Mentoring Improves Self-Efficacy, Competence, and Connectedness in a Therapeutic Horseback Riding Program

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Abstract: Mentoring among various parties at a therapeutic horseback riding program provides enhanced self-efficacy and competence among the children with special needs who are served by the program. These riders are mentored by other children, by volunteers, and by their riding instructor following Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy model. The riders and the volunteers who participate in their training exhibit increases in competence, connectedness, and self-efficacy by virtue of their experience being nurtured and supported by mentors.

Keywords: mentoring; mentor; Bandura; self-efficacy; positive feedback; social development; horse; equestrian; horseback riding; therapeutic riding; volunteer

Mentoring involves a non-parental relationship intended to provide guidance and encouragement to another person who is typically younger and/or less experienced. It is employed in professional, academic, and social settings and involves peers as well as authority figures in the mentor role.

This article illustrates, through the use of a case study, that individuals who serve as mentors and their protégés can develop important relationships that can yield very positive outcomes for everyone. The case study portrayed here describes mentors and protégés at a therapeutic horseback riding program called "Great and Small" located in the state of Maryland. A variety of ongoing mentor-protégé relationships occur within this program. The program manager and the instructors in the program serve as mentors to both volunteers and riders. Longer-term volunteers serve as mentors to newer volunteers. All volunteers serve as mentors to the riders.

Even the horses serve as mentors to the riders. The animals provide positive reinforcement and teach the riders, through their feedback, how to become more competent and confident in their riding. Through the consistent application of well-known psychological theories and informal mentoring procedures, the program personnel provide a sense of community and connectedness to the program participants, that is, to the riders in the program. This connectedness affords the riders the opportunity to develop competence in their riding as well as strong feelings of self-efficacy.

Mentoring programs of numerous types have grown significantly over the past twenty years (Schwartz, Rhodes, Chan, & Herrera, 2011) and tend to promote positive outcomes for both mentors and their protégés. Mentors serve in numerous capacities: as coaches, teachers, and team leaders (Semeniuk & Worrall, 2000). Most of the current research literature indicates the special effectiveness of informal mentoring, as it allows relationships to form and develop naturally. In this type of context, the mentoring relationship can be very useful in providing an environment for accelerated growth on the part of both mentors and protégés (Sullivan, 1996, pp. 226–49). Protégés typically report or exhibit greater levels of competence and self-efficacy, as well as stronger feelings of well-being than peers who have not experienced mentoring relationships (Grossman & Bulle, 2006; Watanabe, 2001).

Grossman & Bulle (2006) reported that they discovered the enhanced "connectedness," that is, the attachment between two people, that occurs within mentoring relationships. They discovered that within a mentor-protégé relationship, like a parent-child relationship, one could experience connectedness. Watanabe (2001) concluded in his research that the mentor-protégé relationship produced positive effects on both parties' mental health.

In addition to these positive outcomes, the research literature identifies a number of other products of the mentoring experience. Williams-Nickelson

(2009) points to self-assurance and self-efficacy as outcomes. Having a mentor with a highly developed sense of competence and self-assurance helps the protégé gain confidence in his or her own abilities. This confidence translates into persistence at difficult tasks. Providing constructive feedback is an important component of mentoring mentioned by Williams-Nickelson. She suggests that this is an essential element of mentoring that shows that the mentor is committed to and cares about the protégé. The protégé benefits from detailed, concrete feedback that provides information about how to improve in future tasks.

Theoretical Basis for Mentoring Approach

Although not mentioned directly within the existing research literature, it is our experience that a mentor's main goal in the relationships with his or her protégés is to provide them with a high level of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy is characterized by one's belief in his or her ability to achieve a given task. Self-efficacy has been linked through dozens of research studies to improved persistence, motivation, and academic and athletic performance (Gernigon & Delloye, 2003; Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991; Schunk, 1991; Lent, Brown, & Larkin, 1984). Bandura (1977) explains that one can achieve a high level of self-efficacy through consistent application of four sources: positive feedback, emotional arousal, successful performance, and vicarious experience.

