

Horse Therapy

'a light on the horizon'

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Children or Adults with disabilities, Autism, ADD or any other physical or mental disability. Especially with children, it can make parents desperate and devastating. Nothing is more hard than having your child diagnosed with any physical or mental disability. But where do you go from there? Special therapies, counseling, medication... when the normal things don't work, it feels like a never ending story and very sad for both the child and the parent.

To people with autism and Asperger syndrome, the world can appear chaotic with no clear boundaries, order or meaning.

These disorders can vary from very mild, where the person can function as well as anyone else around them, to so severe that they are completely unable to take part in normal society.

People with autism are usually more severely disabled, while those with Asperger syndrome tend to be more able, although this isn't always so. Because of the range of severity and symptoms, the conditions are collectively known as autistic spectrum disorders.

There are many things parents can do to help children with autism overcome their challenges and get the most of life. From learning all you can about autism spectrum disorders to getting your child into treatment right away, you can make a big difference.



It's also important to make sure you get the support you need. When you're looking after a child with autism, taking care of yourself is not an act of selfishness—it's a necessity. Being emotionally strong allows you to be the best parent you can be to your child in need.

One of the therapies that are proving to be very successful, though still quite unknown is the therapeutic and healing power of horses.

Children and horses often are paired because the two have a natural affinity for each other. In addition, horses require a great deal of attention, meaning the child must concentrate on caring for the animal rather than thinking about his own problems.

Horses provide a challenge because of their size and strength; in order to work effectively with an equine, a child first must overcome any fears he may have. Horses are quite good at picking up on human emotions, making it necessary for the child to modify his behavior in order to get the desired results from the horse.

In short, a child must remain calm himself in order to put the horse at ease and be able to work with it. This teaches a child that his behavior affects others, and it helps the patient learn to focus on a specific task. Taking care of another creature also instills a sense of responsibility, and bonding with



a horse can be the first step in developing a child's ability to bond with other people.

While children involved in equine therapy programs can improve their self-esteem, confidence and overall physical health, they aren't the only ones who benefit from the programs. Equine therapy programs can be a saving grace for the horses as well. Many of the horses involved in these programs come from abusive homes or other situations in which they were neglected or mistreated. Equine therapy programs take in these horses, give them the care they need, and train them to work with disabled children. The children then overload them with even more attention, care and love.

Hippotherapy and Therapeutic Riding use the horse's multidimensional rhythmic movement, which resembles the natural walking gait of humans, to achieve specific therapeutic outcomes. Therapists help patients ride the horse in different positions, including sitting or laying forward, backward, or sideways; standing up in the stirrups; and riding on the horse without holding on. Specially trained physical therapists, occupational therapists, and speech-language therapists use this therapy with autistic children and teenagers and kids with a wide range of other types of disabilities. It is also helpful for children that are experiencing only light forms of any kind of autism or comparable.

Hippotherapy is useful for:

- relaxing tight muscles*
- increasing balance*
- building muscle strength*
- sharpening hand/eye coordination*
- gaining a sense of body-awareness*
- gaining a sense of self-control*
- gaining a sense of self-confidence*
- improving communication*
- improving concentration*
- improving socialization*
- improving patience*
- improving fine motor coordination*
- improving sensory integration*

The movement of the horse moves the rider's pelvis in the correct way, while also stimulating other bones, ligaments, and joints. A horse moves a person in more than one way, by tilting, rotating, and moving the rider, which would take a whole session of difficult physical therapy exercises to achieve.

Sitting on a horse improves core muscle strength, muscle symmetry, balance, posture, flexibility, circulation, coordi-



nation, and breathing (which also makes it easier to speak). The autistic are unable to integrate their senses and understanding of how their bodies relate to external forces and surfaces; hippotherapy can greatly improve an autistic child's sense of their own bodies in space. Hippotherapy frequently does not use a saddle, allowing the child to receive sensations from the horse's movements, which makes a child aware of where parts of his or her body are in relation to the horse.

