Introduction

As previously described, a major theme running throughout the research study, related to both the young people and the adults, was based around the words ‘calm’ and ‘relaxed’. For the young people this seemed most strongly linked to the horses; for the adults, references to being in nature also featured quite strongly. The themes of being in nature and relaxing with the horses has links to the nature therapy literature (Berger & McLeod, 2006; Coleman, 2006; Peacock, Hind & Petty, 2007), and this is addressed in more depth later in this chapter, together with other suggested benefits from being in the natural environment with horses, such as the learning and physical benefits. First this chapter looks at how both being with horses and being in nature can perhaps bring people closer to experiencing what is described as mindfulness, in the modern Western concept of the practice. This is illustrated through examples from the data which show how the young people were able to adapt their behaviour, which sometimes appeared risky, and demonstrated an unawareness of their actions, in order to have effective relationships and experiences with the horses. To do this, the young people needed to become more aware of their body language and how their emotions and feelings affected the horses, whilst at the same time being relaxed and focused – similar principles to those described in some of the mindfulness literature.

Mindfulness, child psychotherapy and TH

Mindfulness within Western health models has evolved from ancient meditative traditions and has its roots in Buddhism. In its simplest
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definition it is the practice of relaxed concentration in the present moment, as opposed to ruminating on past events or being preoccupied with the future (Biegel et al., 2009; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Moss, Waugh & Barnes, 2008). Mindfulness is suggested as being a method of observing ‘what is happening right now, in our bodies, minds and the world around us’ (Halliwell, 2010: 16).

Being safe and developing a successful partnership with horses requires being in the ‘here and now’, relaxed concentration and attention to body awareness. This is because the horse is constantly looking for direction from its handler/rider through its own means of communication, which is a keen awareness of body language and physiology due to millennia of being a prey animal. If the handler is distracted and not aware and present, the horse will quickly respond by taking control of the situation as it will feel unsafe. The sociologist Game, in describing riding, suggests that what is required is

relaxed concentration, a very focused and meditative state. Maintaining connection and rhythm doesn’t work through the exercise of will power, but requires a mindfully embodied way of being.

(Game, 2001: 8)

Germer (2005) describes the opposite of mindfulness as ‘mindlessness’ and gives examples of this as including rushing through activities, carelessness, being unaware of tension and a preoccupation with the future or past. The young people referred to The Yard would frequently arrive in either a hyperactive state or, alternatively, rather distant and withdrawn and often unaware of how their behaviour affected the horses. Their social workers and carers informed us that many of the participants could become stuck on past events in their lives, either repeatedly going over these events or acting out behaviours. Emma’s mother, Linda, explained that Emma had a Statement of SEN and a one-to-one teaching assistant due to her difficult behaviour at school. She went on: ‘Yeah, you know, she’d go off or, you know, there has been quite a lot of time with [Emma] thinking of the past.’ By being with the horses it was found that the young people would become more focused, attentive and aware of their body language, and, in turn, be able adapt this in order to have effective relationships with the horses. As many of the young people, like Emma, who attended The Yard found it difficult to engage in traditional educational and therapeutic approaches, it may be that EAT/L and TH practices, which naturally incorporate many techniques and practices in working with horses which parallel mindfulness practices, such