



Healing hearts
& personal growth
through
animal-assisted
learning

What began in Glen Innes, East Auckland, as a grassroots initiative, over time has become an animal-assisted learning programme that touches the lives of school age children living in our homeless shelter as well as their whānau and others in our community. Engaging with small or large animals, alongside trained staff and volunteers, not only enables tamariki (children) and rangatahi (youth) to learn new knowledge and skills but also provides a way for them to speak up and share their worries. When these conversations include other children, it gives them permission to open-up. Our staff and volunteers show empathy and aroha (unconditional love and concern), reducing isolation and instilling a sense of hope that, with adult help, things can change and will get better.

Danielle Bergin, Chief Executive Officer

About Island Child Charitable Trust

Established in 2005, ICCT provides transitional housing and a 12-week residential programme that operates 24/7 from premises in Glen Innes, East Auckland. At any one time we can host up to 18 families or 54 people across four neighbouring properties. We work mainly with Māori and Pacific single parent families and adults but also two-parent families. Most of our whānau identify as Māori or Pacific. The impacts of our residential programme vary for each person/whānau and all benefit from housing stability and intensive support. We successfully rehome whānau every year into affordable, appropriate, and sustainable housing.

***Ko te mea nui ko te tika,
te pono me te aroha***

*Our greatest asset is
a love that encompasses
honesty and integrity*





Introduction

Tēnā koutou, mālō e lelei, talofa lava, kia orana, fakaalofa lahi atu, ni sa bula vinaka, fakatalofa atu, namaste, and warm greetings

Our Island Child Charitable Trust Animal-assisted Learning Programme is an integral part of our 12-week residential programme. To accommodate different learning needs and provide a range of learning experiences, we have nine therapy ponies and 10 small animals. The personal growth and life skills gained by school-age children gives them and their whānau a huge boost at a time in their lives when tailored, life-changing support and learning is truly needed.

Our programme developed over time. Observing positive effects on whānau, we became more purposeful in encouraging animal-assisted learning with our smaller animals. We purchased horses and trained them to become therapy ponies. We researched other programmes and learnt as we went, applying new ideas and practices from our lived experience.

Our programme has gained traction because youth love it. As city kids from families with insecure housing and other problems, learning how to ride was an opportunity they never imagined possible. Taking care of kittens, chickens or guinea pigs is a great way to spend an afternoon. Dog training is an exciting challenge.

In earlier days, local youth doing supervised community work sentences under the Ministry of Justice completed their hours through our programme. Along with others, these youth not only built positive relationships and learned new knowledge and skills but also developed a healthier attitude and a more forward-looking direction.

Residents and visitors enjoy seeing horses grazing locally and children riding in the area. “It’s not what you expect to see in the city,” they say. “I thought riding was only for rich people,” is another comment we hear.

To provide the programme, we rely on philanthropic trusts, loyal volunteers, sponsors and donations. We’re also constantly improving the environment, facilities and fencing at Point England Reserve, where our ponies graze.

How our programme works

Around 70% of our whānau staying in our shelter choose to participate in our free animal-assisted learning programme. We work with groups of ten school-age children and youth aged from five to 16 years. We also encourage parents to attend.

Our small animal programme operates 24/7 and offers one-to-one and small group learning. The delivery of therapy pony programme has been disrupted by COVID-19, but usually operates three times a week, after school and weather permitting, for up to two hours per group session. During school holidays, we offer longer sessions and take youth to horse competitions, cross country events and agriculture shows. We encourage children to develop a positive relationship with animals and apply that learning to their other relationships.

We work hard to maintain our strong safety record. Children are properly equipped with riding hats, sturdy boots and protective clothing. Trained staff and volunteers offer guidance and empower youth to reach their full potential.

At all times our animals receive excellent care, regular health checks and veterinary assistance as required. Health and safety with participants and animals is our number one priority.

Programme Goals

Through animal-assisted learning, we aim to:

- Build trust, self-confidence and self-esteem;
- Encourage gentle, kind and respectful behaviour;
- Develop personal responsibility and self-motivation;
- Grow life and leadership skills;
- Enable youth and whānau to have fun together; and,
- Uncover and address personal concerns.

Programme Content

Working with small animals, we teach:

- Animal care – handling, grooming, washing and feeding animals, and behaviour
- Animal wellbeing – nutrition, exercise, physical health and being kind.
- Health and safety – protective measures and managing risks

Working with therapy ponies, we teach:

- Animal care – feeding, grooming, working and socialising horses, and behaviour
- Animal wellbeing – nutrition, exercise, physical health and being kind
- Handling skills – approaching, catching, saddling and being around a pony
- Riding technique – walking, trotting, cantering and jumping
- Training horses– for saddle and farm work, including ploughing
- Farm management – feed management and trough, stable, paddock and fence maintenance
- Health and safety – protective measures and managing risks



Rosie's story

“I notice that kids who’ve gone through trauma at home find it easier to talk to the animals, show their emotions and share what they’re feeling.”

