

Can nature heal children's emotional problems?

Tish Feilden and **Ruth Carney**, who work at Jamie's Farm – a charity offering problem students a week-long stay on a working farm – believe it can.

Jamie Feilden, a history teacher at a Croydon school, brought two sheep into school from his farm to keep in a playground pen. He was amazed by how immediately the children took to the responsibility of caring for the animals – and how much they enjoyed it. Break time fights all but stopped. Enthused, Jamie started taking school trips to his farm - and began to believe that nature can heal children's emotional problems.

In 2008, he set up 'Jamie's farm' – a charity offering residential, week-long visits to his farm for ten children with particular challenges from one school at a time. Jamie believes he was privileged to grow up in the countryside. By giving inner city children a short experience of life on a working farm, he believes he can give them a lifelong taste for getting outdoors and bonding with animals.

Jamie's Farm caters to young people in mainstream schools and Pupil Referral Units. Its small staff team don't just teach the children farm skills, art therapy and discipline. They offer a friendly ear - and take a psychotherapeutic approach to helping the children change their outlook.

Early intervention

Thousands of children are failing to thrive in large and sometimes faceless inner city comprehensives. In 2007, 8,680 pupils were permanently excluded from school. In 2009, the National Behaviour and Attendance Review revealed that each exclusion cost society about £300,000.



Exclusion can cause a sense of long-term failure and marginalisation, causing a high risk of criminalisation and dysfunctional relationships in adulthood.

At Jamie's Farm, we aim to prevent this downward spiral with an intense, short-term intervention. This experience can be a catalyst for change and a systemic shift for the children, or 'guests'.

Jamie's Farm has supported 350 young people to date. By providing a unique programme of on site and follow up support, we try to re-engage children with school.

As Kirsten, a year nine visitor, explained: "You can't be aggressive to a sheep".

Christian, a year ten visitor, said: "Being in the country, you don't have to watch your back... I don't have to worry about being about getting stabbed or shot or robbed. I can just relax."

Our guests

Many of the children we work with have been through huge upheaval in their relationships. Some have lost parents and



have been in foster homes. Many come from new immigrant families. Some are asylum seekers with traumatic histories.

Some live with little adult supervision at home. Some carry huge responsibility as carers for lone parents. Others have parents involved in drug abuse and criminal activity. Whatever their experiences, the children all find integrating into school culture difficult.

Jamie's Farm chooses a school, where the school staff refer about 10 young people to us. Two or three teachers become our visitors for the week, too. At the farm, we try to avoid the pollution of negative expectations - we only ask the teachers for information about the children's home lives if a child is particularly vulnerable and we need to be sensitive.

With therapeutic guidance, the teachers can relate to the children better when back in school and become their advocate - championing the child to other staff and explaining the issues they are facing.

One teacher said, after a week on the farm: "You not only inspired the kids, but created some significant shifts in the adults' understanding of themselves and the work they do".

Some children have florid symptoms of distress and are known as angry and difficult, defensive, blocked and hiding. For these children, a week at the farm is pivotal - allowing them to renew their connection with aspiration and success.

The Jamie's Farm formula

The Jamie's Farm formula combines three principles: family, farming and therapy. The human brain is constantly searching for optimum functioning. Children's brains are particularly malleable. An intensive experience like a week on a farm can create optimum states the brain will remember forever and strive to recreate.

