



FUN, FREEDOM & PHYSIO

Bounty of Benefits for Kids with Disabilities on Horseback

By: Heather Dilts-Baiano

Christine Ryan remembers her autistic son's first time at I CAN-TER, a therapeutic riding centre in Ridgeway, Ont. He was six years old. "What if Brendan got scared? What if the horse spooked? I knew I had no control, and as a parent of a special needs child, that is crazy difficult."

Ryan was nervous about Brendan's reaction to the horse as well, a common fear for many parents. The Niagara Peninsula Children's Centre had recommended I CAN-TER – I Can Therapeutic Equestrian Riding – to Ryan who claims that her son wouldn't allow himself to think about the fact he was on a horse for the first few months. He would mount with little hesitation, but refused to pet or look at the horse when he was done. "He was terrified to even give the horse a treat," says Ryan.

But it wasn't long before Ryan began to relax and enjoy watching her son ride. I CAN-TER, like other certified riding centres, makes minimizing the risk of injury a priority. "The safety of the child is key," maintains Angie Ruigrok of Equineability Niagara, another area therapeutic riding facility. Ruigrok is a full-time physiotherapist, and a certified intermediate CANTRA (Canadian Therapeutic Riding Association) instructor and Level 1 therapist in the American Hippotherapy Association. With that concern in check, the many benefits of therapeutic riding become more obvious to parents.

At first, Brendan, a rote learner, would ignore the side-walkers unless they asked something specific of him. But as time passed, he began saying good-bye to the side-walkers, eventually turning those good-byes into "high-fives" and kisses. Brendan also began to trust his horse Thunder more and more, and his riding skills improved taking him from a slow walk to brief trot sessions. And today, Brendan loves any opportunity he can get to ask his horse for a little more speed in a short canter.

Ryan has watched her son's transformation in the saddle go from a fearful and stiff perch on Thunder to a relaxed and fun experience, where Brendan lets his body move with the horse.

When searching to achieve the remarkable benefits for kids with special needs, parents need to understand the different kinds of therapy with horses that are available. Ruigrok explains that there is some confusion between hippotherapy and therapeutic riding, even though they are distinctly different. Simply put, therapeutic riding focuses on teaching an individual to horseback ride. Hippotherapy is akin to a physiotherapy session on horseback, and commonly serves as part of a treatment program used in combination with other therapies.

Ruigrok describes one of the therapeutic aspects: "When you ride a horse bareback, you notice your legs 'walking', your hips moving in sync with the horse's gait" The simple movement of the horse's back influences the muscles in the rider's back, stomach and legs. The movement stimulates those areas, just like it would if the rider was walking. "A physiotherapist can try to recreate that movement with a patient, but nothing comes close to what a horse can do in half an hour," she stresses.

Lessons in a therapeutic riding program are designed to create an appropriate challenge for each rider, keeping learning fresh and enjoyable. Some lessons focus on body awareness and balance in motion. As control improves, neck strength and fine motor skills increase too. This is important, as postural control helps with breathing, digestion, circulation and mobility. Eventually some riders progress to more independent riding using leg or rein aids or voice commands to guide the horse.

Amanda Tracey's four-year-old daughter Alli has been riding at Equineability Niagara for over a year. Tracey decided

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therapeutic riding was for her daughter after hearing about the social and physical benefits from other parents of kids with special needs. Tracey wasn't sure how Alli would respond to the horses or people she didn't know. But the staff and volunteers at Equineability quickly put all of her reservations to rest, giving Alli the opportunity to acclimatize at her own pace. It all starts with simply petting the animals.

Alli loves riding and looks forward to spending time with her farm friends each week. Her time in the saddle has improved her strength and posture, but her greatest gains have come in the form of cognitive advancements. Her lessons have helped her learn left and right directions, as well as letter recognition and colours.

