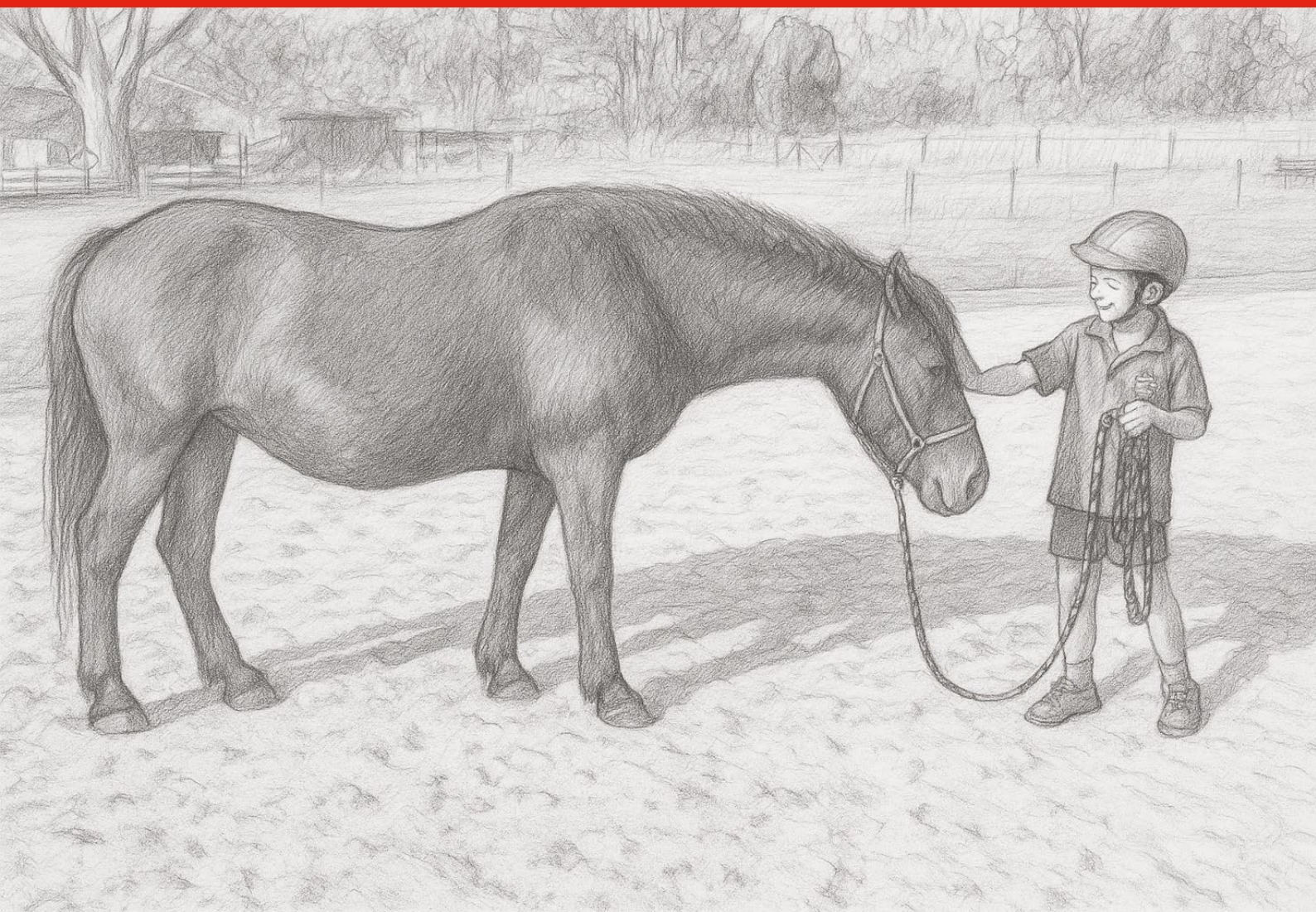
Learning With Horses: An Evaluation of Equine-Facilitated Learning with Inspire Connections

Summary Report

Dec 2025 | Prepared by: Dr Megan Lang

Prepared for: Inspire Connections



Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Pakana and Palawa people of lutruwita, the traditional owners of the land upon which we live and work.

