



Skyla Rafuse, six, holds an Easter picture she coloured for her horse friends at Hinchinbrook Farm in Blockhouse. CONTRIBUTED

Building on horse-to-human connections

Video chats with horses help
Hinchinbrook Farm students
through COVID-19



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Creative solutions kept kids and horses connected at Hinchinbrook Farm during COVID-19, including video chats with horses.

Farm founder and therapeutic riding program manager Patricia McGill says the farm has faced tough times due to COVID-19, including stalled connections between therapeutic riding clients and their horse partners during the pandemic's first wave lockdown in Nova Scotia.

Finding a fix meant employing technology to reconnect the kids with their horses and it happened as McGill brought her phone or a tablet into each horse's stall at the Blockhouse farm so they could get some face time in with their riders.

"The horses ended up babysitting the kids over Face Time," laughs McGill. "The kids were absolutely thrilled, very animated and reacting to the animals."

A POP OF COLOUR

The kids who were visiting over the phone with Hinchinbrook Farm horses participate in therapeutic riding, which connects kids with disabilities and autism-related difficulties with horses and supports their physical and emotional well-being.

McGill says that while she and her volunteers had plenty of barn projects to complete during the first wave lockdown, everyone missed seeing the kids around. In addition to virtual visits with horses, McGill started printing out black and white pictures for the kids to colour.

Parents sent her scanned versions of the colouring, which McGill used to decorate the barn and horses' stalls for video chats.

The farm was eventually allowed to reopen and received special permission to operate one-family playdates, and later horse activities with kids that could incorporate social distancing, which meant that even when the kids could not yet ride, they could get what McGill calls "horse time."

"They got to groom, lead and put horses on boxes, got them to pick up rings and other tricks, and we'd follow them around and supervise as they did these things," she says.

Riding resumed at the farm as of June 8 and its winter programs, which normally see fewer participants, are all



Hinchinbrook Farm horse Jazz examines a picture sent to him by one of his riders. CONTRIBUTED

fully enrolled. McGill says this shows that the connection between child and horse is one parents can't help but take note of.

"Parents say, 'I've never heard my kid laugh like that before.' It's a belly laugh that kids give out when they're riding a horse," says McGill.

Precautions are still in place and everyone who sets foot at the barn has their temperature checked and signs a COVID contract. Each participating rider must also use their own helmet and riding gloves.

It has been a hard year financially for the farm but with new volunteers are also steadily starting on at the farm, McGill says she is constantly reminded of how blessed the farm is as well. She describes the process of keeping the farm going as exhausting, but ultimately rewarding.

As always, McGill has managed her own mental health with the help of her horses, the unique form of therapy she shares with the kids who ride at the farm.

"When you're in the proximity of a horse ... it's a sense of well-being that cannot be described," she says. "Everything is done in horse time. Humans tend to watch the clock but horses don't have that clock, so time just stops."

Donations are accepted at the farm and go towards costs like vet bills, farrier visits and general repairs. To find out more about how to donate, visit Hinchinbrook Farm at <http://hinchinbrookfarm.com/>