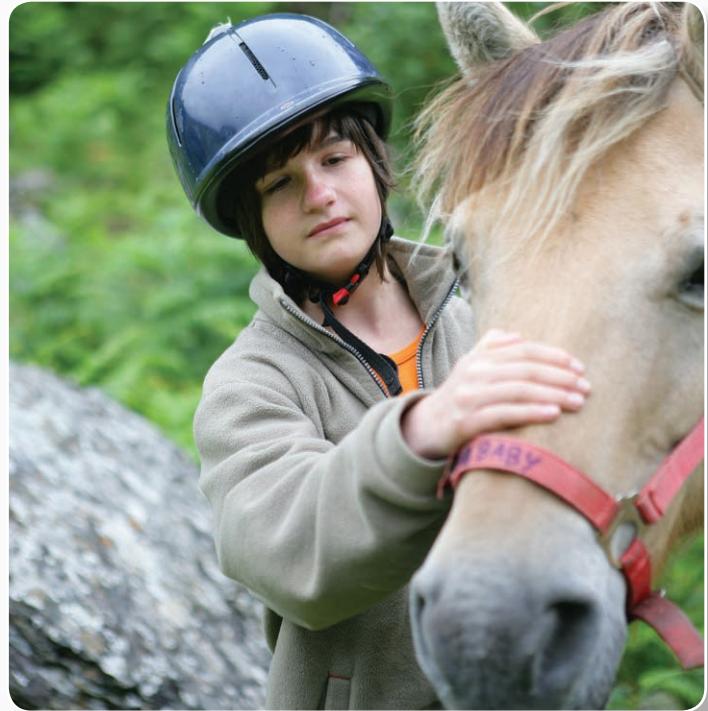
"Therapeutic riding gives her an activity that she's capable of doing and enjoys," says Tracey. "It isn't always easy to find something that works for a child with significant physical needs. Alli is proud of herself and her confidence has grown."

Krista Breen, head instructor and equine program manager at Sunrise Therapeutic and Learning Centre in Guelph, Ont., can attest to Amanda Tracey's observations. "Young children make the most progress," she shares, "both physically and cognitively, and in the shortest time." Breen explains: "children tend to be fearless and want to try new things. Their bodies are still growing and learning. While some riders come out for recreational purposes, others want to learn to ride so lessons are tailored accordingly."

Three years ago Susan Liebig of Rockwood, Ont., was in search of something – anything – for her son Kevin, now 11, who has cerebral palsy, to take part in. Her daughter, Kevin's older sister, is very active and involved in everything. Kids Ability directed Liebig to Sunrise. Kevin loves all kinds of animals, so she knew riding would suit him. But more importantly, Kevin becomes frustrated by his inability to walk... riding was a way for him to be independent.

"Trying to balance [doctor] appointments and family activities was a struggle in the beginning," recalls Liebig. But now the Liebig family calls Sunday their "half day adventure." They drive half an hour to the farm, Kevin has his lesson, and then they drive back home. It's family time.

"Parents know their child best," offers Liebig. "If you are willing to try and it's something you want to do, do it;" she recommends. "They (Sunrise) have given Kevin so much. He has gained more responsibility from taking care of his equine partner. Kevin loves that as much as riding." She explains that her son's left hand is usually "all over the place because he has very little control over it." She knows she will never forget the day that she saw Kevin do something he had never done. "I almost fell off my chair when he steadily held his left hand in front of him. I had never seen him do that anywhere else, except on the horse. Riding has given him better control and much more self-confidence. To see the look of pride on his face while riding is truly amazing."



Working with horses encourages communication, patience and acceptance. Children who have

issues interacting with other people seem to have less trouble with horses. Christine Ryan says riding has given her son Brendan an "emotional attachment to another being" which is very rare for him. She says he really looks forward to riding day and will ask for his horse by name.

