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# Hoof Prints

## Equine Therapy for Autistic Children

Alexandra Dingman

**The patience, loyalty, and quiet responsiveness of a horse frequently engender positive feelings in a child, making a relationship with a horse especially helpful to a child who is having difficulties in life.**

*A man on a horse is spiritually as well as physically bigger than a man on foot.*

John Steinbeck, *The Red Pony* (1994, 12)

He'll be here in a few minutes. I can't help feeling nervous. There is no guessing the mood he will be in, or how he will react to the horses or to me. Seven-year-old Jonah rarely makes eye contact and would rather be by himself. His speech is mumbled and often incoherent. Just one of the estimated 1½ million people diagnosed with autism in the United States (Autism Society of America 2008), this boy displays few nonverbal cues, has poor social skills, uses repetitive language and movements, and is inflexible with routines and schedules. But Jonah reacts differently with horses. Though it is rare for Jonah to talk directly with humans, he will talk to horses and even the barn dog. Last year, Jonah's mother reported that Jonah picked up the telephone and asked her to talk to Ginny, his favorite horse at Lake Auburn Equestrian Center. During the last two years, Jonah has gradually become more interested in me; he now seeks me out in the barn when he arrives, makes eye-contact and engages in games with me at the barn. For Jonah, riding has been therapeutic.

Having worked with horses for over twenty years, I sometimes forget what it is like to see the riding world through the eyes of a novice. Horses are graceful, beautiful, and wild. Their movements inspire awe. "Riding a horse makes someone small feel large, long-legged and powerful." (Friends For Tomorrow 1999). All too often children stay inside, play video games, listen to music, or watch TV, instead of running around and socializing. Riding encourages children to work with their hands, exercise, connect with horses and people of all ages, gain confidence, and learn new skills. As anyone who has spent time



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around a barn knows, there is always work to be done, whether it is brushing a horse, cleaning leather, filling water buckets or sweeping. These activities can be physically challenging, but they frequently are also *shared* activities, creating easy social interactions. The focus is not on humans but on horses, and children can develop their strengths and relationships with creatures as alive as they are.

After a year collecting and analyzing data about my students (in a program called ManeStreaming in Auburn, ME) and working with therapeutic riding

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***For children with physical disabilities, riding corrects abnormal muscle tone and improves coordination, balance, and posture, and enhances sensory motor skills.***

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programs in Massachusetts (Friends for Tomorrow and Lovelane) and Maine (Riding to the Top and Flying Changes), I came to the firm conclusion that the special relationship between children and horses was very real: Horseback riding for children, particularly those with autism, *is* therapeutic. Horses naturally have patience, loyalty, and a quiet way of listening and responding that draws out children and encourages engagement. But horses also require care, patience, and understanding from the people around them, thus giving riders a sense of responsibility for another creature. Temple Grandin (2005, 5) maintains that "riding a horse isn't what it looks like: it isn't a person sitting in a saddle telling the horse what to do by yanking on the reins. Real riding is a lot like ballroom dancing or maybe figure skating in pairs." This special relationship between horse and rider can lead to increased confidence, patience, and self-esteem. Learning how to trust and communicate with a horse can help a child feel more comfortable with humans. More importantly, these relationships provide safe opportunities for children to challenge themselves and to try new things.

In 1994, Carolyn M. Gatty, Assistant Professor in the Master of Occupational Therapy Program, Chat-

ham College, PA, studied 23 children with special needs from the age of 11 to 15 who showed a slight increase of self-esteem after eight weeks of therapeutic riding (Gatty et al., 1994). These positive effects may have resulted from the development of unconditional bonds with horses, confidence gained from "controlling" a creature ten to twenty times their size, and increased physical strength (Roberts 1997).

