

Case study 2: Equine-assisted therapy

Work with Georgie, by Di Gammage

Georgie came to Sirona, an equine-assisted therapeutic centre, set in the hills of South Devon at the beginning of spring. She had been living in a small therapeutic children's home and I had been her play therapist for only a month.

Georgie was so named by her mother because she wanted a son, not a daughter. The relationship between mother and daughter was fraught with conflict. Georgie had periods of time in residential care for respite. Sometimes she settled, and became less angry with the world. She would be returned to her family home and for a time there would be calm. Then the arguing and fighting would begin again. Georgie was nine years old when she came into care this time, still on a voluntary care order. Her baby brother was just over a year old and Georgie's mother had been diagnosed with post-natal depression (although mum had suffered from depression intermittently for many years). The baby, Charlie, stayed at home with Mum and everything seemed to settle down. Georgie's mother was a single parent and neither child's father was regularly involved in their lives. Georgie's father had been a heroin addict.

Georgie's capacity and willingness to attach to anyone or anything was profoundly limited. I saw this not so much as an obstacle but as a deeply developed survival mechanism; why should she trust *anyone*? I did not know how much time we would have to work together, yet I knew this young child could not be hurried. I needed to honour her timing, even if that meant 'nothing' apparently happened in the eyes of other professionals.

In essence, before Georgie could trust me I needed to trust her. As a child-centred play therapist, trusting the child's capacity to develop is the only way to be. Heidegger said: 'An organism will naturally unconceal itself when it is safe to do so.' The need to trust other human beings is essential to our being in relationships that support our growth in every way. Georgie would 'unconceal' herself in relationship with me if and when it was safe for her to do this. I felt sure that any pressure from me for her to be any other way would be met by resistance. I needed to give this child space to be, and to see what unfolded.

The value of horses in therapy has only fairly recently begun to be acknowledged in mainstream circles. Horses are by nature herd animals; their survival is dependent upon being part of the group. They are entirely prey animals, and so, instinctively, they are always on the lookout for the next wolf. Children with insecure attachment patterns, and particularly those children who have experienced trauma, seem to know intuitively the horse's predicament – fear of external danger and the need to be in relationship. Yet for the traumatised child, therein lies a dilemma – what if the danger *prevents* you from being in relationship?

At Sirona, therapist and horse handler working in harmony allow the child and horse to find each other. The horses are a perfect medium for the child's projections – 'this is the lead mare, she takes care of all the others', 'he's the baby', 'she's like my mum, one minute she's calm, then she kicks out at that one there', 'he looks very sad/angry/calm'. Winnicott's

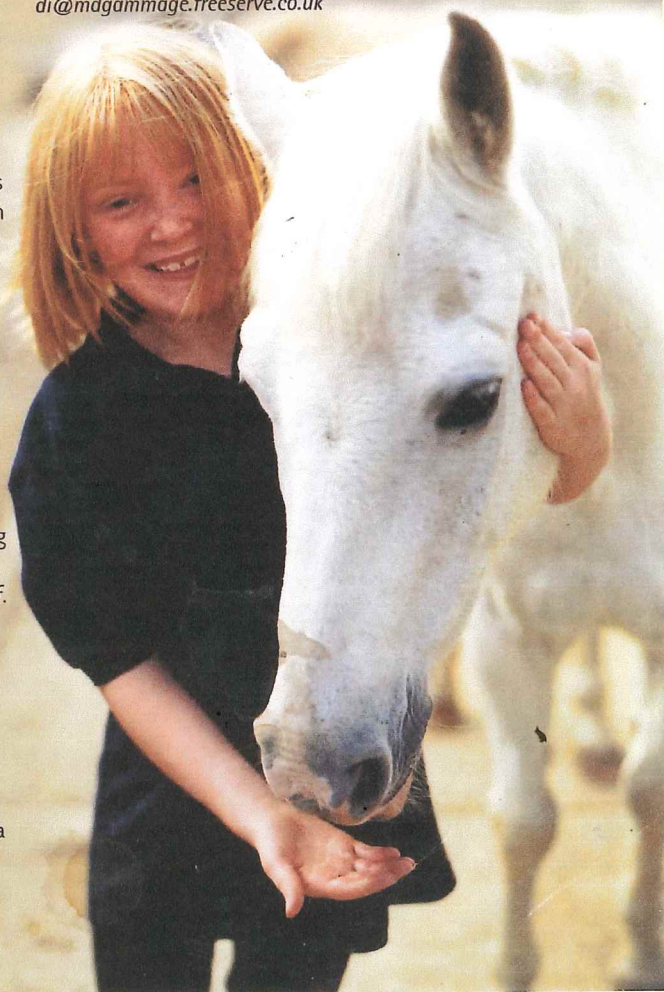
potential space, transitional objects, projection, embodiment (smells, sensations) and role play are all incorporated into the therapeutic approach we adopt at Sirona.

It took several weeks for Georgie to step into the round pen with 'her' pony. She clearly felt an affinity to this mare, as Ruby had experienced abandonment and cruelty in her life. Georgie's evident delight when Ruby 'joined up' with her (where the horse follows the person quite willingly, just as a devoted dog might do) gave the child confidence finally to sit upon Ruby's soft, warm, bare back. Georgie was bursting with pleasure and so were we! She practised 'invisible riding', where with eyes closed she used her thoughts and breath to will the pony to stop walking. Georgie discovered many new things about herself through her relationship with Ruby and the other ponies. She learnt that she could affect others in a very positive, caring way; she learnt that there was real mutual joy to be found in these relationships; she learnt that she could be loving. Above all, she learnt that she was lovable. She knew she could believe this, because horses do not, cannot, lie.

Reference

1 Cited in Sills F. (unpublished work) Primal Sympathy. c/o Karuna Institute, Devon.

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