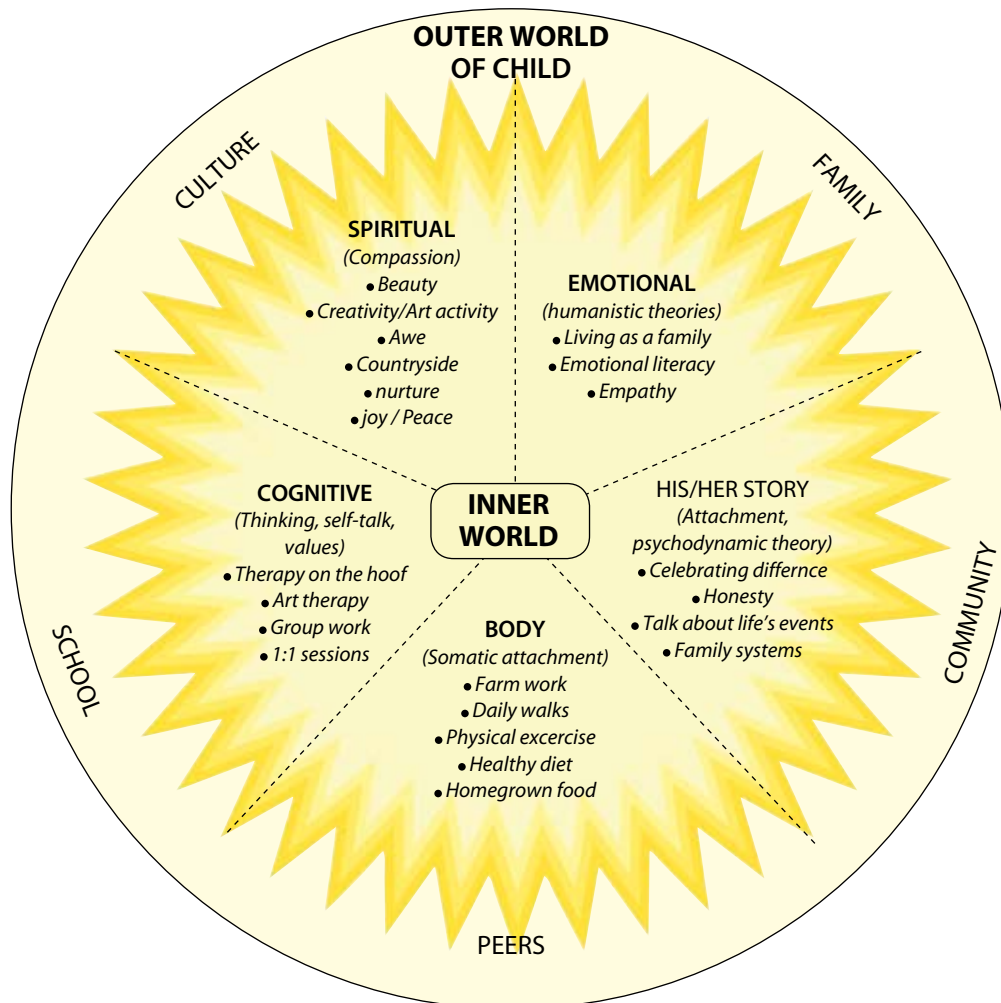
Staying on our family farm, in a beautiful, calm, rural setting, we allow children to take a break from the hyper alert state of fight/flight city living. We create a family - where children feel loved and appreciated.

By offering farming experiences and creative play, coupled with therapeutic relationships, we allow children to thrive. Individually, children unpack some of the history of their difficulties and face their realities. In the group, they develop a dialogue of mutual support and appreciation.

Methodology

Our philosophy embraces a range of therapeutic approaches. The children we work with come from such diverse backgrounds and cultures that we have to respond to them all individually.

At the same time, our trained teachers and psychotherapists share coherent values. We believe children are inherently good, but that life experiences can lead to negative, defensive patterns. We believe trust and openness lead to awareness and understanding that liberate a child to make healthier choices.



We avoid pathologising children. Instead, we focus on successes (which come gratifyingly easily through physical farm work) and building emotional resilience. Children thrive on praise, but they also need to trust and respect where it comes from.

Our model of the child is integrative. As Carl Rogers describes (1980), we work with the core conditions of a therapeutic relationship of unconditional positive regard, genuineness and empathetic understanding.

Additionally, we integrate attachment theory and child development studies (Bowlby, 1951 and Winnicott, 1958). We believe that a child's early relationships affect their ability to sustain trusting, fruitful relationships throughout life. Most of the children we work with are not so severely damaged that they cannot manage normal school life. But many require additional nurturing to access what secondary school can offer. In James Wetz's study on the 'Urban Village School', he describes the importance of building relationships with children to help them thrive in the transition to secondary school.

In our intervention work, we also understand that

- Some children respond better to cognitive behavioural intervention than others. We help children understand where their anger and low moods come from, and develop strategies to deal with them.
- Physical symptoms children present may be an expression of emotional difficulty. We encourage empathy, curiosity and care to prevent somatic defences.
- Children affected by hyperactivity need help to self-regulate their choices of food and activity. Esteem building is required to help them recover from the effect their behaviour has had on those around them.
- Re-engagement back at home is key. Family systems theory (Anderson and Sabatelli 1999) tells us that children can enter new systems, such as Jamie's Farm, and transform themselves. In re-entering family systems, something will have shifted - and relationships can improve as a result.

