



## How the Further Education Through Horsemastership (FETH) Course aids students with attachment difficulties and disorders

### Summary

Fortune College looks to use the student's interest in the horse to help create a safe but stimulating environment where the student can feel secure enough to manage educational and life skills challenges. It offers students an opportunity to be equal with their peers and gives a tangible sense of self-worth through caring for something else, the horse.

Fortune College supports the learning of those with attachment difficulties and disorders through:

A routine-based environment following the horses care needs

To confront challenge and change in a safe environment

Providing a work based/team-based learning structure

Providing opportunities to bond with horses, teachers and peers

Using the horse as a medium for communicating emotions

Embedding boundaries through ridden work

'attachment difficulties' is an umbrella term for children who have either (or both) insecure attachment behavioural patterns or diagnosed attachment disorders [Overview | Children's attachment: attachment in children and young people who are adopted from care, in care or at high risk of going into care | Guidance | NICE](#)

The 'Priory Group' website describes attachment disorder as: Attachment disorder is a mental health condition, mostly diagnosed in young children. It is characterised by abnormal attachment behaviours and disrupted interactions between the child and their primary caregivers. [Attachment Disorder | Priory Group](#)

A child with reactive attachment disorder (RAD) typically shows a persistent lack of care-seeking behaviour towards any caregivers, even when alarmed, sick or in distress. ([American Psychiatric Association \(APA\), 2013](#); [NICE, 2015](#)).

Disinhibited attachment disorder (DAD) or Disinhibited Social Engagement Disorder (DSED) is characterised by strong over-familiarity towards unacquainted adults, out of keeping with age-appropriate boundaries or cultural norms. ([APA, 2013](#); [NICE, 2015](#); [World Health Organization \(WHO\), 1992](#)).

In a 'National Library of Medicine' (NIH) paper the key points are noted as

- Attachment difficulties express a child's expectation that they cannot be sure of their caregiver's sensitive responses to their experiences of alarm, sickness or distress
- Attachment difficulties constitute a common modifiable risk factor for mental health problems but should not be treated pharmacologically
- Attachment disorder is a rare mental health disorder associated with a history of grossly inadequate and/or unstable care
- Attachment difficulties are likely to be reduced by supportive family environments, and interventions by mental health and social welfare practitioners to facilitate such support
- Clinicians can face difficulties in distinguishing attachment disorder and difficulties from other conditions such as ASD and ADHD as symptoms overlap

[Attachment difficulties and disorders - PMC \(nih.gov\)](#)

Depending on whether the child/young person displays Avoidant attachment, Disorganised attachment or Ambivalent attachment, they may display characteristics which include:

- Being emotionally distant
- Be reluctant to ask for help
- Need to be in control
- Be perfectionist and may develop compulsive tendencies
- Sometimes show flashes of aggression
- Try to keep adults sweet so adults don't get too close or get angry with them.
- Attention seeking and 'in your face'
- They will meet their needs however they can
- They are extremely anxious and insecure

- Use up most of their energy gaining the adult's attention with little energy left for learning
- They are quick to blame others for upsetting them
- Be unpredictable and frequently difficult to manage, both emotionally and physically
- Behind their façade of defiance there is a profound sense of fear, panic and helplessness
- They are hyper-vigilant
- Their self awareness is poor

[Microsoft PowerPoint - Tina 3B 1 \[Compatibility Mode\] \(optimus-education.com\)](#)

These behaviours often require support with their learning in the areas of:

- Social skills
- Creating a positive bond between child/young person and teacher/caregiver to be receptive to learning
- Feeling safe and secure
- Understanding limits and boundaries
- Maintaining routines and schedules
- Identifying emotions and express his or her needs

Three main areas to focus on to help children and young people manage attachment difficulties are:

- Establishing boundaries
- Follow a schedule
- Talk about emotions

[Attachment Disorder vs. Attachment Issues \(verywellmind.com\)](#)

The Priory group has found that: equine therapy (therapy involving horses) has been found to be particularly effective in helping individuals to process and change negative behaviours. By working through equine therapy, you can develop skills such as communication, self-control, problem solving and accountability, as well as improving your self-esteem, empathy, flexibility and independence.

