



PLAYTIME

the value of
Unmounted Games

By Laura Moya and Sarah Carlson

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF HIGH HOPES THERAPEUTIC RIDING, INC.

Building an instructional tool kit is a lifelong exercise for most PATH Intl. Certified Professionals, and seeking new material can be challenging. Although unmounted games may not be first on the list of must haves, they provide new opportunities to address and reinforce participant goals. Unmounted games capitalize on the many benefits of play in learning and social-emotional development and are a powerful complement to equine-assisted activities and therapies (EAAT).

Just as horses love to play, so do staff and participants. It is not surprising to anyone working with EAAT that children learn best when the learning environment provides a meaningful context where choices are available, and they can pursue their interests (Hirsch-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2003). EAAT professionals understand this as they take advantage of the novel experience of a farm environment and the motivation provided by an equine. In addition, PATH Intl. Certified Instructors consistently bring games and play into their arenas, providing fun opportunities to reinforce learned skills.

THE POWER OF PLAY

Although at times play can appear to be just that, much more is actually happening. According to Singer, Golinkoff, and Hirsch-Pasek (2006), play creates opportunities for children to gain social and academic skills including improving attention spans, learning to get along with others and working through their emotions. These skills, developed through play, lay the foundation for future learning. Furthermore, children who learn through play develop the social and emotional skills integral for success later in life, showing more creativity and passion for learning than children who are taught through regimented instruction (Hirsch-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Eyer, 2003). Play is beneficial for adults, too. Researchers say that even a small amount of play can have a ripple effect throughout an adult's life making them more productive and happier in their endeavors (Brown & Vaughan, 2009).

Unmounted games create a unique platform for learning, a mixture of structure and flexibility, where participants follow directions while being encouraged to develop their own solutions. They are easy to incorporate into a center's current programming, and there are limitless ways unmounted games can tie into participant goals. Games can act as a priming activity to develop camaraderie, burn off energy before lessons and build therapeutic horsemanship skills.

When facilitating games, there are a few basic rules. How a game is introduced and how it is ended is critical to creating buy-in and future desire to play—it needs to be sold. If the person explaining a game does not believe it is fun, no one will want to play. Also, ending it “while it's hot” ensures people will want to play in the future. Ideally,

games should end when everyone is enjoying themselves; do not let games fizzle out. Create a situation where groups beg for more.

While facilitating, safety comes first and fun is second. Give the group guidelines, and then allow the game to play out. Mistakes are fine and can be an opportunity to work on conflict resolution and result in increased learning. Finally, be an active observer. Each time a game is played, it creates an organic experience, and new goals and benefits will surface depending on the dynamic of the group.

Utilizing games as a priming activity prior to a lesson can reinforce goals such as:

- following directions
- attending to tasks
- creative thinking
- sequencing
- motor planning and coordination

Research by Pellegrini and Holmes confirms that play breaks actually improve a child's ability to pay attention to academic tasks that require thinking (Singer, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pelsk, 2006, p. 14). Therefore, taking a few minutes to play a game can help improve participants' focus for the learning to come.



▲ Taking time to play can make children and adults happier and more productive at school or work.
◀ Opening Page Photo: Team-building exercises like tying the knot can develop creativity and coordination and build therapeutic horsemanship skills.

Games as Icebreakers

The following three games are incredibly helpful when working with new groups. They not only allow groups to get to know each other and build a sense of trust and community, but they also give those participants who seek stimulation an appropriate outlet for their energy. The skills addressed include listening, attention, team building, trust, problem solving, fun, expressive communication, confidence building, leadership and turn-taking.

EGGS, CHICKENS AND DINOSAURS

This activity puts a new twist on the familiar rock-paper-scissors game. In this remake, participants can “evolve” from an egg to a chicken to a dinosaur. Participants are encouraged to express themselves physically and vocally to demonstrate where they stand on the evolutionary ladder. Everyone starts as an egg. Eggs can only play with other eggs and must find another egg friend to play rock-paper-scissors. The winner becomes a chicken while the other player remains an egg. Chickens must find other chickens to play with and those winners become dinosaurs and the game continues (Nutting, 2011). Social skills are seamlessly reinforced while participants get to know each other and build relationship bonds, which creates a sense of community.