Therapy on the hoof

By working alongside children in the art room, on the farm, in the vegetable garden or on a long walk, we create plenty of opportunities for one to one informal dialogue. Tish Feilden, the farm's therapy coordinator, calls this the 'therapy on the hoof' model - which is casual, but requires boundaries and confidentiality.

In spontaneous chats, children can open up and reveal themselves. They can discuss their vulnerability, family story and difficulties. In the group, Tish often reminds the children that it is not what happens to you that counts - it is how you deal with it. Intertwined with energetic days' work, the children learn how to handle conflict, assert themselves, make relationships, deal with frustrations and enjoy being young. Because the staff are self-aware and open, the children can be authentic. We encourage celebrating the children's backgrounds, as well as mourning the loss of family and community.

Community values

We have a committed, close community of staff who both multi-task and specialise. We value country life, but have all travelled widely and respect different cultures and values. We try to give our staff opportunities for self-development and help them to deal with the effects of working with vulnerable children. We value frank discussion and dispute with reparation.

The culture we create is based on family values and community. Children are welcomed as guests in a home full of family pictures and colourful and informal art. For some of them, this is their first trip away from home - and it is in no way an institution or youth hostel.

At our first meeting, we invite the children to experiment with a time without television, MP3 players and mobile phones. We explain that phones can be a connection to friends and family - but also a constant distraction. Here, they will enjoy a week of calm, peace and fun and leave the worries of home, gangs and school behind. We ask them to hand in sweets and fizzy drinks and try healthy eating as an experiment - to see if they feel any difference in their energy levels and concentration.

Case Study: Billy (14)

On arrival, Billy's excitement hides his nervousness. He is agitated - not just because of the fizzy drinks and sweets he ate on the journey here.

This 'whirling dervish' act is a defence. He seems to collide with the staff and children, creating an external chaos to mirror his inner world. He keeps his greetings brief - to conceal his inner feelings and avoid the intimacy of relationships.

Billy's group of 10 children, from year eight, nine and ten at an inner city comprehensive, are visiting with a year head, a teaching assistant and a teacher. The adults are surprised at the children's 'instantaneous' transformation into listening, respectful and thoughtful young people.

Billy insists he needs to phone his dad. His teacher reassures him that parents know there will be no contact unless there is an emergency. A staff member tells Billy how hard it is to trust, and insists that his family will be okay without him. Billy shrugs, but stops complaining.

The staff set a welcoming tone from the beginning. The first challenge is: 'Please introduce someone in the group - but we are only interested in what you like about this person'. From the offset, this is a new beginning - a chance for the children to recreate themselves. The children can leave their baggage, with their mobiles, back in the city.

After greetings, we go for a walk to orientate the children - to show the farm and allow one to one questions. Billy runs, plays hide and seek and drops his disruptive defences. He reveals an enthusiastic, energetic spirit revelling in space and freedom.

The daily long walk allows time and space for casual conversations and mixed meeting. Children reveal themselves and gravitate towards the adults they find safe. There is a chance for serious talk and frivolity, falling in the mud and playing tag in the fresh air. Once in a while, a child remarks on how

beautiful the countryside is. Already, Billy is revealing a side of himself he finds impossible to express at school or home.

Every day, a shared supper, which all the children help prepare, is followed by bedtime. Two or three children share a room. At 8am, they rise to feed the animals before a big cooked breakfast.

Billy chooses to bring in the sheep - an activity that requires everyone to work as a team. Billy struggles to do as he is asked but, with support, understands that his energy can make a positive contribution. In the afternoon, he chooses to spend time in the art room.

But a few days in, disappointed with his screen-printing, Billy kicks off saying: "This is crap".

Tish takes Billy out for a walk to bring the horse in to paddock. She asks him: "Is the screen-print crap? Or do you feel like crap when things go wrong?"

Billy talks about his family - his mother has left him, and he's sure it's because he is unlovable. Billy and his step dad do

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their best to keep the semblance of a family, struggling for his little sister.

Billy is protective, but also angry – and there’s no one strong enough in his family to tell. Billy is vacillating between tears and rage, kicking the ground and looking for distractions. But Tish reminds him that he is safe and can be truthful out in the fields.

Tish explains that she understands how hard it is to feel deserted. She comments that maybe he tests those around him - particularly teachers who care for him - to see if they will leave him too? She also suggests that he disguises his sadness with anger.

