



LLAMA DEARA RANCH

## RESEARCH PROPOSAL ON EMPATHY-BUILDING IN CHILDREN, AGES 8-11

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### *General Information*

**Research Premise:** That the company of other species can help children learn to empathize with others and themselves, to understand subtle feelings in others and in themselves, and to develop a welcoming attitude toward differences and diversity, thereby enlarging their view of the world.

**Rationale:** This proposal is based on complex systems theory and the practice of family systems therapy and integrative child counseling, using other species as collaborators. Hannah-Leigh Bull is also planning a qualitative research project on the development of empathy and self-esteem in her elementary school students, Grades 4-5, as part of the Social and Emotional Learning Program at Rio Grande School (RGS) in the coming winter and spring trimesters. This program will incorporate field trips to Llama Deara Ranch (LDR), which Hannah-Leigh directs; there the children will experience farm life and connections with other animal species, plants, and nature. The project will also include specific in-classroom activities and discussions before and after the learning experiences at the farm.

The intent of this program is to help children and their families cultivate caring attitudes and actions toward others and the natural world, and through extension, learn about care and nurturing of self and others.

This proposal is based on theory, research, and practice. The results of this research project will be documented, presented at the American Counseling Association convention, or both.

**Measures:** Although this research project will be qualitative in nature, students will fill out an appropriate empathy measure at the beginning of the empathy-building program and one at the end, so that a quantitative assessment can be made. Hannah-Leigh is still researching the best measures to use.

**Students:** Boys and girls, Grades 4 and 5, mostly ages 8-11.

**Format:** Study and learning will be divided between RGS campus work, and two half-day programs for each grade. RGS work will involve in-classroom work on

1. Recognition of inner feelings within self
2. Interpersonal perception and self-awareness
3. Modeling of empathetic behavior
4. Empathetic responding to self and others
5. Practice in intentional dialog with others (mirroring, validation, and empathy)
6. Focus on similarities between self and others
7. Role-taking or role-playing
8. Ongoing practice in imagining and perceiving another's perspective
9. Study of and reading on famous empathetic people, such as MLK, Gandhi, Mother Teresa
10. Beginning integration of the traits of mature empathetic orientation:
  - Sensitivity to another's distress
  - Respect for each other's right to be understood on his or her own terms
  - Reluctance to all-good or all-bad conceptualizations of individuals
  - Comfort with the gray in-between state that characterizes most lives

LDR workshops are described in the following pages.

**Purpose:** Many of the behavior challenges we now face in our society stem from a lack of respect and empathy for self and others. The classroom work and LDR programs will use both didactic and experiential formats that allow the students to continue to get to know themselves through working with each other, and the animals, plants, and earth at Llama Deara. RGS and LDR activities will build cooperation, empathy, and a sense of self worth. The project is twofold:

1. Build empathy for self and others in the students.
2. Document and present the results of the project both within the RGS community and without.

**Philosophy:** LDR's approach to education is integrative, addressing the whole person, in his or her physical, mental, emotional, social, spiritual and ethical aspects. The following practical guidelines apply:

1. Change is manifested over time, with hundreds of experiences of being recognized and respected by self, others, and especially by grounded, mature, and fun adults.
2. Quick fixes are not anticipated.
3. The program is committed to the self-care and growth of emotional awareness of each student and the participating staff.
4. The subjects covered, such as nature, animal husbandry, physics, and art, may be resisted or not, and the seeds can also be planted to grow in the students when appropriate.
5. The agenda at LDR is fluid and expands with the workshop participants.
6. The integration of parents in the overall learning process is desirable.

**Didactic Syllabi:** The syllabus on didactic discussions, such as animal and human violence, will be available once the program is set.

**LDR Staff:** Primarily Hannah-Leigh Bull, with perhaps a ranch helper to aid in activities. If further workshops were desired, other professionals would participate, such as a scientist, for a physics and nature module. Parent participation is desirable and possible, given that some may be at the ranch on the days that their children are brought to LDR.

**RGS Staff:** Primarily Hannah-Leigh Bull, with help from the full-time teachers and other specialists.

**Possible Dates:** At LDR, one Monday or Tuesday in February after two RGS sessions on empathy; another session at LDR in April, also on a Monday or Tuesday, following more RGS sessions.

**Facilities:** Rio Grande is an independent non-profit day school and a community of teachers, students, administrators, and parents committed to a collaborative, progressive, and child-oriented educational environment. It supports students in grades K-6 and has a student body of roughly 125.

Llama Deara is a four-acre llama farm, with a number of buildings for human use, as well as structures facilitating animal care and comfort. The buildings regularly available to students will be

- Casita Celestial, a large artist-style studio, which has both a bathroom and kitchen, and is appropriate for didactic sessions, breakout groups, skits, and role-plays, when inclement weather keeps participants from being outside. The outside areas are generally available to all students and staff, within reason and according to ranch rules.
- Casita de Llamas, the ranch office situated next to the llama corral, where the Director sees children and their families, and which may be appropriate for initial ranch orientation with the children.