FRUIT ATTENTION

Ever struggle to quiet down a large group by shushing or whistling to gain attention? Although these techniques might work, they do not effectively engage the group. This activity offers a creative, fun way to capture a group’s attention. Fruit Attention creates an appropriate time to be loud and boisterous while getting a group to stop what they are doing and listen. In this game, the group leader designates a topic, such as fruit, and tells the group that each time the leader shouts out the name of one particular fruit, for instance, “apples,” their job is to freeze, stop what they are doing and respond with “oranges.” Transition time and frustration are minimized while the group’s level of engagement makes a dramatic shift. The category can be changed (animals, parts of the horse, breeds or markings) and difficulty increased by making this a whisper game. Success is clear when the shyest participant has to be asked not to scream “oranges” quite so loud, or when the person unabashedly expresses his or her ideas for tomorrow’s attention words.

FUNKY FLOORS

Often when learning something new, we are taught the correct way to complete a task in the proper sequence. This game allows individuals to be creative and use their imagination in deciding how they are going to move from point A to point B. The game is simple. The leader tells the group to imagine what would happen if suddenly the floor turned into another substance—for example, Jell-O, lava, icebergs. The group is encouraged to move from point A to point B in whatever way they see fit over the designated flooring. The game encourages movement and reinforces motor coordination while helping participants become comfortable expressing themselves in front of their peers.

Team-building Games

How often does the partnership between participants and their horses delve into what it means to be a leader, how to both give and take direction and trust someone enough to follow? The inclusion of these unmounted games emphasizes this social bond in a team environment that encourages trust-building and reinforces following directions, expressive language, problem-solving, conflict resolution, teamwork, cooperation, turn-taking, leadership skills and eye-hand coordination.

GROUP JUGGLING

In this activity participants practice turn-taking and eye-hand coordination as they learn each other’s names while passing an item, such as a ball, around. First, the group makes a circle. Then each person passes the ball to one team member while calling his or her name. The ball is passed until each team member has passed the ball without repeating anyone. The group must remember the sequence created. Once the group is successful with one full rotation and remembers the sequence, increase the difficulty by throwing more items into the mix. Is the group able to keep the sequence going with multiple items? What if the pattern is reversed? Or timed? For a group that already knows each other, ask them to call out a fun fact about a friend rather than his or her name before

passing (e.g., volleyball player instead of Zoe). In the midst of this wild, sensory environment of laughter and excitement, teammates must focus on their individual task while maintaining awareness of the group, ensuring their readiness for the next item.

GUTTER BALL

Ever feel like transition time is lost time? Gutter Ball makes moving from one location to the next exciting and challenging while encouraging teamwork and problem-solving. Each group is given a ping-pong ball, and each member has a varied length of PVC piping that has been cut in half and sanded for safety. Then they are assigned the task of moving the ball from start to finish. The ball may only come in contact with the pipe's gutter, and touching the ball with hands or fingers is prohibited. Participants may have to move the ball over an obstacle course, which can be simple or advanced, and the groups may be given planning time. Camaraderie is a natural result of this game, as turn-taking is necessary and creates time to cheer on peers.

THE KNOT

Ever end up in a situation you're not sure how to get out of? This activity humorously illustrates the solution to this dilemma while emphasizing cooperation and leadership.

