

The Synthesis of Encounters among Autistic Children and Donkeys

Researcher: Michelle Whitham Jones

My name is Michelle Whitham Jones and I'm completing a PhD in Anthrozoology. As part of my PhD, I'm doing a research project which will be exploring if spending time with donkeys, could help you better understand your child's communication and emotional state or if there are any other benefits. I believe that donkeys are sentient animals and that their emotions and characters will be very important to how your child interacts with them during these sessions.



I would like to invite you and your child to take part in this study because there has been some evidence that equine assisted interventions can help children with autism improves their general wellbeing. I believe that some children with autism can have a deeper, unique understanding of social animals such as donkeys. There has not been too much research specifically on nonverbal children with autism and I think these sessions may help us understand these children better.

Before you decide to take part in this research it is important that you understand why the research is being carried out and what is involved. Please, read the information here so that you can decide if you would like to be a part of the research or if you would prefer not to.

If you choose to take part in the study, I will discuss your child's needs with you and ask you to keep a brief record of what you notice after the sessions. I will meet you just after the trial to share what I have observed and to discuss your observations. I will meet you and other parents after a month to discuss if the sessions have made a difference. I will observe your child spending time on the ground with the same donkey at the Ivybridge Donkey Sanctuary Centre each week for 4 weeks. We will observe the sessions and record what we notice. Another researcher will record the donkey at the same time as I am observing your child. Using this information, we hope to learn if the donkeys are able to help the children and if the donkeys benefit from the sessions also.

We are aware that parents and families of children with autism often have many professionals working with them. Some families feel that there is not enough practical help for them to be able to help their own children within their families and they have been vulnerable to books or films about miracle cures that seem too good to be true and of course these 'therapies' often are unrealistic and parents are let down or even financially compromised from the experiences. Our research is hoping to be able to offer a realistic way of tackling some traits of autism that the child or the family find challenging. We are not making any promises at all

but hope that the donkey interactions your child will receive as part of this research project will help to find practical solutions.



Do we have to take part in this study?

No, it is up to you whether you take part or not. You will be asked to sign a form to say that you are happy to take part. However, you can still change your mind and stop participating in this study at any time.

Will it cost anything?

No, all Donkey Interaction is free of charge because the Donkey Sanctuary Charitable Trust pays for it.

What will happen if I take part in the study?

Before the study begins, I will meet with you to explain the study in more detail and ask you to complete a consent form. We will meet at the Ivybridge centre, PL21 0LE, and we will show you around and you can meet some of our donkeys.

I will ask you to tell me if you think your child would be happy to be with the donkeys by the behaviours that they exhibit when we meet the donkeys for the first time so that I can get consent from your children.

I will also discuss your child's way of communicating so that I and the staff are able to understand if your child wants to end the sessions at any time.

Once we have completed the observations we record what happened in the sessions. At the end of the sessions we will ask you about what you have noticed and we will record your observations too. When we finish the study at Ivybridge we will make sure that the results do not have your name or your child's name on them so that we can protect your privacy. When we have more data from lots of children we will be able to start to see patterns about what works well and what we could improve.

Eventually we are hoping to be able to record if the encounters between donkeys and autistic children can enable us to understand how to help communication and calmness in other situations and support more families in the future. We are also hoping that this activity is enriching for the donkeys who provide the therapy. Our aim is always to ensure that both the donkeys and children benefit from their sessions.

What is good and not so good about taking part?

If you are involved in the research you will help us to better understand the experiences of families living with autism and how this form of animal assisted intervention could support the children by showing us their unique communication and social awareness. We hope this will lead to families and professionals knowing more about how autistic children communicate and how we should try to engage them. This study will initially take between 1 and 2 months and then it will continue in the other Donkey Sanctuary Centres with other children for another 2 more years. We can't pay you or pay your travel expenses but we will

be offering refreshments to you when you visit us and the donkeys, we also have a play room for other siblings.

Are there any risks in taking part in the study?

A risk with taking part in this research is that we may not be able to improve the traits that you have identified but the children may just enjoy their time with the donkeys.

The Donkey Sanctuary takes health and safety very seriously but we need you to be aware that we are working with donkeys who, although chosen for their good temperaments may be unpredictable. We ask that your children wear suitable clothing (such as leggings or jogging trousers and hard shoes).

Is the research safe and who has checked it?

This study has been looked at by an independent group of people called 'Social Science and International Studies Research Ethics Committee from Exeter University. They have decided that the study is safe for you and your child to take part if you want to. We take our welfare and safety obligations very seriously therefore children who have displayed harmful behaviours towards animals in the past or who demonstrate harmful behaviours towards the donkeys in this research will not be able to participate. Only donkeys that are pro-social towards children are considered for the study. Any donkey who shows aggressive behaviour towards people will be removed from the research.

Who will know about my results?

Only the researchers will see your responses to this research and they will not be allowed to tell anyone what they heard or saw without your permission. The data will be kept safely locked away in a 2 separate places so that the children's names and code numbers will not be able to be put together. Any electronic data will be separated from names so that it will always be anonymous. When we have collated all of the data the results may be published but your child will remain anonymous.

Will I find out what happens after I've taken part?

After we have finished the research we will send you a leaflet summarising the results so that you know what has been found. The results may be in publications for animal researchers or professionals interested in autism and it may be used to teach others at research meetings. Your child or your name will not be included.

The Donkey Sanctuary at Ivybridge run a Saturday club so that your children may be able to continue sessions with the donkeys after the project free of charge should they wish to.

Who can I contact?

Michelle Whitham Jones

Email: mw524@exeter.ac.uk

Or my research supervisor:

Dr Samantha Hurn

Email: S.Hurn@exeter.gov.uk