**Supplies:** Provided by Llama Deara Ranch.

**Food:** Lunch normally provided by parents to their kids, with snacks provided by LDR.

**Cost:** If integrated into the curriculum at RGS, no cost to RGS except for a possible stipend if field trips to Llama Deara occur on days other than the Director's scheduled times at RGS.

**Website:** [www.llamadeara.com](http://www.llamadeara.com) contains bios of the staff, both two-legged and four-legged, and descriptions of the grounds and services provided.

### ***FIRST FIELD TRIP TO LLAMA DEARA***

**9:00 – 9:45:** Introduction to the camelid family of animals and to the llamas at Llama Deara, with hands-on experiences in the corrals and discussion about the impressions and feelings that arise around these large, gentle, curious animals. These talks and others will focus the students on learning about themselves in relation to the animals and will foster a respect for the animals that can evolve to self-caring and acceptance.

Handouts will include a guide to interacting with the llamas (see attached).

Respect, boundaries, concurrent emotions, curiosity, conflict resolution, thinking before acting, and family values as modeled by the llamas can be observed and discussed in the context of human relations.

**9:45 – 10:30:** Written creative activity requiring the students to write at least a couple of paragraphs about how the *llamas* viewed their interaction with the participants; this will allow the students to share how they sense they are perceived and give them a chance to voice how they see themselves. The discussion can evolve into assessing the accuracy of their opinions of self. This activity also helps students learn how to consider their affect on others. Paper and pens/pencils provided. Writing circle in the apple grove or studio.

**10:30 – 10:45:** Healthy snack, in the apple grove or studio.

**10:45 – 11:45:** Walk or run down to the *bosque*. At the river forest, time could be spent exploring the ecology, building a meeting place by the river, and being active physically in nature. During this time, the Magic Walk Challenge (see *Wild Adventures*) will be the activity that builds trust and comfort in Nature and comfort with others.

**11:45 – 12:15:** Lunch in the apple grove, with unstructured exploration.

**12:15 – 1:00:** Activity in the apple grove or llama corral. Earth Stewardship and Animal Care Challenge are possible activities derived from Project Adventure programs for building connection with others and the Earth.

**1:00:** Return to RGS (allow one hour driving time because of road construction).

## *SECOND FIELD TRIP TO LLAMA DEARA*

**9:00 – 9:45:** Didactic module on respect for animals and how animal violence can lead to violence among humans; new thoughts on anger management and how to process the injustices in our lives.

*Note:* This discussion requires prior and subsequent in-classroom sessions RGS for assimilation; a full curriculum on this subject has already been formalized.

**9:45 – 10:00:** Healthy snack.

**10:00 – 10:45:** Communion with llamas in the apple grove. Self-assessment of how the students' relationships with the llamas are growing and what they are noticing about themselves. Definition of the students' own boundaries and those of the animals. Body language.

**10:45 – 11:30:** Walk or run down to the *bosque* to see how things have changed and to continue project started down there. How has nature rearranged or enhanced their efforts of the previous month? Have new families of animals taken hold? Does observation come more easily to them? Can they observe, or does their nervous energy prevent them from seeing, smelling, being? Let them assess this themselves and share.

**11:30 – 12:00:** Lunch in the apple grove, with unstructured exploration.

**12:00 – 1:00:** Activity in the apple grove. Growing Wonders Among Us, from *Wild Adventures*, is recommended for appreciation of other species in nature and practice in listening and sharing. Short discussion of what they've learned about nature, animals, themselves and each other that they can take back to their homes and school.

**1:00:** Return to RGS.

### *Optional Activities*

Farm life and activities generally teach communication skills, self-confidence, patience, consideration, compassion, and self care, among many other gifts. The following is a sampling of activities that can be integrated into future field trips for these grades and others.

- 1) Creation myths, writing, acting out, speaking the story that brought them where they are at this moment and how they want their lives to be right now. Facilitator will share concrete ideas about goals for right now, such as how to feel more comfortable in this new environment, how to handle relations with fellow students or staff more easily, and so on. As the students feel at ease with the program, discussion can lead to what they want for their lives in a broad sense, including family and friendships.
- 2) Experiential group play/challenges in the apple grove. These exercises will build trust, communication skills, successful group dynamic, and leadership. They are modeled after the Project Adventure and Association for Experiential Education publications. A wealth of fun and invigorating activities exist to help students connect with themselves, nature, and other humans and species. Humor is often emphasized in these activities, which in itself is healing and stress releasing.
- 3) Experiences with scientist/mathematician, relating the patterns of nature to physics and math, with discussion of chaos theory and the interconnectedness of all creatures and all acts.
- 4) Assessment of physical and emotional cues and sensations of various behaviors. New research on the brain and how we grow as humans.

### *Further Information*

For more information about Llama Deara Ranch programs, please contact Hannah-Leigh Bull by email at [hlb@llamadeara.com](mailto:hlb@llamadeara.com), or by phone at 505-685-9416. You can also visit the ranch Website, [www.llamadeara.com](http://www.llamadeara.com).