at the club level has been a concern that they aren't quite sure "how" to include youth with disabilities. The following steps are needed to prepare volunteers and Extension staff to assist youth with disabilities:

- Round table sessions for working with people with disabilities in volunteer training programs. Successful moderators have included instructors from Purdue University's North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA) accredited riding center.
- Multi-State Judges and Show Managers School sessions on communicating with parents and making judges aware of accommodations that need to be made.
- Added classes at the State Fair Horse Show that are appropriate for youth with disabilities and meet the same qualifying criteria as other classes.
- Rules allowing managers the flexibility to modify class rules to meet the needs of youth with disabilities (Brady, 2003).
- Provision of information, such as *A Perfect Fit: 4-H Involvement for Youth With Disabilities* (Tormoehlen, 1994) to leaders to increase their awareness of the needs of youth with disabilities.

Criteria and Implications

It is vital to keep in mind when developing accommodating that every situation is unique and every child has his or own strengths and limitations. It is important to work with the child and the family to develop a way to accommodate the disability that is safe and provides a meaningful educational experience for the child. Professionals such as teachers, vocational rehabilitation specialists, and others who provide services for people with disabilities can be valuable resources. Extension staff members should take advantage of the resources available at the university to seek guidance in making accommodations for youth involved in their programs and ensuring compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

All accommodations should meet two basic criteria:

1. The accommodation allows the child with a disability to participate (observation does not constitute participation) in the same collective activity as their peers without disabilities.
2. The accommodation does not adversely affect how other participants in the activity perform, are judged, or are evaluated. It is not the intent of an accommodation to guarantee success, or superior recognition, for any participant.

Accommodations can be planned much more effectively with prior notice. It is recommended that the registration materials for any events and activities have a contact number for people to call and a box to check on the form if registrants need accommodations for disabilities.

Equally important in developing effective accommodations is creativity. We must challenge ourselves to think of different ways to include people in an activity and of different ways an activity could be conducted to meet the needs of all interested youth. This may mean making some changes in the way a class is run or in the way information is communicated in order to make the activity accessible.

Many disabilities can be accommodated easily and with little additional expense to the family or the organization. In some situations, especially relative to academic events such as judging, horse bowl, hippology, or public speaking, the family can provide input on how the school has accommodated the child's disability that can serve as a guideline in the 4-H program. Activities can be made accessible to children with disabilities by providing volunteers to assist with reading or writing, printing written material in larger font, or taking tests on a computer.

The area that frequently becomes more complicated when providing accommodations is when the horse is involved. A primary concern is always safety, and no accommodation should ever be made that creates an environment that is unsafe. Keep in mind that interacting with horses has inherent dangers, but caution must be taken to avoid being so overly careful in making accommodations that the end result is a failure to be accessible.

Some examples of ways to accommodate youth with disabilities are to:

1. Allow the use of equipment and modification of tack and equipment that enables the child with a disability to participate fully, e.g., allow a child in a Western style class to carry a whip or use a snaffle bit on a senior horse or drive a modified cart. It is important to note that under NO CIRCUMSTANCES should the child be tied/attached to the saddle or any other equipment.
2. Provide a signaling system or auditory assistance to communicate the call of a class to a visually or hearing impaired child

3. Have a child in a halter class that is in a wheel chair enter the ring last, with or without an assistant, and stand slightly away from the line up, or relocate the class to a place with a harder, level surface to facilitate the wheelchair.

One common concern is that the accommodation creates an "unfair advantage" for the child with the disability. The purpose of the accommodation is to provide an opportunity for children with disabilities to participate in the same activities as their non-disabled peers. The people who are concerned about it being "unfair" must remember that the child with the disability is overcoming far more to be able to participate than most of the non-disabled children can even imagine. Providing an opportunity for everyone to participate does not create an "unfair advantage" for anyone.

Remind those making this claim that the purpose of 4-H is to provide a positive, interactive learning environment for all youth, and that we have a responsibility as educators, leaders, and parents to make our programs accessible and invitational to all youth. We have truly made progress toward our goal of positive youth development when all of the participants in an inclusive program can learn to be more accepting and understanding of people with differences.

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