

FLOWER & STORMY GO TO PRISON

Have you ever thought how much of our communication is done by our body language? Perhaps most of us have learned social skills to defuse a situation where a message of hostility or anger is being displayed and are barely aware of the reason.

Horses are incredibly receptive to these body signs and in the 1980s a new way of training them (Parelli Natural Horsemanship) was developed, achieving "success without force, partnership without dominance and harmony without coercion". An amazing trust builds up between horse and trainer but this only works when the body language is right.

Then a bright lateral thinker hit on the idea that this could be a two-way message. If a trained horse would only perform if the body language was right, why shouldn't a human learn to modify the signals they were giving out to gain the horse's cooperation? And this is what Harriet Laurie from Askerswell does with her Parelli trained thoroughbred mare Flower and Connemara pony Stormy. She is running courses at the Young Offenders' establishment on Portland and achieving remarkable success. If the horse displays signs of tension when asked to perform some movement, then the handler must understand that it is the message he is sending which is causing the block – and learn how to modify it. As for the horse's body language, the angle of their ears usually tells exactly how they are reacting. From this the young prisoners begin to understand how this can be taken back into their everyday life. The feeling of achievement is something completely new to most of them and a huge boost for their self-esteem.

They are not learning to ride; they are learning to get the horse's cooperation to be led on a loose rope, back, bend down a line of cones, jump over a raised pole, turn in a tight circle, walk sideways and even put their front feet on a box three pallets high – all this from the ground. They do get a little bareback riding at the end as a reward for their achievements.



The proof of the pudding is in the eating. Harriet's courses are highly praised by the prison management and she is building up an impressive body of professional people to support this work and help her get funding. The project is currently being studied by the University of Southampton.

So don't think, "Pony Club for prisoners? What nonsense. They are there to be punished". Just picture what has led them to be put inside: probably a lifetime of anger and tension which affects all their behaviour. With this newly learned ability to control their emotions they have a much greater chance of coming to terms with life in the community in the future. Well done, Stormy, Flower and Harriet.

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