We pay respects to Elders past and present as the knowledge holders and sharers. We honour their strong culture and knowledges as vital to the self-determination, wellbeing and resilience of their communities.

We stand for a future that profoundly respects and acknowledges Aboriginal perspectives, culture, language and history.

Acknowledgements

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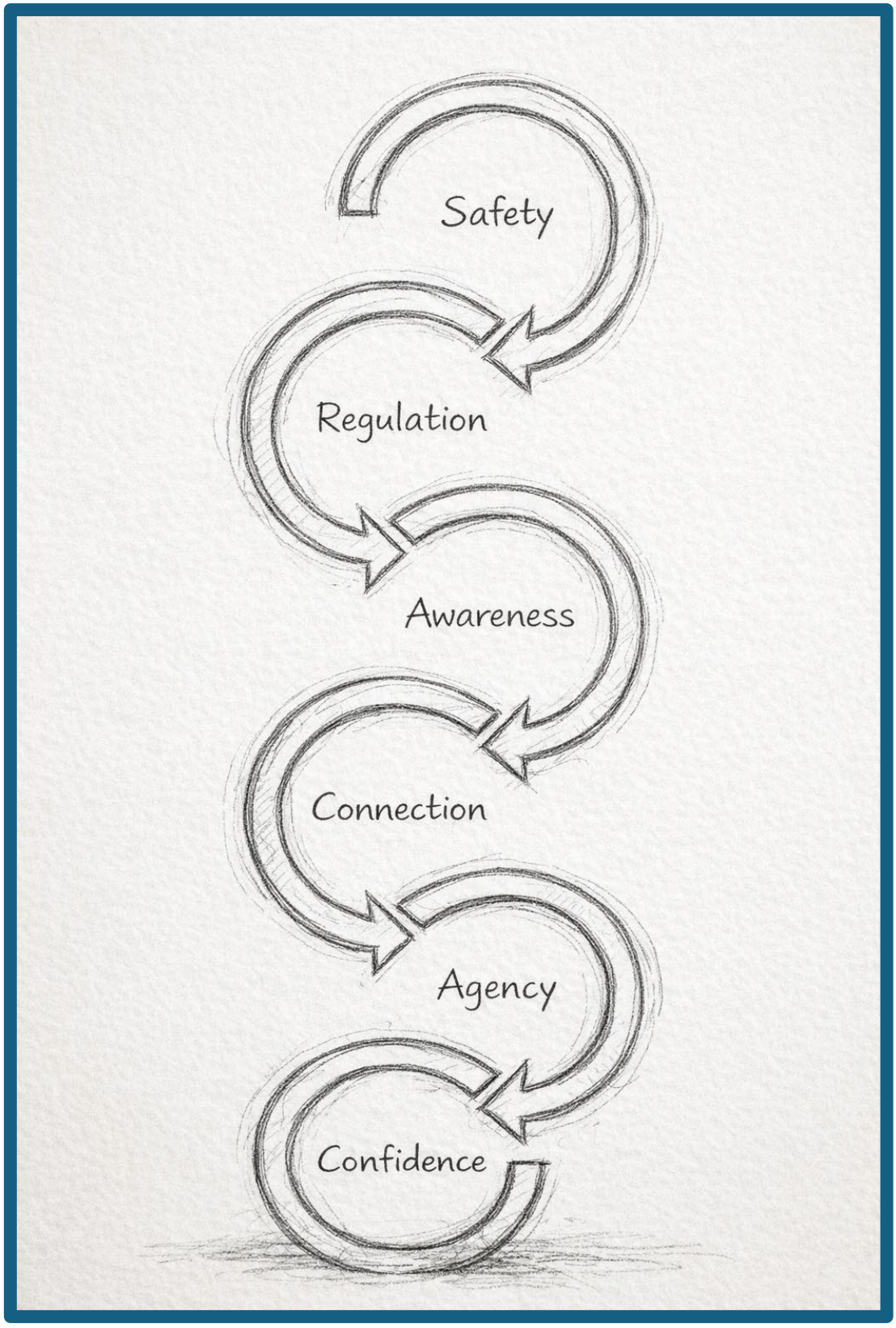
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Safety
Regulation
Awareness
Connection
Agency
Confidence

