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## THESE HORSES HELP STUDENTS LEARN

by Ben Bohall, Producer/Reporter, NET News 



11-year-old Clayton is taking part in equine-assisted or horse-powered learning. He leads Misty the horse to small learning stations strewn across this path. Each one is comprised of physical math problems designed specifically to match Clayton's skill level. (Photo by Ben Bohall, NET News)

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**How can animals help us learn? A small central Nebraska ranch where students are finding the answer first-hand at one small central Nebraska ranch.**

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At Brave Hearts Equine Therapy in Kearney, teacher Nancy Lyon is working with 11-year-old Clayton on his math skills. This activity is all about addition.

In this setting, there are no chalkboards, chairs, tables, or books, like those you would find within the walls of a traditional classroom. In fact, there are no walls. The two are walking outside along a small path. But they aren't alone.

In his right hand, Clayton is holding the reigns of a thousand-pound black mare. He leads the horse to small learning stations strewn across this path. Each one is comprised of physical and visible math problems designed specifically to match Clayton's skill level.



Brave Hearts Equine Therapy was recently started by Lyon and her husband, Dan. Both have degrees in education and have worked with at-risk youths for most of their careers. (Photo by Ben Bohall, NET News)  
This is called equine-assisted, or horse-powered learning. As Lyons explains, the goal is to help students struggling in reading or math. The horse acts as a comforting companion.

"It's also to help them conquer some of their fears and some of the things that keep them from learning in the classroom," Lyons said.

Brave Hearts Equine was recently started by Lyon and her husband, Dan. Both have degrees in education and have worked with at-risk youths for most of their careers, usually with their two therapy horses Frosty and Misty at their side. Here's how it typically works: A student like Clayton will hold onto the horse while working through a math problem, or memorizing a vocabulary word. The horse provides security to the child.

"Horses will mirror their behavior," Lyon explained. "So if they tend to be kind of stubborn, the horses will be like that. So if they're stuck, we might say, 'We notice the horse is stuck. What can you do?' So they try different things. We're getting them to do some critical thinking. Then we transfer that into the classroom."

Michele Pickel is an associate professor of education at Concordia University in St. Paul, Minnesota. She is also considered a pioneer in using horse-powered learning to help struggling readers.

"The facilitators are able to break through the social and emotional barriers that get in the way of so many of our students' abilities to learn," Pickel said.

While there's not a lot of academic research on equine-assisted learning, some studies have shown it can be effective in building confidence in students.

"The research on self-efficacy - their ability to believe that they can accomplish something - that research is so powerful. The way that the success with those horses reinforces their belief that they can accomplish a particular task, in this case reading, it's a huge boost to their ability to work successfully in the classroom,' Pickel said.



Frosty (left) and Misty (right) are two of the therapy horses used at Brave Hearts Ranch. (Photo by Ben Bohall, NET News)

Sarah Edwards is chair of the teacher education department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Edwards says horse-powered learning is also furthering educators' understanding of experiential learning, showing how physical movements can help the brain process difficult problems and challenges.

"Our research continues to point us to the direction that kids just cannot be sitting in desks all day. There's nothing that's good for the brain with that sedentary time. A variety of experiential approaches? Absolutely. That's exactly the direction our education programs are going," Pickel said.

Back at the ranch, Lyon, Clayton, and Misty the horse are finishing up today's lesson. As things wind to a close, Clayton's mother Jessica watches from beyond the corral gates. She says she's happy with the progress he's made. And she adds Clayton likes his trips to Brave Hearts Ranch.

"He really chose to be out here. He wanted to do something different," Jessica said. "In a town the size of Kearney, there's not a whole lot of opportunity for kids to work with large animals like this and incorporate reading and math... After the first season, we were in the car and it wasn't 30 seconds that he wanted to come back and do it again."