

# Horse-Assisted Therapies for Children

Many people are familiar with therapeutic horseback riding, but are unable to distinguish the differences between **hippotherapy** and **equine-facilitated psychotherapy**. Both therapies incorporate horses or ponies into the child's treatment – the difference lies in the goal of the intervention, which is determined by the professional facilitating the treatment. This article was co-authored by Christine Randle, LICSW, President of Flying High Farm, Inc. in Lunenburg, and Ann Chernoch DPT, President of Autumn Dancer Riding in Westminster, and will help to explain the differences between these two exciting therapies.

For many centuries, humans and animals have been working in partnerships that have developed into several different forms of relationships. One of the earliest records of using animals for therapeutic reasons was in Ancient Greece where the Greeks placed “those who were not healed” on a horse to “life their spirits” (Haskin, 1974). Florence Nightingale noted the use of animals in health care in 1860. She observed “a small pet is often an excellent companion for the sick, for long chronic cases especially.” The first recorded setting for the therapeutic use of animals was the York Retreat in England, which introduced small animals as a form of treatment for persons with psychiatric illnesses. Today, 53 million households in the United States have an animal living with them.

## ***Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy***

Psychotherapy is an interpersonal, relational intervention used by trained psychotherapists to aid individuals in problems of living. This usually includes increasing the individual's sense of well-being and reducing subjective discomforting experience. Psychotherapists employ a range of techniques that are designed to improve the mental health of an individual, or to improve group relationships (such as in a family).

Equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP) incorporates horses or ponies in the psychotherapy process between client and therapist (“equine” is the latin word for “horse.”). At Flying High Farm this innovative psychotherapy is delivered by one professional with the following credentials:

- Massachusetts licensed mental health professional
- NARHA Certified therapeutic riding instructor
- Massachusetts licensed horseback riding instructor

This specialized therapy is conducted within a clearly defined therapeutic space and setting, with the intent to promote healing, growth and empowerment of the child. Having this one clinician working with a child promotes a strong relationship between the child and the clinician and ensures that the child feels safe to share private feelings with someone they trust. EFP has been shown to be effective with children demonstrating a variety of behaviors and diagnoses such as:

- Autism
- Asperger's Syndrome

- ADHD/ADD
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Low self-esteem
- Poor social and communication skills
- Bipolar Disorder
- Adjustment Disorders (Divorce, death, remarriage, etc.)

EFP helps to:

- Break down defense barriers
- Challenge children in a non-threatening manner
- Promote a motivating, learning environment
- Build the therapeutic relationship
- Enhance problem-solving skills
- Provide immediate cause-and-effect situations
- Decrease feelings of hopelessness
- Stimulate creativity
- Encourage responsibility
- Captivate and hold attention
- Help teach empathy
- Empower and give a sense of control over self
- Develop social skills
- Teach better communication skills
- Promote both teamwork and individual leadership

These attributes can help enhance a child's relationships within the family or with peers; improve the desire to concentrate on homework; promote ownership of one's actions; provide a child with a topic to discuss with peers; etc.

## ***Hippotherapy***

Hippotherapy is the utilization of the horse's motion as a tool to promote goals related to function. Physical therapists utilize the horse for goals related to walking, crawling, climbing, motor planning, balance, endurance, core muscle strength of the trunk, arms, and legs, or eliciting protective responses. Occupational therapists and speech therapists also utilize the horse for goals involving their specialty areas of fine motor hand and finger use, and communication. Hippotherapy is a very dynamic tool from a physical therapy point of view because the motion of the horse provides motion in three planes, as well as vibratory input, challenges balance, endurance, postural reactions and protective responses. The program is not just about being on the horse though, it also includes developing trust, listening skills, communicating choices, and coordination. It is much more than a pony ride!

For example: A rider has scoliosis and weakness on the right side of the trunk. The rider would be on the horse and the horse would walk on a circle (for part of the program) to help the rider activate the muscles on the weak side of the trunk in order to maintain balance. Another example would be having the horse stop walking whereby the child

would have to 'catch' themselves by reaching their hands forward - this is a protective response. In this same scenario the rider would also have to utilize all the muscles of her spine to keep their trunk upright, and if successful the protective response of the hands would not be necessary.

The horse's walking provides a deep input to the rider through the seat, and other weight-bearing surfaces such as the hands which affects the nervous system. A quick or bouncy type walking horse can arouse a very low energy system. A very hyper nervous system can be dampened by the rhythmic smooth gait of a different horse. This type of input allows for greater focus, can help support language use and development, and changes the way a child interacts with animals and other people.

Programs can be designed to support multiple disciplines during one session, such as weight bearing on the arms, while singing along to a rhyme, utilizing PECs for preferences of activities (such as playing basket ball or baseball), and managing clips and pins while playing go fish or other card games on the horse's mane. Sidewalkers and horse leaders are utilized for safety so most any child with any ability could participate safely, including those children who are blind, deaf, or are wheelchair-mobile. There are some conditions that prevent participation, but for those who can, this activity is not only fun, it is also age appropriate, individually skill-based, and provides the child with a sense of motion and view of the world and of adults that they would not otherwise get to experience.

Therapeutic riding is the teaching of an individual who requires additional time, support, or interactions how to ride a horse, and can sometimes include handling, saddling, and leading the horse for goals of independent or modified independent horsemanship. Many of these riders would also require a leader or sidewalkers for safety.

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