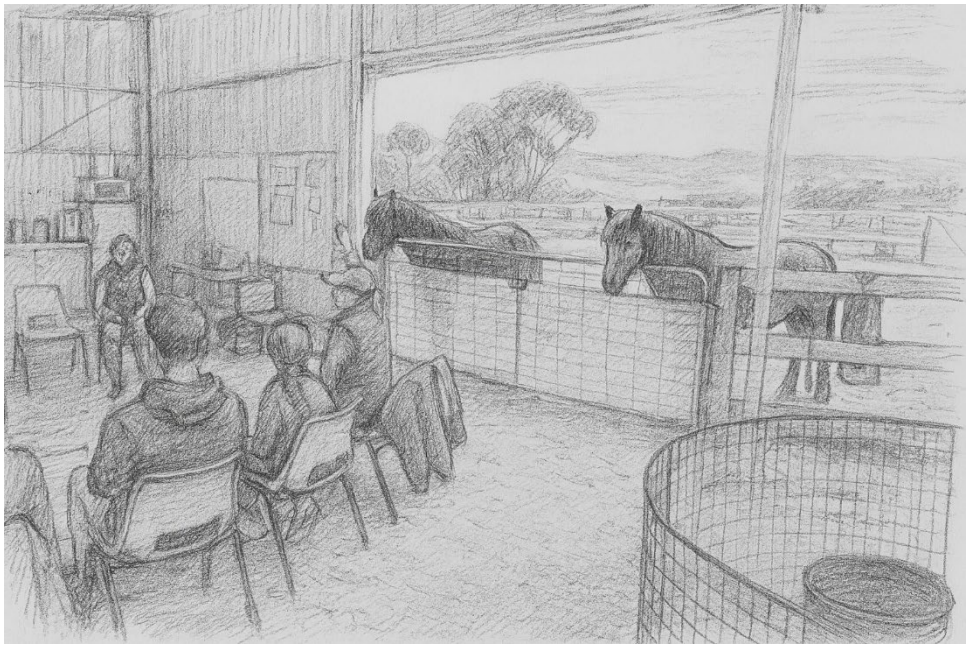
Introduction

Children who experience anxiety, dysregulation, or difficulties engaging in school often benefit from learning environments that prioritise safety, regulation, and relational connection. Equine-facilitated learning (EFL) provides a distinctive, evidence-informed approach by combining embodied experience, non-verbal feedback, and relational learning in a calm, sensory-rich setting.

Inspire Connections provides EFL programs for school-aged children. The programs are designed and delivered by an experienced educator to nurture the development of transferable skills centred around principles of safety, agency, and relational attunement. Through structured interaction with horses on the ground (no riding), children are supported to notice their internal states, regulate their behaviour, and build confidence through meaningful, supported challenges.

This summary report provides a brief overview of findings from an independent evaluation conducted by the University of Tasmania. The full report offers detailed insights into the research, which included child-centred workshops, interviews with school staff and EFL team members, team debrief reflections, and children's written reflections. The evaluation explored how Inspire Connections supports children's emotional, behavioural, and relational development, and identified the mechanisms that contribute to positive change. See the full report for more information.

The findings show that Inspire Connections creates a highly engaging learning environment in which children experience themselves as calm, capable, and connected. Across the eight-week program, children demonstrated strong emotional regulation, increased confidence, respectful relationships, and sustained engagement. These outcomes position Inspire Connections as a high-value program for supporting children, and particularly those who face barriers to participation and wellbeing in traditional school settings.



Participation and analysis

The evaluation involved 16 children in Grades 3–7 from three regional Tasmanian schools who participated in eight-week Inspire Connections programs. Children contributed to the research through child-centred workshops, conversations, written reflections, and creative activities designed to support inclusive participation. Perspectives from two accompanying school staff members and three experienced EFL team members were gathered through interviews and session debriefs. Data were analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach, with findings triangulated across children's accounts, adult observations, and program documentation to identify consistent patterns, mechanisms of change, and contextual influences.