To begin, have six to eight participants form a circle and ask participants to extend their right arms in toward the circle and hold hands with someone across from them; it cannot be the person next to them. Then ask group members to do the same with their left arms, without holding hands with the person next to them or the same person with whom they are holding right hands. Once the knot has been formed, the group objective is to become untangled without letting go of each other's hands; when completed, the group will find themselves standing in a circle, holding hands. To an outside observer, it may appear that participants are set up for failure; groups are haphazardly organized and include those with a variety of special needs, yet they are able to find a way to form circles, demonstrating the innate compassion and resourcefulness of the human mind. It is also amazingly inspirational how effortlessly an adolescent group works together to problem-solve and who emerges as a leader. Often someone perceived as needing help can become the leader, directing teammates toward success.

Strengthening Horsemanship Skills

Unmounted games that incorporate horsemanship knowledge create an alternative way to tackle educational goals, replacing dry lectures with interactive and challenge-based games. These games address many of the same skills in the previous activities and can be incorporated as a closing activity or as supplemental curriculum.



▲ The camaraderie that unmounted games develop can carry over into group therapeutic riding sessions.

RIGHT/LEFT BRAIN

Looking for a way to foster leadership and interaction while teaching horsemanship? Taken from the Strides to Success curriculum *Marvelous Minis*, this activity creates a fun, nurturing environment in which members take turns being the brain (sharing leadership). Observing group dynamics during this activity is eye opening and allows us to better understand how each individual perceives a task and grows into leadership roles. To begin, a group of three individuals stands shoulder-to-shoulder, and the participant at the left becomes the "left hand." The person in the center



▲ The funky floor game encourages creativity and reinforces motor coordination.

GRAB BAG

Need a creative way to teach new topics? In this activity, participants take initiative for their own learning, employing curiosity and problem-solving to reach group conclusions. Fill a bag with items from the barn, such as a hoof pick, curry comb or bit, and have one participant look into the bag, select an item and describe it without removing it or showing it to other members. Then ask another teammate to search for the item by feel without looking in the bag. Remind him or her not to remove it until he or she is sure it is the correct item. Once the item is identified, have the searcher select the next item. This can review or introduce new materials in an engaging way. Instead of lecturing about bathing tools, throw a wash mitt and sweat scraper into the grab bag and let the group become detectives guessing possible functions of the item. When played with new items, stress is decreased as there is no wrong answer. The item is unknown to all; therefore, the game is an exercise in communication and creativity.

Because unmounted games employ the power of play in reinforcing many therapeutic horsemanship skills, they can be a very worthwhile addition to a certified professional's repertoire and a center's programming. These games use few resources, can be played almost anywhere and are great for rainy or snowy days when no indoor arena is available. By helping participants build

becomes the brain, and the person at the right becomes the right hand. Groups are assigned a task to complete, which can also involve an equine activity such as haltering or grooming a horse. Only the brain may give directions or speak, and each hand must carry out the instructions of the brain. Participants can be challenged to take on leadership or assisting roles depending on their strengths and weaknesses, which invites them to grow and develop their own voice or learn to listen carefully and be supportive.

SCAVENGER HUNTS

Scavenger hunts provide a fun way to reinforce and review therapeutic horsemanship skills as well as enhance listening, paying attention and problem-solving. Clues can be simple or abstract; distance between activities can be added for those who benefit from running. For added motivation, trinkets can be earned for correct responses that, upon completion, create one larger item to keep, for example a horse puzzle. Modified scavenger hunts can be sensory matching games for younger populations that are lower functioning. The participant is given a sensory item to touch and explore, like hay; then they must find the item in the barn to receive a trinket. For increased difficulty, include challenges in which the group assembles a bridle or identifies types of roughage before receiving the next clue. Technology lends itself naturally to scavenger hunts; groups can photograph or film items, such as the parts of a horse, and report back with their images, demonstrating task completion.



▲ Tying the knot is a great game to encourage cooperation and inclusiveness.

critical social and emotional skills, regardless of age, they can have a positive impact on many other areas of children's lives.