Billy mellows. His body takes a new, softer shape. Tish tells him that, despite his difficulties, he can be charming, funny, intelligent and popular with children and adults. They discuss that he needs to stop sabotaging these good moments, find out where his support systems are and remember that he has the power to change his life. They return with the horse, and go back to the house to prepare supper.

That evening, the group celebrates the children’s accomplishments so far and invites them to set an ambition for the week. What qualities do they want to leave with, that will make their lives better? All the staff members are moved by the children’s honesty – they admit “I need confidence”, “I get really angry, then I can’t think straight”, “I do want to be nice to people” and “I can never stick to one thing”. The children are on their way - they have set their own agendas, and the staff will support them.

That week, Billy learned to ride a horse, herd the cows, muck out pigs, tend chicks, play with dogs, walk

long distances, swim in the river and fall in the mud. He left with a real sense of achievement. His need for adrenaline had been channelled into safe expressions.

He returned to school at the end of January, and received a lot of support from his head of year - who had previously only known him for his truancy and behaviour. Billy decided to volunteer at the youth club near his school, and this year he has taken on greater responsibility there.

When we visited Billy, he was proud to tell us he has joined an outdoor pursuits club - to continue the passion for the outdoors he developed at the farm. Billy said simply of the farm: “I learned different ways to behave”.

His head of year said: “Billy still has difficulties. He gets angry, and he keeps his tutor at arm’s length. But there are adults he trusts. If you’d asked me a year ago if he’d still be in school now, I wouldn’t have been sure. But he’s definitely not at risk of exclusion any more.”

Case study: Jessica (14)

Jessica was in year ten, visiting Jamie’s farm from a Pupil Referral Unit after getting excluded from three local schools. We knew Jessica had self respect issues rooted in a history of abuse, resulting in confusion between her childhood and adult self.

Jessica was at Jamie’s farm for five days. The staff noted that she was acting her age unselfconsciously, making appropriate contact with her peers and building self respect. Jessica worked the hardest of all the guests and was the most thorough in her chores.

After the week, when Ruth, the farm’s chief operating officer, visited Jessica’s Pupil Referral Unit, Jessica was not there. She had found herself a full time college course.

Her carer said: “A lot has stuck with her. She’s eating better, so she’s healthier, and she’s calmed down a lot at home. The farm was an important experience, at an important time for her.”

Sustained impact

At Jamie’s farm, we record our guests’ progress over several years.

In the months following the visit, teachers report that

- 83% of school 'refusers' have reduced truancy
- 94% of children show increased motivation to learn on return to school
- 90% of children show improved engagement with school

Our evaluation, linked to the Every Child Matters agenda and Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning, shows a 25% overall increase in each child's soft skills in

- 'focus and concentration'
- 'ability to learn new skills'
- 'ability to cope in difficult situations'
- 'ability to respect and empathise with others'
- 'relationships with adults/peers'

As Billy's case shows, the biggest successes can happen when young people realise that support already exists, but was invisible to them before.

One year after the intervention, 68% of Jamie's Farm visitors who were at risk of exclusion at the point of referral are no longer so, and 82% have maintained a decrease in behavioural incidents.

Tish Feilden is a therapy co-ordinator at Jamie's Farm. She is a UKCP registered psychotherapist with over 30 years' experience working with children in schools, residential settings, clinical settings and the community. She also trains counsellors, psychotherapists and teachers for school counselling services. Ruth Carney is

the chief operating officer of Jamie's Farm. She taught RE and Citizenship at Cranford Community College, Hounslow, and was the participant president of Teach First. She is completing a Master's in educational studies at Canterbury Christ Church University.

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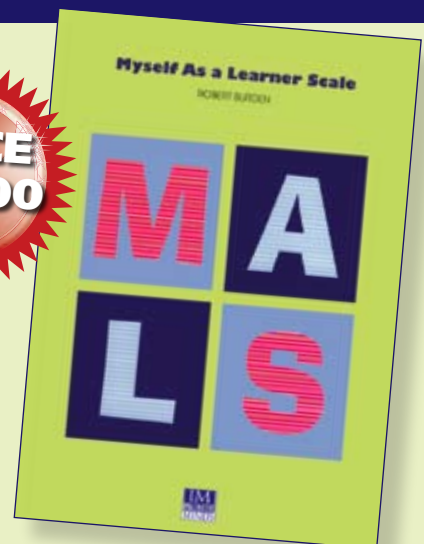
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Robert Burden is Professor of Applied Educational Psychology and former Head of the School of Education at Exeter University.

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