

**Tool 2.3**

Connecting with the animal

CLARITY Competence Area:

Nurturing connection to oneself, others and nature

GreenComp Competence Area:

Embracing Complexity in Sustainability

Why use this tool?

This tool can help explore animal behaviors, needs and habitats, while reflecting on coexistence. By connecting with the animal, we can better observe, reflect upon and empathize with other species, as well as reconnect with our own nature as animals. Friendly laughter, harmless exploration and fun is encouraged, as we learn and retain knowledge more effectively when we are enjoying ourselves.

Activity 2.3.3

Walk and talk with animals

Overview

How can we be authentic while communicating and establishing trust together with another animal? This activity is designed for 1-2 learners per animal, and requires friendly, safe and ethically trained animals (for example dogs, horses or sheep). Meet the animal with compassion and invite them to follow you around an obstacle course of relevant tasks and puzzles. The learners engage with the animal while growing skills associated with collaboration and connectedness. Solving the tasks requires the learners to find a common language with the animal.

Curriculum linkage

Physical Education & Health, Civics & Social Studies, Ethics and Religion & Philosophy.

Your choice of tasks along the path can also introduce any other desired subject or discipline.

Competences built

Empathy, interconnectedness thinking, presence, authenticity, compassion and emotional literacy and regulation.

Prep Work

Coordinate with the animals' owners beforehand about which animals will be involved and what handling routines need to be followed by the learners (concerning giving treats, petting, etc.).

Prepare the tasks along the obstacle course.



BASIC INFO

Age range:

6+

Duration:

45 minutes

Group size:

1-2 learners per animal. Ideally max 10-15 learners active at a time, to best maintain safety around the animals

Level of difficulty:

Intermediate

Materials/space required:

Friendly, safe and ethically trained animals (for example dogs, horses or sheep). Treats for the animals as positive reinforcement (check with the animal owner what sort of treats are suitable).

Location:

Outdoors

Engagement of external stakeholders:

The owners of the animals involved. The animals.



Steps in the activity

1. Conversation and ground rules
2. Grounding exercise - to find calm before greeting the animals
3. Meet and greet the animal
4. The obstacle course
Reflections

Step 1: Conversation and ground rules

Learners are often excited and sometimes scared when they are about to meet an animal. We recommend starting off with a conversation and a grounding exercise to find calm and focus before introducing the animals.

1. Before introducing the animals, have a conversation with the learners about how they think the animals will want to be treated, about what motivates the animals, and about friendly ways to interact with them.
2. Teach the learners if and when to give the animals treats as part of communication.

Step 2: Grounding exercise - to find calm before greeting the animals

Guide the learners in a grounding exercise by inviting the learners to follow the steps below:

1. Put your feet steadily on the ground and keep your eyes open.
2. Sway forward and backward as much as you can.
3. Slowly sway less and less, until the swaying is so small it is no longer visible to anyone.
4. While swaying, observe your breathing. You don't have to change anything or breathe in any particular way, just observe.



Learners greeting a horse, inviting the horse to voluntarily come over to them.

Photo by Marte Maurabakken/Climate Creativity.



5. If you feel calmer now, try to recall that feeling with you when you meet the animal, to make the animal feel safe with you.

Step 3: Meet and greet the animal

1. Encourage the learners to now invite an animal to where they are standing. You and the animal owners can help assign the animals and, if needed, guide the animals to the learners.
2. Invite the learners to meet the animal with compassion. Based on information from the owners about what the animals like, the learners may for example scratch behind ears or stroke their fur, or simply give the animal calm and space.
3. Ask the learners to invite the animal to follow them a few steps, without tugging or pulling. You and the animal owners can help with tips where needed to avoid frustration with the animals.



Learner greets a horse, before they invite the horse to follow them.

Photo by Marte Maurabakken/Climate Creativity.

Step 4: The obstacle course

1. Encourage the learners to now invite the animal to follow them around an "obstacle course" of relevant tasks and puzzles. Each stop/station along the course will have a task. As the teacher you should choose tasks that are suitable for your particular group.
 - a. How long the tasks will take will depend on the individual learners and animals. We recommend you present for example 2-5 tasks per course, but that you bring with you another 5 tasks (or think of variations on the existing tasks) to present to the learners in case they finish quicker than expected.
 - b. The goal is for the learners to experience good communication with a different species, so there is no hurry in completing tasks and no problem with not completing all tasks. Depending on your learners' skills you can for



example leave written instructions at each station, or explain the tasks verbally before the start.

2. Support the learners as they work on the tasks and puzzles with their animals. Suggestions for station tasks and puzzles include:
 - a. Leaving a small mat on the ground. The learners' goal is to get their animal to step on the mat with a front leg.
 - b. Placing 5-10 items in a line, which the learners will go slalom between with their animal.
 - c. Placing a long stick on the ground, where the learners' goal is to get their animal to stand with two legs on one side of the stick and two legs on the other side.
 - d. Placing two long sticks on the ground to create a "corridor", where the learners will walk on the outside along the corridor, with the animal walking in the middle of them inside the corridor between the sticks.
 - e. Preparing curriculum-specific tasks for learners, such as "5 history questions", "write a poem about today", or "read a kind message to the animal". The animal can get food and/or rest while the learners undertake the task.

It is important to note that there is no need to include all (or any!) of these obstacles. Sometimes one or two obstacles are plenty, and other times, especially if the learners are unfamiliar with the animal, walking with the animal on a course without obstacles is challenging enough. Challenges can be fun, but don't make it too hard for them!

Step 5: Reflections

1. Open up a dialogue with your learners about the experience, either in smaller groups or all together. Possible questions to keep the dialogue lively include:
 - a. What do you think the animal liked about moving together with you?
 - b. Think of a person you enjoy working with. What are some traits that make cooperation work well?
 - c. Can you name some other situations where cooperation is important?
 - d. What can be scary when you are cooperating?
 - e. What do you need to feel safe when cooperating with someone?
 - f. What is a good leader, and how do they make you feel?





Dos and don'ts

Do:

- Choose obstacles and complexity according to your learner group's needs.
- Collaborate closely with the animal's owner.

Don't:

Rush the animals or the learners when they're interacting.

Adaptations:

Choose location and animal depending on your learners' needs, for example a wheelchair-suitable environment or an animal who's comfortable with learners doing sudden movements.

We invite you to adapt this activity to the specific needs of your learners, including by taking into account their neurodiversity. When adapting tools and activities for neurodivergent learners, please note it is not about treating others how you want to be treated, but how they want to be treated. Ask, listen, and stay open to different ways of learning and engaging.

References

This activity was designed by Climate Creativity.

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