Laura Moya, a PATH Intl. Certified Advanced Instructor, Equine Specialist in Mental Health and Learning and Lead Site Visitor, is an instructor at High Hopes Therapeutic Riding, Inc., a PATH Intl. Premier Accredited Center in Old Lyme, CT. She can be reached at moyal2@owls.southernct.edu. Sarah Carlson is a PATH Intl. Certified Advanced Instructor, Equine Specialist in Mental Health and Learning, Associate Site Visitor and special programs coordinator/instructor at High Hopes. She can be reached at scarlson@highhopestr.org.

REFERENCES

- » Anderson, D., Zimmerman, L., & Barnes, M. (2008). *Marvelous minis: Equine experiential educational curriculum*. Plainfield, IN: Strides to Success, Inc.
- » Brown, S., & Vaughan, C. (2009). *Play: How it shapes the brain, opens the imagination, and invigorates the soul*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.
- » Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R. M., & Eyer, D. (2003). *Einstein never used flashcards: How our children REALLY learn – and why they need to play more and memorize less*. United States of America: Rodale Inc.
- » "Human knot." Retrieved October 31, 2013 from <http://www.movingbeyondicebreakers.org/includes/activity.php?video=humanKnot>.
- » Nutting, D. "Inclusive theatre games." (2011). Proc. of Let's All Play, National Inclusion. Raleigh, NC.
- » "Pipeline/gutterball: Description of a teambuilding activity." (2009, April 5). Retrieved October 31, 2013 from <http://www.wilderdom.com/games/descriptions/Pipeline.html>.
- » Singer, D., Golinkoff, R. M., & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2006). *Play: Learning how play motivates and enhances children's cognitive and social-emotional growth*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

RESOURCES

- » Strides to Success curriculum books
 - *Marvelous Minis*
 - *Cowboy Poetry*
 - *Journey of the Spirit Horse*
- » *Duct Tape Teambuilding Games—50 Fun Activities to Help Your Team Stick Together* by Tom Heck

HORSE SENSE

of the Carolinas

MORE THAN A MIRROR

Horses, Humans & Therapeutic Practices

By Shannon Knapp

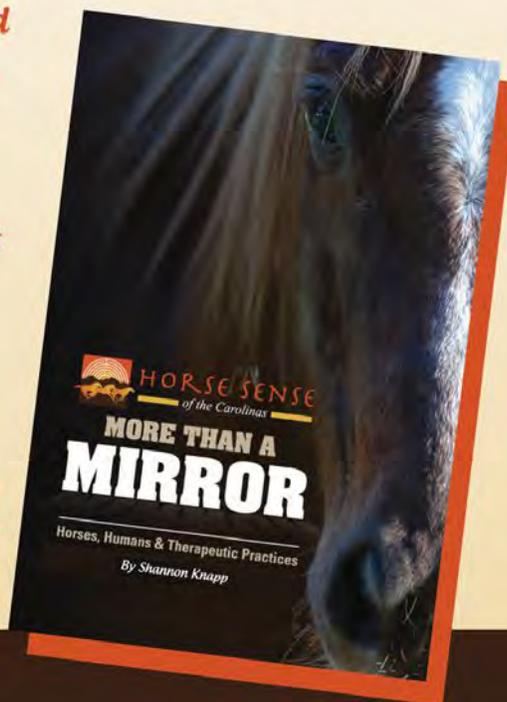
"I have been glued to the book since it arrived."

- Harriet Laurie,
TheHorseCourse

"A wonderful gift to the field!"

- Linda Nelson

Foreward by
Linda Parelli



More Than a Mirror examines theory and practice of Equine Assisted Therapy as a therapeutic intervention. Shannon Knapp, M.A., of *Horse Sense of the Carolinas*, integrates PATH, EAGALA and TF-EAP practice, along with horse selection and support, and horse professional requirements. Interviews with over 25 leading practitioners, including Leif Hallberg, Kris Batchelor, and Tanya Bailey, provide a varied and deep examination of the field!

"This book is a wonderful example of the power and spirit of collaboration."

- Leif Hallberg, Author of *Walking the Way of the Horse*

AVAILABLE NOW ONLINE:
HorseSenseBusiness.com