I’m a programme veteran! I help to teach kids how to be gentle with the ponies. I show them how to approach them, brush them, make up their feed and ride them.

I’ve noticed some kids who come to the homeless shelter don’t get kindness shown to them very often. Mum may be tougher on them than their younger siblings or maybe they don’t know who their Dad is. They might have moved around a lot or be having trouble at school. They don’t trust easily and have never learnt to show kindness to animals. They’re used to being tough because they’re often told to toughen-up. They tend to be rough with their siblings and push each other around.

It takes time for them to open up but, once you show them how to act around animals, they start to learn that they can become a nice person and act in more gentle ways. Their faces light up when you take them to the horses because they know they can be themselves. They know the animals won’t tell them off or make them feel incompetent.

You can’t really do much wrong when you care for animals. Plus you can be yourself. You don’t have to worry about the expectations or pressures of other people, and what they think.

Being around horses seems to encourage you to become a better person. Because you’re there, in that moment, with these amazing animals who are gentle and majestic, you feel amazing too. You feel empowered simply by being able to stand there, in that moment, with such a big strong creature who is so gentle with you. I notice, over time, the kids become gentler with themselves and their siblings.



Tamariki stories

“I rode a chestnut pony called Copper. He can go fast but he went slow with me so I wouldn’t fall off. He was a good boy!”

“I feel very excited when I visit the horses and always want to come back. I like making up their feed and riding them.”

“I like cuddling-up with a dog! She makes me feel happy, not sad.”

The benefits we see

For Kids and Youth

Children have fun and build healthier relationships with animals, other kids and adults. They learn valuable strategies and skills for living. They learn respect, trust, responsibility, leadership, and discipline and these qualities grow self-esteem and self-confidence. Their behaviour becomes more settled as they develop more harmonious attitudes and learn to avoid at-risk behaviours. Trips away to horse events enable them to see a broader horizon, and experience the world, beyond Glen Innes.

For Parents

Parents learn new knowledge and skills. Some Māori whānau recall positive childhood experiences of riding horses in remote areas, strengthening their whakapapa connections. Other parents, who have experienced isolation, say they no longer feel so lonely and, for those who have suffered trauma, we notice improvement in their ability to manage day to day tasks.

For Families

New, enriching and drug-free experiences enhance whānau relationships. Families begin to appreciate the value of local reserves they can enjoy at no cost. Hearts broken from constant transience and displacement begin to heal. Threads of empathy and compassion that bind family members strengthen.

For Community

Safe, structured engagement with therapy ponies adds special value to our community. Having therapy ponies grazing on local reserves brings the country to the city and enables city dwellers to maintain links to the natural world. Residents enjoy the tangible and intangible benefits that come with connections to nature and large animals, and the whole community benefits.



“Caring for animals provides awakening moments in which we begin to see our values. Children and adults learn not to be rough with animals and one another. Instead, they learn to be kind and respectful.”

Lesieli, programme volunteer



“As a person, you gain confidence and discipline from looking after horses, and a feeling of respect because they’re such majestic animals.”

Quinn, former programme participant



What researchers say

Animal-assisted intervention can include structured therapy and educational programmes as well as unstructured enriching activities (IAHAIO, 2013, O’Haire et al, 2015). A survey of studies by O’Haire et al (2015) showed that animal-assisted intervention is a developing field of research across disciplines and countries. It usually complements other service delivery and often involves dogs or horses but can include other farm animals, including cats and guinea pigs. Activities may vary, according to the animal, and staff often have different forms of training (both human and animal-focussed). Programmes typically operate over a one to 12-week period and include individual sessions, group sessions (6-10 participants), and a combination of both. This review highlighted a range of benefits including increased emotional wellbeing, improved coping skills, and enhanced relationships. More research is needed to assess outcomes but preliminary investigations suggest these benefits are due to the reduction of certain factors such as problem behaviours, anxiety, depression, isolation or loneliness, especially among those who have experienced trauma (such as family violence or abuse) and post-traumatic stress.

Burgon (2011) notes that animals have long been recognised for their therapeutic and educational values and historically horses in particular were recognised as “healing agents” (p. 167). Horses are seen as having unique qualities because of their large size and power as well as their vulnerability. Horse-assisted learning programmes developed more recently to provide opportunities for learning new forms of behaviour. Programmes may have particular orientations but many have similar elements. She cites studies that show the benefits of horse-assisted learning especially for youth who encounter considerable life challenges. Her own study suggests that horse-assisted learning can enable youth to gain strengths and resources that foster protective factors (such as self-belief, self-confidence, self-esteem, a sense of mastery from successfully overcoming challenges, social skills, an empathy for others) that in turn promote resilience and open up positive opportunities and outcomes.





