



## Horseback Riding and Autism

Horses and the exercise associated with horseback riding can be very therapeutic for person with autism. Although, at this time, there is no known cure for autism, there are certain activities that can be of benefit to a person with autism.

Over the years of working in the area of therapeutic riding we have observed the following advantages of horseback riding for persons with autism:

**Sensory Development:** Horse related activities promote sensory perceptions. Riders are first encouraged to pet or touch the horse. Some riders, who could barely touch the horse when they first started in the program, were eventually petting it and soon progressed to grooming it. Holding the reins while riding improves fine motor skills. By riding bareback, the muscles and the nervous system of the rider are stimulated. By decorating the arena with colorful posters, the riders are encouraged to look at the posters as they are riding.



**Communication:** Riders are encouraged to use the verbal commands of “walk on” and “whoa.” For some children, these are their first words. They learn that they can control the animal by communicating their wants using very specific words. Side walkers interact with the rider, encouraging them to name the objects in the poster, or the props that are used in the games that are played.

**Behavior:** The act of petting and stroking a horse has a calming effect. The rhythmic movement of a horse is also calming. Riding instills in the rider the need to use soft gestures and not act out when frustrated. Riders learn good sportsmanship when winning and losing the games played on horseback. Lessons follow a familiar pattern, with light variations from week to week, allowing the comfort of a routine with experience of deviations from that routine.

**Social Interaction:** During the riding lessons, the rider is encouraged to communicate with the horse and the side walkers. Riders also interact with the other riders before and after the class as well as during the class when games are played on horseback. After each lesson, the rider interacts with the horse by removing some of the tack and giving the horse a treat.

Lessons learned during a riding class often affect the rider’s behavior at home. When John began horseback riding, he was fearful of the horses movements and had some balance issues. Within six months he was well balanced when he rode and understood how to control his horse. His father reported that John’s newly learned behavior with the horse carried over to the family dog. Previously, John could not let the dog out, but now, he could not only let the dog outside, when necessary, but also took it for walks. His improved self-confidence and ability to communicate better was reflected in his relationship with his dog.