Positive feedback is essential in working with children who are learning new skills. The mentors in this program are urged to provide positive, concrete, and constructive feedback to the riders as often as possible. Emotional arousal refers to the level of excitement or anxiety that a child may feel. It is important for the mentor to assess the rider's arousal level and ensure that he or she feels comfortable enough to make the attempt to engage with the horse. Successful performance, in Bandura's model, emphasizes the importance of providing the children the opportunity to do something correctly, even if it does not involve riding the horse.

When a child first attends the program, he or she might be afraid to get on a horse right away. On any particular day, then, the child's successful performance may entail grooming the horse or just touching the horse. In this case, the child feels good about his or her efforts and will feel more confident upon returning to the program the next time. Vicarious experience is provided by offering, when appropriate, a model to act out the behavior that one is trying to teach the child or other protégé.

In addition to Bandura's self-efficacy theory (1977), we can also see Vygotsky's theory on social development active in mentoring (1978). Vygotsky suggests that the interactions between people have a major influence on the development of one's cognitive thinking. Further, his theory of zone of proximal development (ZPD) describes a range of ability that a person can exhibit, ranging from what he or she can accomplish on his or her own to what can be accomplished with assistance. The mentor, in this case, acts as the assistant with whose help, the protégé is capable of accomplishing actions at a higher level than he or she could achieve alone.

Interestingly, the vicarious experience component that Bandura describes can be seen as a synonym for mentoring, that is, providing through one's own behavior or the behavior of others a model for performance. Comparably, Vygotsky's ZPD can aid the mentor and instructor in teaching the protégé and the rider more difficult tasks.

In this article, the program manager, instructors, and volunteers at the Great and Small therapeutic riding center, all of whom serve as mentors, describe situations in which they apply Bandura's sources in their mentoring. These mentors provide an environment that enhances the self-efficacy of the children with special needs with whom they work.

The benefits of this type of environment can be seen in many different areas. One consistent outcome for the protégés is the connectedness and, therefore, security that they experience makes them feel safe enough to take risks. The self-efficacy that the protégés feel, which is an expected outgrowth of their connectedness and of the other elements of the environment, leads them to become competent in their handling and riding of the horses much more quickly than they would have without the experience of being mentored. The elements of Bandura's self-efficacy model and the benefits that this model promotes can be seen throughout the comments given below by the mentors at Great and

Small.

Description of People and Horses in the Program

The riders in the program are individuals with a variety of special needs. Some of them have been victims of physical and sexual abuse, some suffer from conditions on the autism spectrum, some have cerebral palsy, some exhibit a developmental disability, and many have a combination of these conditions. The program brings together calm, caring horses with determined but vulnerable people and allows the horses and people to support each other in a number of incredible ways.

The volunteers (i.e., leaders and side walkers) in the program range from high school students who serve in order to fulfill mandatory community service hours, to retired school teachers who are ready to give of their time to support the next generation. All volunteers must undergo an informal or formal training program designed to teach them the rules and policies of the program, as well as the approach that they should take in their interactions with the riders. There is a strong emphasis on providing the components of Bandura's self-efficacy model at all times, in an effort to enhance the riders' connectedness, confidence and competence as riders.

The instructors in the program have all achieved certification by one of the national entities that ensure that instructors have the knowledge and skills about riding and teaching that are necessary to provide students with opportunities to learn to ride in a safe and competent manner. The instructors are paid for their instructional time in the program.

The horses who work in the program meet the needs of the riders by providing steady, gentle support and unconditional acceptance, while also acting as a vehicle for the riders' growing development of a new set of skills. Through their patient interactions with the riders, the horses provide positive feedback to the riders as they strive to learn new things. As the riders become more confident in their riding, they begin to develop true partnerships with their horses. In this way, the horses offer the riders something very special, that is, validation of themselves as skilled, competent people who can ask the horse to do something and get the response they desire. The horses also benefit from their involvement in the program. They are given a sense of purpose and pride, while also receiving loving care by the riders, the volunteers, and instructors, and the staff of the program. This combination of loving care and a true goal is what every horse wants in life.

Interactions among Mentors and Protégés

As described above, Bandura's model is used as the basis for this program. The vicarious experience component presents the clearest analogy to the mentoring that is provided across the program, as modeling is the primary method by which volunteers are taught how to serve in their roles. Modeling also forms the basis for the adoption by program personnel of the culture of positive feedback that is quintessential to the program. Illustrations of the other elements of the model will also be given here so that the reader can see how all of the pieces come together to promote connectedness, competence, and self-efficacy in the riders and the volunteers in this program. (In the following examples, the names of the persons described in this essay have been changed.)

