

Arena SetUp For Success!

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Generally, group therapeutic riding lessons are the best use of center resources - balancing facilities, financials, instructor's time, etc. It is up to the instructor to ensure a high quality lesson is provided to each individual within the group. However, many therapeutic riding instructors struggle to teach a cohesive group lesson.

Often, instructors provide individual instruction to riders and/or volunteers. This causes confusion, disrupts the flow, hampers rider progression, and is taxing to the instructor.

Moreover, therapeutic riding participants have communication barriers and/or learning differences that require specific teaching styles with very clear directives. More confusion arises with volunteer limitations such as hearing, visual, physical, as well as the foreign equine vocabulary. Many volunteers have little horse experience and struggle to discern the nuances of skill based riding lessons.

The lesson should be centered around a skill based objective. All lesson components should lead directly to said objective, ensuring clear progression within the lesson.

- “Warm Ups” should prepare the rider's body to meet the objective
- “Review” should remind the riders what they have already accomplished that is a stepping stone towards this new skill
- “Skill” should break down the components of the skill
- “Activity” (may or may not be necessary) should allow riders to practice the skill (meet the objective) and possibly progress in the skill (exceed the objective)
- “Cool down” should allow riders’ to reflect of the skill

An important component, that is often overlooked, is the arena setup. How can the space be maximized to ensure the riders continue moving throughout the lesson? Is the set up conducive to the horse's athletic abilities? Does the setup directly reinforce the objective? How can the instructor effectively provide feedback to individual riders in real time, while teaching to the group? Will the riders and volunteers effectively see and understand the markers provided without constant reminders? All of these questions, and more, should be taken into account when setting up the arena.

Once an objective has been set, the riding skill broken out, and an activity designed, the instructor is ready to consider the arena set up. There are many factors that play into a therapeutic riding lesson, not all of them can be controlled by the instructor. It is important to take advantage of any aspect that can be directly managed, such as arena set up. Let's look at the pros and cons of some general situations:

- Placing the activity along the rail vs. in the middle of the arena?
 - Along the rail
 - Pro - crowd control, possibly good use of space, can help keep everyone moving, may be easier for riders (horses) to accomplish
 - Con - repetitive, may lack progression
 - In the middle
 - Pro - adds level of difficulty, may allow for more space utilization, brings riders closer to the instructor when attempting something new
 - Con - difficult, may decrease space utilized, may cause confusion, may encourage obstinate behavior in horses

- Should the objective be attempted in two places at once?
 - Pro - provides more opportunity for kinesthetic learning
 - Con - safety consideration dependent on instructor's view, riders may need more processing time, volunteers/riders/horses may need a break
- Where will the instructor stand to have the best view?
 - Ideally, instructor will stay (relatively) stationary in the middle
 - Careful moving too much as it
 - Limits the instructor's view
 - Distracts riders/volunteers
- How will the riders maintain safe spacing?
 - If the horses get too close should the riders:
 - Circle - may not be the best for the horse, may interrupt set up
 - Halt - changes the input provided to the rider, may cause frustration
 - Cut across the arena - may interrupt set up
- Who will keep track of how many times an activity has been attempted/completed
 - Riders (with volunteer assistance) can be in charge of themselves - everyone will complete this 2x, then continue on the rail
 - Instructor may need to keep track

When preparing for a lesson, the instructor should visualize how the lesson will flow. At what point in the arena should the riders change directions, line up, complete a warm up, etc. Of course, we have to allow for flexibility in the moment, but starting with a clear picture will ensure the instructor stays calm, cool and collected during the lesson. When in doubt, have the riders walk a lap on the rail so you can take a breath and collect your thoughts!

Creating skill based lesson plans ensure riders' progression within horseback riding. Lesson activities should directly reinforce the objective. Arena setup should maximize the space provided, allow the horses to navigate easily, and maintain flow so participants continue moving as much as possible. Taking a few moments to plan an appropriate arena setup will set up the instructor, riders, volunteers, and horses for success.

Naomi currently lives in Kansas City, KS and teaches at Heartland Therapeutic Riding Center. She has mentored many instructors from all over the world through the PATH Intl. Registered, Advanced and Interactive Vaulting certifications. Naomi thoroughly enjoys working with "lifelong learners" at any level. Naomi is available for personalized long distance mentoring via video chat and filmed lesson review; as well as clinics in person. Please be in touch by emailing her at NaomiHGeorge@outlook.com