"Horses and kids are often linked," says Louise Kennedy, an assistant instructor, and a 10-year volunteer at CARD (Community Association for Riding for the Disabled) in Toronto and TEAD (The Equestrian Association for the Disabled) in Hamilton. "There is an emotional response and sensory benefits from the warm fuzzy animal that provides a friend. Horses, with their big eyes and attentive ears, just wait for you to pet them. Emotional benefits come from the unconditional love horses give, and the way they greet you."

Steffanie Bjorgan, owner and executive director of Red Roof Retreat in Niagara-on-the-Lake, which offers horseback riding for kids with disabilities, approaches her programming a little differently. Bjorgan doesn't refer to her program as 'therapeutic riding'. "I don't call it therapy because that may not be the goal," she explains. "It could be strictly a recreational activity, or an activity to improve personal skills. But if you call it therapy, something that they've all done for so long, it may not appeal to them. Kids benefit from riding because they don't really have a concept of what they will gain; they just see it as a fun experience. Their parents may have predetermined goals but kids just want to ride."

When searching for a therapeutic riding centre, Bjorgan cautions: "Do your homework." She recommends calling

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ahead and arranging a visit with the child and staff. She is a firm believer in the importance of a child seeing what riding is, where they will be going and meeting the animals before the first lesson day.

Breen also stresses the importance of research. "Be aware that in Canada, any facility can call itself a therapeutic riding centre. Parents should be specifically looking for a centre with riding instructors who are certified to be working with individuals with disabilities."

Some centres have waiting lists, so it is a good idea to start looking as soon as you can. Most have websites and it's a good idea to make use of them, to learn more about what a facility offers, what to expect, safety procedures, prices and expectations.

Therapeutic riding can also be a family affair. Family members can also experience the program and its benefits through volunteering. "Centres cannot operate without volunteers," asserts Kennedy. "Helping out in the barn can work to dispel parents' fears, nerves or reservations."

But aside from being passionate volunteers, parents play an important role in their child's success in these programs. "Parent involvement is key because we are the bridge of knowledge for the team," Ryan affirms. "We as parents are a reference for the child's likes and dislikes, their behaviour patterns and possible safety issues. And of course, an obvious point to support our involvement is for emotional support to ensure a positive riding experience for our kids. Add to that, offering ideas on how to further challenge them as well."

The skills learned during therapeutic riding, such as confidence and self-esteem, flow from the farm into everyday life and the classroom. Children become more confident, more social and "more risk takers in a good way," points out Bjorgan.

Kennedy agrees. "Often it's self-confidence, knowing that they're doing something special. They have a sport, especially if they can't compete in soccer or hockey. New friendships develop between riders, riders and horses and riders and staff, that can last a lifetime."

For Ryan's son Brendan, he has developed an interest and trust in his horse that his mom calls "inspiring. Riding has been the most beneficial activity for him not only physically but emotionally and socially as well." Ryan takes great pleasure in watching her son take nothing but joy from riding. "There are a few things in Brendan's life that give him true happiness and comfort and riding is top of the list. I love being able to witness that," she says. "As a parent of a special needs child, a lot of things are difficult. Anything can happen to change the course of an event. Riding has been such a constant source of normalcy for us."

BACK IN THE SADDLE *Unlimited physical, cognitive, emotional and communicative benefits come from therapeutic riding, complementing traditional treatments and medicines.*

PHYSICAL BENEFITS

- Mobility and flexibility
- Balance
- Co-ordination
- Muscle tone and control
- Core strength
- Concentration
- Proprioception (stimulates sensory receptors for increased mind-to-muscle response)
- Fine motor skills
- Posture

EMOTIONAL BENEFITS

- Independence
- Self-confidence
- Motivation
- Patience
- Acceptance
- Emotional control
- Self discipline
- Cooperation

SOCIAL BENEFITS

- Interaction with others
- Communication skills
- Relationship building

For more information, or a certified therapeutic riding centre/instructor near you, contact the Canadian Therapeutic Riding Association at (519) 767-0700 or visit: www.cantra.ca.



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