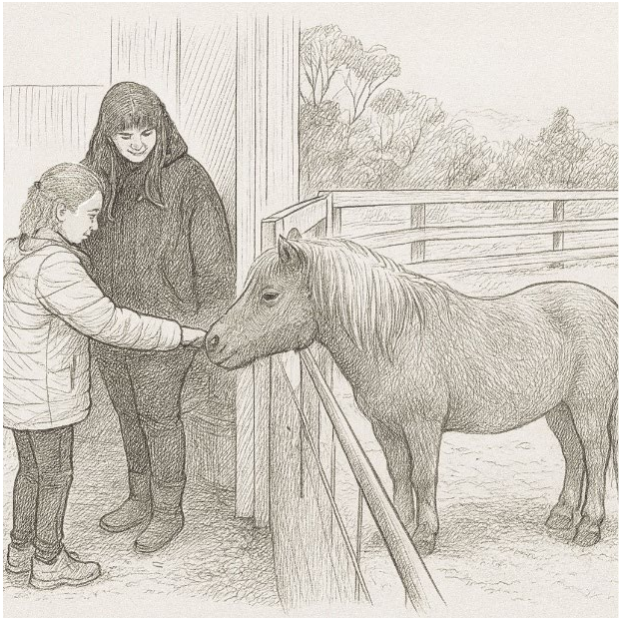
Summary of findings

The evaluation found that Inspire Connections creates a highly effective learning environment for children who experience anxiety, dysregulation, or difficulty engaging in school. Across the eight-week program, children consistently demonstrated emotional calmness, behavioural regulation, increased confidence, and strong relational engagement. These outcomes emerged from the alignment of program design elements rather than from isolated activities.

A learning environment that enables regulation

A clear and consistent focus on safety was evident in all aspects of the program. Safety agreements, predictable routines, and close adult supervision created both physical and emotional security. Children quickly internalised safety expectations and articulated them spontaneously, indicating deep understanding rather than surface compliance. Importantly, safety was not experienced as restrictive, but as enabling. Children willingly wore helmets and followed other safety procedures, and described how their confidence grew once they understood how to act appropriately around the horses.

The program operated at a deliberate pace, allowing children time to arrive, observe, and regulate before engaging. Children were encouraged to notice their internal states and decide when they were ready to approach the horses. This pacing supported self-regulation in a practical, embodied way. Children frequently chose to pause or step back independently, and these choices were respected and validated by the EFL team. As a result, regulation was positioned as a prerequisite for participation rather than an abstract goal.



Strong emotional effects

Children consistently reported feeling calmer, happier, and more relaxed in the equine environment. Deliberately scheduled check-ins at the beginning of every session showed that children arriving with heightened emotions were quickly able to self-regulate once sessions began. Many children attributed this shift directly to the presence of the horses, noting that seeing or being near them had a noticeable, positive effect.

Experiences of calm were often described as pleasant and effortless, and were sustained throughout sessions. Adults, including school staff and EFL team members, reported similar effects, describing the environment as grounding and emotionally settling. Children also reported that thinking about the horses outside of sessions could evoke feelings of calm, suggesting enduring emotional resonance.

Confidence through supported challenge

Many children identified initially feeling unsure around the horses. With deliberate pacing and scaffolding of safety, children were supported to find their own readiness to interact with the horses. This progression occurred gradually and on the children's own terms, moving from observation to saying hello, brushing, leading, or other forms of engagement. This process was frequently described by children as a meaningful achievement and a source of pride.

Children's confidence extended beyond interactions with the horses. School staff observed that children who were typically reluctant or hesitant at school showed increased willingness to engage, communicate, and take risks within the program. Children themselves identified confidence as a key outcome, describing the experience as helping them realise that they "could do it".



Behavioural regulation

A consistent pattern of behavioural regulation was evident across sessions. Children who had challenges regulating at school demonstrated calm, careful, and attentive behaviour at Inspire Connections. School staff repeatedly commented on the contrast between children's behaviour in the equine setting and in the classroom.

Children did not describe regulation as effortful. Instead, they explained that being calm felt natural and necessary for interacting safely with the horses. They articulated clear links between their behaviour and successful engagement, noting that quiet bodies, slow movements, and awareness of others helped the horses feel safe. Children recognised and valued their own regulated behaviour, often commenting on it explicitly.

