

Whisperer's lessons for kids



► **NOT JUST HORISING AROUND:** Wellington horse whisperer Andrew Froggatt helps kids learn empathy through horses at Epuni Care and Protection Centre. Because these children are vulnerable, their privacy has to be protected and *Hutt News* cannot identify them.

BY PRIYANKA BHONSULE

A HUSHED atmosphere envelops Epuni Care and Protection Centre, one heightened by grey clouds and the threat of rain, when *Hutt News* visits. There are high metal fences, locked entry and exits - a gated community.

But a short walk leads to a lush, green paddock around the back, where today there are horses grazing.

Andrew Froggatt and his team of helpers and horses have come to share the 'Seven Secrets of the Horse Whisperer' with vulnerable kids at this centre.

The young people, aged between nine and 16, are clearly excited. Some are

nervous to be around big animals; some can't wait to have a go on their own.

First Andrew has a few techniques to share with the group - and none involve actually whispering into a horse's ear.

Having worked with horses written off as 'untrainable' by others, Andrew has 15 years' experience taming the wild and stubborn ones.

"They're a bit like people, you have to tell them they're doing a good job, give them praise," he says.

"But they also have to learn who's boss, and learn respect."

He demonstrates by making his horse, Brave, gallop around in circles then stop in the middle of his tracks by just raising one hand.

"Mean bro!" comes the exclamations from

young males in the Epuni group.

It's like when you're walking down the street, says Andrew, and you see someone coming your way and you think 'Shit, I better move out of the way for this person'.

"That's what a horse has to learn as well, about you."

The kids are clearly impressed by Andrew's control over the horse ("That's awesome!") and he soon hands over the reins to anyone interested (and not scared).

Brave gets a bit of a rest as a dozen kids put into practice what Andrew has taught them with chestnut-coloured Irish hunters, Luka and Mickey.

A young girl gets the hang of it straight away, making her horse stop and start walking at her hand commands.

"It was so cool!" she says, breathless after running the horse around the paddock before handing him over to another eager boy. "I want to ride one, but I don't think we're allowed."

An autistic boy who has been afraid of animals of all shapes and sizes his whole life

pats a horse without even flinching.

All this frolicking around with horses has a purpose.

It's called Animal Assisted Therapy, a programme run jointly by Child, Youth and Family and SPCA.

Residence manager Ross Barber says the SPCA brings in animals once a week, and has done so for the past 18 months.

"Dogs are frequent visitors and a favourite with the children. "Some of these kids have come from families where cruelty to animals was OK. These visits are important because they learn about empathy towards animals, which in turn teaches them empathy towards humans."

He says since the SPCA visits have started, violent incidents in the residence have gone down 30 percent, which is a huge improvement.

At the end of this month's special session with the horses, there are smiles all around and Andrew says he came away with some good vibes.

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