Positive Feedback

Illustrations of positive feedback abound among all parties who participate in the Great and Small program. In an interview with the program manager, Regina, and an instructor, Nora, the following descriptions of positive feedback were provided:

> PW (first author): "Can you talk about the kind of feedback that you give the volunteers and the feedback that the volunteers give to the riders?"
>
> Nora: "We are very positive. The volunteers often say to the riders, 'Good job.' And I tell them: a) don't say it if it is really not their best, and b) instead of saying 'good job,' say 'good sitting trot' or 'good heals down.' Be specific. If they say 'great job' and the rider is concentrating on his hands, which happen to be not great, then he may be thinking his hands have really improved. He'll get a false impression of what is a good job."
>
> PW: "Do you tell the side-walkers to focus

on the positive?"

Nora: "I don't have to tell them; I just show them. I do this with both my students and my volunteers; I do what people call the 'Oreo.' You say something good, you say a correction of something that needs to be changed, and then you say something good."

When asked how the volunteers learned to give positive feedback:

Nora says: "They've heard my instructions to the riders [through modeling] so much that they know what they are looking for, so it is easy for them to do that. The volunteers' interactions with the riders are so wonderful from the very beginning, before the rider even gets on and while we are adjusting the stirrups. One side walker is adjusting the stirrups and the side walker on the other side is saying, 'How was your week? What went well?' The volunteers give the riders the social interactions that so many of our kids are missing. Having someone really care about them and connect with them is really important to them."

PW: "What else do you see in their interactions?"

Regina (program manager): "A whole lot of patience."

PW: "How do the volunteers know to be patient?"

Regina: "We don't have to tell them. They are just really good about that. We had one child who was afraid to get on the horse. The first time he came here to ride, it took the full 30 minutes to convince him to get on the horse. He was petrified. But now he comes running in here and can't wait to get on. He's five or six. He's got it figured out. The volunteer that day stood there just holding 'Mystic' for 30 minutes at the ramp. They are all incredibly patient and positive."

It is interesting that Regina believes that the volunteers do not need to be taught directly that they should be patient. She believes that the volunteers are naturally patient people. In fact, the mentoring that they receive from the instructor, the program director, and the more senior volunteers teaches them indirectly and informally that patience is necessary when working with these riders.

The instructor is then asked how she convinces the volunteers to provide such a caring attitude toward the riders. She says:

One of the things I say is 'Speak to them like they are friends of yours of that age.' So you are not going to speak to a teenager like she's a five year old and vice versa. 'Don't speak any louder, because they are not deaf. Don't speak slower, unless they often ask you to repeat yourself.' I really emphasize that. 'These are people who are often times the same age as you, and I want you to treat them just like your friends. They need friends.' I also explain that the riders want to see the same people every week and have a relationship with them because they don't have a lot of friends in school. The social part is missing a lot for them.

This is an example of direct instruction, but it is done in a very gentle manner. The instructor does not provide negative feedback, but provides an explanation for acting positively with the riders. In addition to exemplifying the positive attitude that is extant at the program, this quote illustrates the caring, connected community that all of the personnel at the program strive to develop.

One of the long-term volunteers, Damika, was asked about her experience in mentoring newer volunteers:

Damika: "It would just be me and Lily [newer volunteer] at the time getting horses ready and stuff, and I could use Lily as [an] example because she was so self-deprecating. When she came in, I think she has had a little experience with horses but not much, she was so worried about doing things wrong. I kind of took her under my wing and said, 'Don't worry about it,' every

time she made a little mistake, 'I've done stuff like that.' Really for hardly having any experience she came along very quickly and absorbed in a couple weeks what I had absorbed over a couple of decades. So I let her know that."

PW: "This is a theme that I keep hearing today. That having a mentoring experience brings people, both volunteers and riders, along more quickly than not having a mentoring experience."

Damika: "Oh, my heavens, yes! It's not just the educational part of it, but it's feeling like you are being taken under someone's wing. Nurtured and not alone."

Because of the overwhelmingly positive response provided by all mentors, the protégés feel protected and safe as they learn how to provide services to the special children in the program.