The excitement of riding encourages speech when the rider wants to communicate with the therapist and the horse. Non-verbal autistic children have suddenly started talking



when they use the horse's name or ask the horse to get moving! Also physically disabled children benefit from the equine therapy. For example: Twin boys who were diagnosed with cerebral palsy were

expected never to walk. After three years of equine therapy, both of them began to walk. Similarly, a young girl with Rett Syndrome who had almost no muscle tone learned to sit up in a saddle after just three months.

Learning to ride a horse requires balance and coordina-

tion. Many physically disabled children lack muscle tone, and consequently, their coordination is severely lacking. Equine therapy gives a disabled child a physically enjoyable experience that also helps develop muscle tone, balance, and coordination. It also helps the child develop and improve upon hand-eye coordination. It achieves the same results as standard physical therapy but in a more pleasant setting.

In 1986, a new therapy developed for children with multiple and complex disabilities was developed by Mr. J. Roelofsen from Holland. Especially for the children that are unable to sit on a horse, he invented the so-called 'hrijfbed', or 'wagon-bed'

Wagon-bed riding is done with a covered carriage containing a canvas stretcher. It is a way to enable severely disabled people to move and so alleviate complaints such as constipation and spasms.

Wagon-bed riding may be considered a special kind of hippotherapy.

The wagon is a steel construction pulled by two trained horses. Canvas is stretched over the backs of the horses. The patient is placed in supine position on the canvas in the



slight hollow between the horses. The rhythm, the warmth of the horses and the ambience has a relaxing and massaging effect on the patient.

Wagon-bed riding is suitable for people who do not get enough physical exercise because of a handicap. During Wagon-bed riding the blood circulation and vital functions, such as metabolism and digestion are stimulated. It has a beneficial effect on people who find it difficult to walk.

Complaints such as constipation, epileptic seizures and lung obstruction (e.g. cystic fibrosis), may be reduced by wagon-bed riding. It has also been shown that wagon-bed riding has a stimulating effect on coma patients.

The wagon-bed proved to be ideal for people with the following conditions:

- * *People with multiple disabilities*
- * *People with intellectual disabilities*
- * *People with dementia*
- * *People with metabolic diseases*
- * *Rehabilitation of children and adults*
- * *Patients with spasm*
- * *Some coma patients*
- * *People with non-congenital brain*
- * *People with mental limitations*
- * *People with chronic fatigue syndrome*
- * *People with chronic pain*
- * *People with SCI*
- * *People with stroke*
- * *People with rheumatoid arthritis*
- * *People with vascular problems (claudication)*
- * *People with MS*
- * *People with muscle disorders*
- * *crippled*
- * *Older people with mobility difficulties*

The horses used are usually Tinkers, Fjords and Haflingers. A shoulder height between 1.40 and 1.45m is ideal. The horses should be of equal shoulder height, preferably have a long back and an even, calm tread.

Training a team of horses usually takes a year. Smaller ponies are used for small wagons, but these are not suitable for bigger children or adults and the ponies do not have such a calm tread.

There are generally 3 types of wagons:

The three-wheeled "standard" type with one swivel wheel at the front and an axle at the rear, above which the driver's frame is located.

The four-wheeled type with two swivel wheels at the front and an axle at the rear, above which the driver's frame is located.

The three-wheeled balance type with two wheels beside the middle of the horses and one swivel wheel at the rear, behind the driver's frame.

Four-wheeled wagon-bed

The four-wheeled wagon and three-wheeled balance wagon can be provided with a lifting platform to lift the patient on to the canvas fabric bed. With the three-wheeled "standard" type, the patient is lifted on to the canvas with a separate lifting aid. Some wagons are provided with a cushion against which the horses can push, so that they don't require



An example of a wagon-bed used by a therapeutic centre in The Netherlands a chest harness and ropes and can be taken in and out of harness quicker.

The frame to which the canvas is fixed should be adjustable for height appropriate to the horses.

In order to intensify the transfer of the motion of the horses to the participant, the canvas on which the participants lies is provided with straps around it or at both sides.

Since hippotherapy was introduced, it has helped thousand of children all over the world. To see the children light up when they are around the horses is the best thing one can imagine. Furthermore it proves to be a big relief for the parents as well, as it takes off some of the daily stress they experienced with the care for the special needs of their children.

A big hooray for the horses!



There are specialized horse therapy centers everywhere around the world. For more information, please check <http://www.frdi.net>