Horses are very sensitive and seem to understand when a person needs extra attention. One day last winter, Jonah arrived early for his lesson and, before anyone could catch him, he ran to the barn and ducked under a stall guard, into my horse's stall. This 1,000 pound high-strung ex-race horse named Riley is quite territorial. I could only imagine what he would think of this whirling dervish flying into his stall. To my amazement, when I finally caught up with Jonah, Riley was standing quietly alongside Jonah hanging his head by Jonah (a gesture of comfort and relaxation), just watching as this child played in the hay. I have witnessed countless occasions in which horses have behaved in miraculous ways around children with disabilities. For example, a horse will stand perfectly still for a small child and even shift their weight if a small rider is slipping to one side (see also Splinter-Watkins 2002).

In addition to social and emotional connections, research proves that a horse's rhythmic, repetitive movements work to improve a rider's muscle tone, balance, posture, coordination, strength, and flexibility (Borzo 2002). One mother told me about her seven-year-old daughter:

Being on the horse has improved her sense of balance tremendously. At one time she had to think about sitting up, and if she relaxed she would begin to tumble to one side. Sitting up straight has become a natural response for her now.... (MacNamara 2005, 2)

For children with physical disabilities, riding corrects abnormal muscle tone and improves coordination, balance, and posture, and enhances sensory motor skills (Borzo 2002). Brushing, carrying tack back and forth, picking up manure and sweeping are demanding, but this work is considered fun by children and is great exercise.

Children with autism and special needs are not the only ones to benefit from work with horses. Riders often develop bonds with horses that alleviate loneliness, depression, and isolation. For Sarah, a six-year-old with low self-confidence and social anxiety, identifying with a loyal equine friend was all she needed to open up to other riders at the barn. This unique setting, filled with friendly people of all ages, horses, and often barn cats and dogs, puts children and adults at ease with its simple focus and community. Sarah struggled to make friends in school, but the barn was a safe place where she was never teased and where all the horses listened to and accepted her. In response to a kind person, a horse will often offer a gentle nuzzle or greeting. Children who have trouble relating to humans often learn through interactions with horses how to communicate with peers. Many children who find it hard to make friends walk into a barn and become buddies with other children immediately as they converse about the daily updates on the horses.

As prey to mountain lions, coyotes, and humans, horses can be fearful, untrustworthy, and shy. Children often behave the same way (Canfield 2003) because they don't have much control over their lives and believe that no one listens to them. With two loving but high-powered, controlling parents, Noah was not used to being listened to until he came to the barn. Noah's parents admitted they did not give their child enough responsibility for decisions. They thought he would like riding and that he should try a new activity now that his weekly Latin classes had ended. As this ten-year-old nervously arrived at the barn, I introduced him to Captain, a Roan quarter horse, and demonstrated how to lead Captain out of his stall and through the barn aisle. Noah looked shocked and pleased when Captain followed him without hesitation. Children are constantly being reminded of what they should be doing, how they should do it, and, of course, what they should avoid doing. It is empowering to be handed a horse that looks to you for direction and guidance. This kind of recognition, though commonplace in adulthood, is infrequent in childhood.

Therapeutic riding has an impact on the whole person: socially, emotionally, mentally, and physically. Horses do not care how a child walks or talks or

performs in school; such a lack of judgment frees up all relationships. As Kathy Splinter-Watkins put it, "I know that therapeutic horseback riding works — just look at the smiles!" (Splinter-Watkins 2002, 1).

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## Therapeutic Riding Resources

North American Riding for the Handicapped Association, Inc. NARHA Denver, Colorado <[www.narha.org](http://www.narha.org)>.

Friends for Tomorrow Therapeutic Riding Center, Lincoln, MA <[www.friendsfortomorrow.org](http://www.friendsfortomorrow.org)>.

Friends For Tomorrow Therapeutic Riding Center. 1999. *A story of children and horses*. Promotional video.

Riding to the Top: Therapeutic Riding Center Running out of Pineland Farms Equestrian Center in Gray/ New Gloucester, ME <[www.ridingtothetop.org](http://www.ridingtothetop.org)>.

Flying Changes Therapeutic Riding Center, Topsham, ME <[www.flyingchanges.org](http://www.flyingchanges.org)>.