Emotional Arousal

As described above, assessing and adjusting emotional arousal levels is essential in building self-efficacy. It is important that riders and volunteers feel engaged but not overwhelmed or stressed by the riding situation. A story told by Regina (program manager) illustrated the importance of assessment of the emotional arousal of the rider.

There was one of the new kids who was… I wasn't sure if he was afraid of the horse or if he was afraid to do anything sports-related because he has a brother that goes to a different school and they've labeled him as the sports kid. So he feels that he'll have no success with sports. So we babied him and I think we babied him too much because he is a middle-schooler. There is always this fine line. There is a fine line between babying him and letting him do the steps he wants and laying out the steps and leaving him alone so he can do it himself.

The team made adjustments over time so that this rider would be provided with opportunities to improve, in spite of his stated misgivings at times.

Emotional arousal can also be a concern for volunteers. One new volunteer, Margaret, describes her early experience in the program this way:

My first day I couldn't do it; I got so sad. I started crying. The kids were in such bad shape. These little kids with cerebral palsy and autism. I thought 'I can't do this, this is killing me.' But then I would see the kids looking at their parents and smiling. And Lily would tell me that if I stay with it, I'll see the kids improving. So I thought 'I can do this! This is a happy thing!' So I stuck with it.

This example also shows the importance of positive feedback from mentors, and from the riders and their parents, without which Margaret might not have had the courage to continue her volunteering.

Successful Performance

One of the most important elements of the self-efficacy model is the necessity of providing instances in which the rider can feel successful. This component is at the root of all of the teaching methods used by the instructor and volunteers. Even if "success" is defined simply as approaching or touching the horse, each child is given an environment in which he or she can achieve success every day.

When a child is afraid to get on the horse, the instructor (Nora) and volunteers put together a protocol to ensure that the child has the chance to experience success anyway, with Nora explaining:

Very patiently. We usually bring Shadow, sometimes Mystic, into the ramp. So the rider can hang out at the banister and I give him the control of the horse. I tell him, 'This horse is not going to walk near you until you say "walk on." And when you want the horse to stop you say "halt."' And the volunteer makes sure that the horse does this. I also say, 'You can make the horse come as close or as not close as you want.' If the horse gets too close accidentally, the rider can back up away from the banister and that helps him feel comfortable. Then we move the rider to where there is no banister between him and

the horse and we ask him to touch the shoulder or the rump whatever he feels comfortable doing. Some people are afraid of the swishing tail; other people are afraid of the head.

Clearly, even small successes are reinforced in the program, so that the children can work at their own pace and can feel a sense of mastery every day. This example also provides an illustration of the need to assess the rider's emotional arousal, which Nora does very expertly.

Another example of successful performance is described by Lily:

> I was actually the leader. There were two teachers. At first, we just got him to approach the horse and pat the horse. He was tall enough to throw his leg over and still have both of his feet on either side of the ramp. So he did that and pretty soon he actually sat on that particular one, but he didn't want the horse to move yet. Then the next time he got on pretty quickly. Then the next time he got on the horse and we went all the way around the arena.

When riders have been attending lessons for a while and have become comfortable with the horse, the goal changes to increasing the competence of the rider. The following description by Nora provides a good example of ensuring successful performance in established riders who are working on their steering:

> I use fading and shaping. Fading means you give them the most help that they need. In this case, you use hand over hand. You are going to take your hand and put it over his [the rider's] hand, which is holding the reins and you are going to help him bring it out and that's how you are going to help him steer. If the rider needs a reminder to use his foot in his steering, I tell the volunteers to touch a foot, and that will remind him to use his foot. Then the next time you just point without the touch and then the next time you just say 'Bring your hand out.' Then the next time you do nothing. So that is fading: you give him

the most help at first and then he becomes independent in a sequence.

Each success, then, becomes the basis for the next step in the child's learning. This experience can also be related to Vygotsky's ZPD. When the volunteer initially provides a great deal of help and then progressively provides less, the child will learn to complete even the most difficult task on his or her own because of the assistance received from the volunteer:

> Shaping is the opposite. Shaping works like this: we have a pretty independent rider, who usually does well, but let's say she is having a bad day. So we tell her to weave through the cones and she does a terrible job. So we say 'Let's do it again.' And I'll say, 'Side walkers, let's give verbal cues.' Then, 'Let's do it again. Side walkers, let's give tactile cues.' Then, 'Okay, let's do it one more time. Side walkers, hand over hand.' Then I'll say, 'Success! Look how round those turns were around those cones! Now let's try fading.' Then we usually give them a trot to reward [positive feedback] their good behavior.

