

The Way of the Donkey

Comprehensive Intervention School-Based Program

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The Way of the Donkey is all about donkeys and positive empowerment! The Way of the Donkey™ and Donkey Enabled Empowerment and Wisdom or DonkeyEEAW!™ These programs are considered a form of donkey assisted therapy, which we are calling "donkey assisted coaching."

The Way of the Donkey ~ Positive Psychology and Trauma Informed Care

While not implemented extensively in the U.S., the Donkey Sanctuary in the U.K. has engaged in donkey assisted therapy for over 40 years. Their initial approach primarily involved riding, which emulates the predominant way in which horses are used in therapy activities.

They are now extending their program to encourage greater hands-on interactions to provide the opportunity for a loving connection between people and the donkeys. These interactions take advantage of the unique character of donkeys -- as "sentient facilitators."

Nancy Willard, Director of The Way of the Donkey, has worked for several decades in digital risk and bullying prevention. A strong focus of this work has been directed at developing research-based strategies to empower young people to make good choices and to empower young people to effectively respond to hurtful or risky situations in a way that is empowered and seeks to reduce the potential harmful impact. The approach Nancy recommends to schools and others in this area is fully grounded in positive psychology and trauma informed practices.

The field of positive psychology provides insight into strategies individuals can use to live more happy and productive lives. Trauma informed practices provide insight into how individuals can respond in traumatic situations to reduce the potential of harm in the form of a traumatic distress response and can assist those who have experienced harm to recover from that harm and respond effectively when in stressful situations.

It turns out that donkeys share many of the traits that social science researchers say help people feel happier, feel empowered, and more effectively handle stressful situations. The Way of the Donkey calls our donkeys "Intuitive Empowerment Facilitators."

The Way of the Donkey includes these seven, research-based components:

Connect With Friends Donkeys love their best "buddy." To be a good friend think about how the other person feels and treat the person the way you would like to be treated. (Connections)

Reach Out To Be Kind Donkeys scratch each other's back. When you reach out to be kind to others this makes them feel great ~ and you also! (Kindness)

Build Your Strengths Donkeys like to learn new things. When you use your personal strengths to do new things this makes you feel empowered. (Character Strengths)

Be Thankful Donkeys are thankful when they receive treats, especially carrots. Being thankful for the good things makes you feel happy. (Gratitude)

If things get tough... If donkeys become unsure or afraid, they do this:

Stop and Stay Focused Donkeys don't run or fight or freeze. They stop and stay focused. (Mindfulness)

Stand Tall Donkeys stand tall and look powerful. Recognize that you cannot control how others act, but you can control how you feel about yourself and respond. Standing tall can help you feel more powerful. (Presence and Rational Emotive Response)

Think Things Through Donkeys think things through. They figure out what is best to do. If you need to figure out what to do, ask yourself these questions: What has actually happened? What is my goal in this situation? If I was hurtful, how can I acknowledge this and what harms do I need to make right? What several powerful positive actions, using my strengths, could I take? Is each action in accord with my values? For each action, what might happen? What is my best first choice? If this does not work, what else could I do? (Problem Solving, Character Strengths, and Restorative Practices)

The Way of the Donkey Comprehensive School-Based Program

The Way of the Donkey is seeking to implement and evaluate a comprehensive The Way of the Donkey approach as way to empower students receiving special education services in the Eugene/Springfield area.

This Comprehensive Program would include:

- **Professional Development.** Professional development training for staff that provides insight into the research-background for The Way of the Donkey and the recommended extension activities.
 - Staff will be specifically taught how to use the Stop and Stay Focused, Stand Tall, and Think Things Through approach to address and difficulties or challenges that come up within the group. Staff will be encouraged to engage the participants in a brief mindfulness activity each day or more frequently, such as after a break, followed by practice in "feeling small" and then "standing tall." The problem-solving approach of The Way of the Donkey would be encouraged. Much of these positive steps are already incorporated into special education programs. They would continue with this new "long ear" touch.
- **Six Week Intensive Implementation Involving Weekly Visits with the Donkeys.** During these visits, we will allow a reasonable size group of students to interact with one of the donkeys doing grooming or petting. Other students will have a more extended time alone with a donkey. We will establish a protected space using temporary electric fence posts with ribbon and set up a fun obstacle course. Our initial approach will be to allow the solo student the opportunity to determine how he or she wants to interact with the donkey -- do the obstacle course, simply lead the donkey around, pet or groom the donkey, or simply sit and have a talk.
 - The practical reality is that outside obstacle courses will not be possible during the winter months. The donkeys can come into the facility wearing "bun bags" and donkey shoes to protect the floor.
- **Follow-up Visits.** After the six week intensive visits, the donkeys will visit once or twice a month.
- **Information Materials.** Slideshow for the participants that introduces them to fun history and insight on donkeys and the key concepts of The Way of the Donkey. Posters will be provided that present the key concepts from The Way of the Donkey.

- **Parent Meeting.** At the parent meeting, Nancy will present the basic concepts of The Way of the Donkey for positive parenting.
- **Character Strengths Survey.** Brief version of a Character Strengths survey, to identify which of 24 key character strengths are strongest for each participant. Organizations can have older participants complete the more extensive survey on the VIA Institute for Character web site. Classrooms or schools be encouraged to have students create a poster or collage that illustrates their key personal strengths and to discuss, share, and celebrate each participant's personal strengths. There are additional resources on the VIA Institute for Character classes or schools can use to focus attention each day on one of the character strengths.
- **Journaling or Discussion Groups.** Older students will be asked to journal daily. The younger students will discuss these questions in a discussion group. The questions are the following:
 - What warm connection did you have with a friend or mentor today?
 - How did you reach out to be kind today?
 - How did you use one of your personal strengths today?
 - What happened today that you are thankful for?
 - Did you practice mindfulness today? Did you remind yourself to calm down at any time? How did this work?
 - Did you practice standing tall today? Did you remind yourself to stand tall at any time? How did this work?
 - What situation did you face where you needed to think things through? How did this work?
- **Evaluation.** Pre and post surveys of the participants that focus on their perceptions of their current level of happiness, personal empowerment, and emotional well-being. Other evaluation actions may incorporate an assessment of disciplinary records or incident reports and staff surveys.