Supplementary activities, including percussion instruments, clay, and craft along with the intentional program structure of mindful observation, movement, and quiet reflection, all functioned as co-regulatory supports, offering multiple pathways for children to engage. The combination of meaningful motivation, sensory coherence, and choice contributed to sustained regulation throughout sessions.

Relationships and relational learning

The program fostered strong, respectful relationships between children, horses, and adults. EFL team members modelled calm, patient, and non-judgemental interactions, responding and adjusting with flexibility to the individual needs of the children in each group. Children described adults as supportive and respectful, noting that guidance was given in a gentle, positive manner.

Relationships with the horses were particularly powerful. Children described feeling noticed, welcomed, and recognised by the horses, often interpreting attention through observable cues such as ear position or movement. These experiences were emotionally significant and frequently referenced as highlights of the program.

Importantly, horses did not always respond as expected. Their interactions were influenced by many factors, including the environment, and they responded to the ways in which children presented in the moment. While this sometimes resulted in a horse avoiding contact, children learned to notice and interpret this feedback, adjust their behaviour, and try again. These interactions supported empathy, perspective-taking, and reflection in ways that felt authentic, non-judgemental, and empowering.



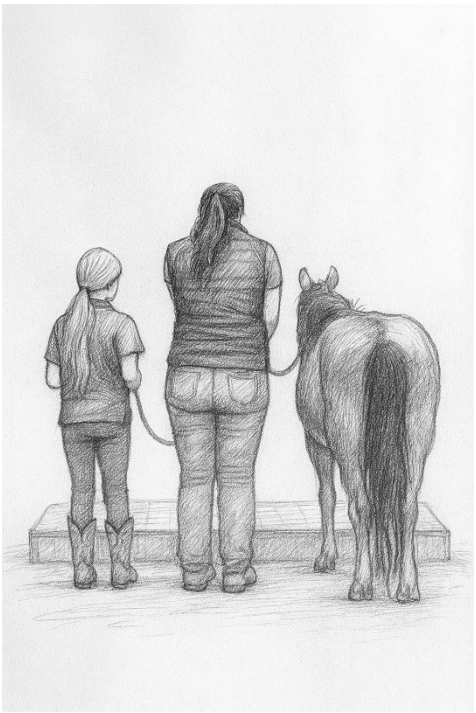
Agency and self-direction

Agency was a core feature of the program and a key mechanism of impact. Children were encouraged to make decisions about how and when to participate. This autonomy reduced pressure and supported emotional regulation. Children who initially chose not to approach the horses typically did so later, once they felt ready.

Adults described the importance of creating conditions where engagement could emerge naturally. This approach resulted in increased participation, confidence, and communication over time. Children demonstrated growing awareness of their needs and strategies, articulating when to step away, slow down, or change activities.

Sustained engagement and attachment

Engagement with the program was exceptionally high. Most children attended all sessions and expressed strong anticipation between visits. Children described the program as something to look forward to during the school week, particularly when school felt difficult.



Nearly three months after the program concluded, children retained detailed knowledge about safety, horses, and activities, and continued to speak positively about their experiences. They recalled horses by name and described specific interactions, indicating that learning and emotional connections were durable.

The distinctive role of horses

All participants identified the horses as central to the program's impact. The evaluation suggests that the "specialness" of horses arises from a combination of factors: their size and presence, their sensitivity to human emotion, their readable body language, and their conditional responses. Horses provided immediate, authentic and non-judgemental feedback that children could interpret.

The interactions between children and horses invited co-regulation by encouraging them to practise awareness and calm, predictable behaviour. The potential for children to feel challenged or unsure made successful interactions meaningful. Children experienced acceptance and connection that felt earned rather than automatic, contributing to a strong sense of capability and trust.

Conclusion

The findings show that Inspire Connections creates a distinctive relational learning environment in which children experience themselves as calm, capable, and connected. The program supports emotional regulation, confidence, respectful relationships, and sustained engagement through the intentional alignment of safety, pacing, agency, adult attunement, and the unique relational qualities of horses.

These outcomes position Inspire Connections as a high-impact, evidence-informed program for children, particularly those who face barriers to participation and wellbeing in traditional learning environments.

Why horses?

Authentic, immediate, non-judgemental

Readable body language



Responsive, attuned, awareness

Regulating, calm, presence

Big, powerful, challenging

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