





Horse Therapy Opens New Doors for Youth with Autism

Equestrian Bridges Offers Empowerment

BY MICHELLE BRADFORD

Horse therapy for children with disabilities has been around for years, but a program in Benton County, Arkansas, is trying a new slant to help children with autism learn social skills. The approach at Equestrian Bridges Ranch (www.equestrianbridges.org) at Twin Springs, Arkansas, a 120-acre spread, is not traditional horseback riding, or hippotherapy, as it is known. Equestrian Bridges teaches children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) to improve communication and social skills through simple games and tasks with horses.

Communicating and fitting in is a challenge for people with autism; some individuals are nonverbal and may have unusual mannerisms, such as hand-flapping and twirling objects. Social cues are often hard for them to grasp; they might laugh when someone is crying or not understand the sarcasm intended when people roll their eyes.

The idea at Equestrian Bridges is that horses' reactions to humans are so open and exaggerated that children clearly understand what impact their voice, demeanor and actions are having. The children can see how the horse reacts when they grimace, talk in a soothing voice or get too close to the horse, and they can adjust their behavior accordingly, the Executive Director Nathan Rudolph said.

Because horses are so physically large, it is easy for children to read their body language, Rudolph said. Through games and teaching the horses commands, the children catch on to what's appropriate and can transfer those skills over into real life. At one social skills session, Michelle Baltrusch, the programs education director, showed two girls with ASD how to gain the horses' trust through playing a simple game of moving the animals near and away.

Jenny Thompson, then 13, played the friendly game with a horse named Custer, moving her hands gently over his smooth brown-and-white coat. He blew warm air into her face, which drew a toothy smile and laugh from the girl. Jenny also played the "yoyo" game, moving Custer away from her by letting go of a braided rope, then wiggling her index finger to coax the horse to her.

Baltrusch, also a special education teacher in the local school district, told Jenny to tell Custer to move away gently and politely. "That's how we treat people—gently and politely," said

Baltrusch. "We can send people away politely, and it doesn't have to mean forever." Molly Ivy, then 15, made an instant connection to the horses at Equestrian Bridges, said her mother, Nancy Wells.

After the social skills classes, the mother and daughter go to dinner, and Wells said her daughter is more engaged than usual. The class really opens her up,

before the family had dinner guests one night, Ivy's speech pathologist had her write out instructions for herself. "I won't ask people when they are going to leave, I won't try to make them hurry up and go, and I'll have plenty of time to watch TV later," she wrote.

If there is an intense situation, Ivy's reaction is almost opposite of what it should be, Wells said. But she recognizes

this, and she's learned to adapt. She'll say, "I'm sorry. I know I'm not supposed to act that way." She's very literal and she's very aware she has autism. Ivy's 18-year-old sister attends art school in Italy and is higher functioning than she.

Wells and parents of seven other children with ASD pay \$240 for six social skills therapy sessions at Equestrian Bridges. The nonprofit program, started in February 2008, and the operators are considering seeking accreditation with the Equine Assisted Growth Learning Association and the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association, according to Rudolph.

The biggest growth in youth camps around the country right now is for kids with autism, according to Marguerite Colston, spokesperson for the Autism Society. There are many different programs available (see the Autism Society's online database, www.autismsource.org, for listings nationwide), but when parents and caregivers are choosing therapy programs for their children with ASD, they should rely on the

individual education plan (IEP) created at their child's school. Parents need to make sure to choose programs that are safe and appropriate, and offer a level of care to meet their child's needs, said Colston.

Many places say they treat autism, but it is a specific medical and neurological condition that requires specialized



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Wells said. "She's talkative, and there's a lot of eye contact. I'm not sure what it is about the horses; they're as sensitive as the children, and they work with each other. There's definitely a symbiotic relationship going on there," she said.

Being socially appropriate is a constant effort for Ivy, who also has an older sister with autism. For example,

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training, said Colston. Therefore, it's a good idea for parents to ask questions and get guidance from the child's school, rather than just accept what the program claims. Horse therapy for children with ASD is not new, but it has traditionally focused on improving sensory integration through riding, according to Karan Burnette, associate director of Partners for Inclusive Communities (<http://www.uams.edu/partners/>), which operates the Arkansas Autism Resource and Outreach Center (<http://www.aaroc.org/>), a division of the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences.

Hippotherapy uses the movement of the child riding the horse to stimulate the child neurologically and physically, she said. Social skills groups are also a common therapy for children with autism, but they usually involve human peers.

"It's a new one on me," Burnette said of the Equestrian Bridges' approach of using horses to improve socialization skills. But animal therapy has a place in helping children with autism, and this sounds like a new avenue to do just that."

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Equestrian Bridges at Twin Springs, Inc., is a 501(c)3 not-for-profit corporation whose primary objective is to improve the lives of children for success. The vision and purpose of Bridges, Inc., is to empower individuals considered to be at risk for social, behavioral or academic delays with the tools to develop emotional, mental and physical fitness using natural horsemanship.

More information can be found at www.equestrianbridges.org. For inquiries, please email info@equestrianbridges.org or call 479-409-8980.

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