Looking Ahead

Our animal-assisted learning programme has been operating successfully for well over a decade and we want to ensure its sustainability, to keep touching the lives of tamariki, their whānau and our community.

We depend on staff and committed volunteers to run our programme, but we also need keen supporters, generous donors and philanthropic funding to keep it going. People, groups and organisations can:

- Contribute to our programme costs;
- Sponsor a pony or fund horse equipment;
- Help us to pay veterinary, farrier and equine dentist bills
- Make a donation towards improved facilities;
- Organise a working bee to help maintain fencing;
- Or suggest an idea – we're open to offers!

Our aim is to keep delivering the best quality programme we can.

We warmly acknowledge and thank our supporters:

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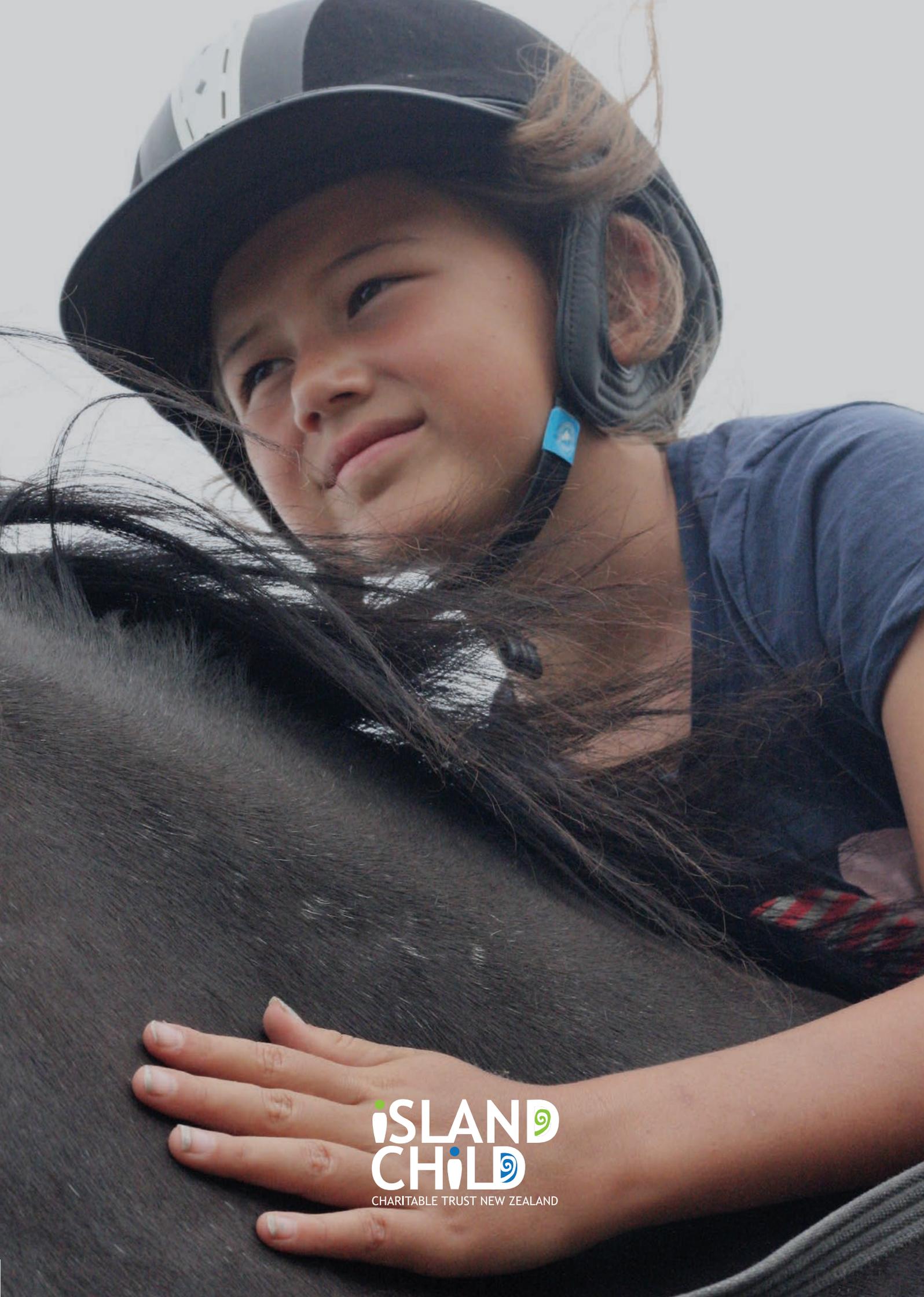
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ABOUT THIS STORY

Dr Frances Hancock, the author, specialises in innovative practice, relational ethics and community storytelling. Photography by Rebecca Harrington. Design and layout by Creative Sauce Ltd.



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