In this example, the instructor actually uses the word "success" in an emphatic manner. The riders hear this type of positive reinforcement all the time, and the combination of the feedback and the feeling of mastery helps them to feel confident.

Vicarious Experience

Modeling (vicarious experience in Bandura's model) is used by the instructor in training new volunteers, by long-term volunteers in training new volunteers, and by long-term riders with new riders. The ease of the new volunteers' learning new things so quickly can also be described by both Bandura's social learning theory and Vygotsky's social development theory. Both explain that one can learn through observation without directly being taught. The instructor, Nora, describes training of new volunteers this way:

> When they come to me and they have never been trained or they've only had an individual training or whatever, I kind of

see where they are and what they need to know. Usually, I'll just tell them, 'Side walkers, you have to talk to each other because you have to be symmetrical, especially when you are adjusting the stirrups or tightening the girth. You can't tighten the girth from both sides at the same time and, with some of our kids, you can't do the stirrups at different times because they will feel unbalanced.' But from there, the side walkers just work it out and talk to the rider appropriately.

The modeling, then, along with direct instruction, helps to build the new volunteers' confidence. The volunteers learn that they need not rely on the instructor alone, but that they can look to anyone in this community to help them develop their abilities.

Nora then gives an example of a new volunteer (Lily) who was, at first, a bit unsure of herself. Nora describes Lily's first few weeks this way:

> I have to say I really like Lily, so I am going to use her as an example. Lily came to us kind of out of shape and felt that she could not keep up with the horses. But she had such a good way with talking to the riders that I didn't want to lose her. She had such good timing. I was working with an adult volunteer and a teenaged volunteer, and the teenager could keep up with the horse but didn't know how to relate to the child at all, and her timing was off. Lily's timing is always right on. When she said she wanted to quit, I said, 'Please don't. We can always replace you for the trot. Someone can come in and take over. We can get one of the barn staff to come in and take over for the trot. You are great at everything else! So don't quit.' [NOTE: This is also a clear example of the successful performance component of the model.] She stuck with it and she got in shape. She can now trot more than I can. Then we had a new adult coming in and she was really unsure of herself. So I said 'Watch Lily.' And then I had them switch places and Lily gave her a few tips, mostly a lot of 'you did this right, you did that right.' I feel that she got on board really

fast because she was under Lily's eye. It could take me a month to get to all the different things I do in the arena about where to be and what the timing is, but when you've got a volunteer mentor it could be two weeks. It cuts the training time in half.

This example illustrates the fact that feeling nurtured and encouraged by others in this community helps new people to become prepared and secure in their new roles very quickly.

Regina also describes how Damika (long-term volunteer) mentors the newer volunteers:

> Everyone looks to Damika to figure out how to sidewalk or lead the horse, or how to support the rider. She's been here the longest, so she really knows how to do everything. It is one of those things where I can give a new volunteer a quick tour and then say, 'Damika is going to show you how to groom.' And Damika teaches Lily and then pretty soon Damika and Lily teach Margaret.

Regina concluded that this type of mentoring "brings the new volunteers along very quickly, so they become more independent after just a few sessions." An example of having a rider act as a model for a new rider is provided by Regina:

> We use modeling when it is appropriate. A lot of times the clients come out here to see the program before we put them on a horse. I invite anybody that's interested to come see the program." When a new rider participates in this type of observation, he or she is benefiting from the modeling of an established rider in the program. The new rider sees that someone 'just like me' can get on the horse and communicate with him. This is very empowering for the new participant, who may have arrived at the program with doubts about his or her readiness to take on this challenge.

As noted at the start of the article, it is clear from the processes used at Great and Small and, especially, from the very positive outcomes for the

personnel and the riders, that the informal mentoring approach used here is the right approach for the program. This type of approach allows relationships to develop naturally, without the rigid partnering and scripting that might be required in a more formal setting.