Those who struggle to articulate how they're feeling often find equine therapy useful as they're able to express their emotions and feelings with their horse. In addition, individuals who find it hard to trust others or be intimate with people, can often achieve a strong bond and a level of closeness with their horse, and experience affection, acceptance and mutual respect. [Equine Therapy | Mental Health & Addictions Therapy Types | Priory Group](#)

Horses thrive on routine! Fortune College use this natural element of the horse to develop a repetitive, well-maintained routine focusing on the needs of the horse which helps create a basis for predictable timetable of daily work-based events. This supports our students to feel safe within their environment and to develop their own daily routines. But also, within this routine of caring for the horse are naturally occurring events which must also be addressed for the benefit of the horse; a vet/farrier visit, a lame horse, severe weather. Working with the horses through these natural disruptions to routine, aid our learners to understand and address the disruptions in their own lives. For most of our students, facing changes and adopting a more flexible approach is easier to contemplate in a secure environment with the calming influence of the horse for comfort.

Working on the yard and caring for the horses in their charge, enables learning in a team-based environment without contriving situations and in a non-pressured environment for horse motivated students. Working alongside likeminded students allows individuals to develop working relationships but also to understand the responsibilities of their own commitment within a group and how their behaviours can help or hinder the welfare of the horse. The responsibility of care for an individual horse may be given to one or two students for a half term and then changed according to need and to give a different learning opportunity for the student.

Students work within a set yard group of 6 to 9 students. This group is overseen by a lead teacher and supported by teaching assistants, a Literacy, Numeracy and Communication (LNC) lead and a transition and guidance tutor, this group of staff get to know their students under their care. Fortune College does not separate equine based teaching staff from independent living/care staff, so that the work founded on the stable yard with the horses can more easily be transferred to other areas of learning as staff move from one site to another with the students.

When addressing social and emotional difficulties, such as difficulty to express emotions, Fortune College work with horses as a medium, by exploring how the horse communicates their feelings to us and each other through body language and behaviour, we can then transfer this learning to talk about our own expressions of emotions. During loose schooling sessions, Equine facilitated learning is evident, non-verbal communication is the catalyst in this one to one session.

To help with the understanding of emotions and expression, students engage in the Alex Kelly 'Talkabout' programme. Talkabout is a structured programme for teaching and measuring social skills, following a hierarchical scheme of work. These skills need to be taught/learnt in the specific order to ensure the learners have the building blocks in place to support the higher level skills that follow.

Riding has at its basis the need to understand how to give and receive instructions clearly, how to listen to the horse and to respond accordingly. Within this discipline is the need to keep the boundary of horse and rider, to instruct the horse without bullying, to be the instigator of movement but still retaining team-work. Many Fortune College students will form a bond with a number of horses with whom they work with and/or ride. Gaining help from teachers to improve this equine bond helps develop a trust which in turn helps the student to accept, trust and develop a positive learning environment.

When riding and when working with the horses on the yard, students learn to identify that different staff will have focus on different elements of teaching, giving a different aspect of student experience to learning i.e. the literacy and numeracy teacher will focus on this even when in a riding session, the Equine Lead may focus on the horses welfare. Moving on from this, the student will develop an understanding of which staff members they need to relate to for different teaching purposes who is the appropriate staff member to seek help for different issues i.e. for horse problems go to the Equine Lead, Health problems go to the Health team etc.

Some examples of ridden exercises that assist our students with attachment difficulties and disorders to understand boundaries and to feel safer;

- The session has a hierarchy structure, the lead teacher is in charge and gives instruction.
- Riding sessions in the school has set rules i.e. maintaining correct distance, keeping your place in the ride. There is progression and these rules increase if riding in open order rather than as a ride i.e passing left to left, Riders have more autonomy in their decision making, planning, anticipation and judgement.
- The session will follow a warm up, main exercise then a cool down for the horse, so the student is influential in maintaining the wellbeing of the horse.
- Students are given a riding order, dependent of horse speed and rider ability although the teacher can give challenge by creating ride order or a horse choice which influences the difficulty levels for the individual.

Students ride and loose school a variety of horses. Whether requested by the student or chosen for a therapeutic reason by one of their group staff, students are supported to work through riding/loose schooling the horse we provide, to a positive end. In some situations, students need support to recognise that they are unable to ride or work with a particular horse, due to ability for example, working with staff they can then face this situation to see if this is an achievable future option, and if so, which steps are needed to achieve this goal.

Fortune College may also seek external support and involvement from professionals on an individual basis to meet specific identified needs. Recent involvement includes Psychiatry, Psychology, Occupational Therapy, Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy, Bereavement Counselling, Speech and language and Art Therapy.