Implications for Mental Health Professionals & Future Directions for Research and Practice

This research team is dedicated to the study of the emerging field of human-animal interaction, specifically therapeutic riding. Westerman and Hargreaves previously served on a team of researchers that examined the effectiveness of therapeutic riding for adopted children with special needs (Hargreaves, Westerman, Westerman, & Verge, 2007). The primary objective of this preliminary work was to conduct sound empirical research examining the effectiveness of Great and Small's Therapeutic Riding Program. Future research will include an assessment of the types of mentoring employed in the program and an evaluation of the influence of the mentoring on the program workers as well as the riders.

The family is included in the Great and Small Program in a variety of ways, including the provision of information from the parents of the children, and communication with parents about results that reflected their children's improvements. This two-way communication, in particular, was a factor that contributed to the success of the participants of the aforementioned study conducted by the research team in 2007. In fact, it is apparent that inclusion of family members in the healing process is not only valuable, but truly essential to the therapeutic riding program itself as well as to the impact of the program on all aspects of the participants' lives. Thus, we propose that the family unit can be an extension of the therapeutic riding program, as best practices in therapeutic riding programs as well as animal assisted activities and psychotherapy encompass the utilization of all positive resources within the participants' family and environmental system(s).

One manner in which this may occur is by providing families, specifically parents, the opportunity to watch the riders' sessions at Great and Small. Through observation, the parents will learn the elements of the mentoring approach used in the program. They will see that providing opportunities for success, coupled with positive reinforcement, modeling, and awareness of their children's arousal levels can bring about great positive changes in their children. Many parents are unaware of how important these components can be in the healthy development of their children. In future research and practice, we propose to include parents and siblings actively as part of the program at Great and Small when possible.

It is further contended that the families of mentors may benefit from the positive behavioral techniques employed by Great and Small in settings outside of the program, including in the homes of the Great and Small mentors. In so doing, it is hypothesized that the overall impact of such experiences for the entire team at Great and Small would be beneficial to the mentors as well as to the clients and, ultimately, to the program as a whole. The expectation is that the model would support progress that can be further developed so that clients and their families, as well as mentors and their families, can reach their maximum potential in all aspects of their lives as an outgrowth of the positive impact that Great and Small has made upon the mentors and clients within the program.

Conclusions

The program described above relies on mentoring relationships among the staff, volunteers, and riders in order to promote positive outcomes for all of them. It is clear that the mentoring experiences at Great and Small, based upon the models of Bandura and Vygotsky, are providing accelerated development for all who are involved. One way we can see this is through the competence and self-efficacy that the volunteers and the riders express as a result of the ongoing support and guidance that they receive within the program. One volunteer describes the effects on the riders of having caring mentors:

> The mentoring is building a caring community here that everybody benefits from. The benefits are obvious in the outcomes of the kids because they're becoming really good riders. But even having the kids feel more comfortable and more familiar more quickly when they are mentored by other people than if they are

not, that makes a big difference.

This volunteer has highlighted the importance of successful performance and arousal management, in particular, but all of the examples provided by Great and Small personnel underscore how useful all of the components of Bandura's and Vygotsky's theories are in the development of self-efficacy and confidence in the staff as well as the riders. The mentoring provided to all of these people constantly, in every experience they have at Great and Small, reflects these theoretical approaches.

The staff and volunteers report over and over during their interviews that they enjoy their work at Great and Small because it is meaningful, fulfilling, pleasant and positive to themselves, and beneficial to others. One volunteer says, "It makes you feel so good because you really know you are making a difference for these kids and it is very rewarding." The riders show, through their verbal and nonverbal expressions, that they enjoy their participation as well. One adult rider describes her perspective of the program this way: There is a "sense of community and celebration at the barn." She tells a story about a day when another rider was just finishing his lesson as she arrived for hers. The instructor told her about the wonderful things that the previous rider had done. In this way, "all riders can revel in each others' successes" and they feel like a part of something greater than themselves. Feeling this connection to others is something that many people with special needs report as a loss that occurs along with their disability. The program, through the very special, positive work of its staff and volunteers, provides a level of connectedness that many of the riders have sought for a long time. The riders are also receiving social learning and support in a safe environment that they may otherwise not experience on a consistent basis.

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