Benefits of Equine-assisted Activities and Therapies

Working with horses can have a major physical and emotional impact on people with a wide variety of issues and disabilities. A few (but not all) issues and disabilities for which EAAT are useful are listed below.

Cerebral Palsy
People of all ages with cerebral palsy may enjoy interacting with horses. Children can learn a sport such as riding to share with their peers. Adults may treasure riding as a lifelong leisure activity. Horseback riding requires skills including good posture, coordination and balance to direct the horse. Riders with cerebral palsy may progress from riding with walkers to riding independently. Some people with cerebral palsy may prefer to learn carriage driving and may even be able to drive from their own wheelchair in a specially designed carriage.

Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)
Children with attention deficit disorder (ADD) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) have difficulties with attention and self-control of behavior. Therapeutic horsemanship requires attention to the instructor and the horse. Children who participate in a riding program are taught sequential steps for learning to control their horse and becoming more independent. Riding lessons can be modified in length to accommodate for decreased attention span.

Autism
Children and adults with autism participate in a variety of PATH Intl. center programs including riding, driving, vaulting, hippotherapy and equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP). Both equine-assisted activities, such as riding and vaulting, and equine-assisted therapy, such as hippotherapy or psychotherapy, can impact the life of a person with autism.

Bass, Duchowny, and Llabre (2008) studied the effects of hippotherapy or psychotherapy, can impact the life of a person with autism. They found the children with autism participating in a 12 week therapy program are taught sequential steps for learning to control their horse and becoming more independent. Riding lessons can be modified in length to accommodate for decreased attention span.

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Why horses?

New scientific research continues to reveal critical information about equine sentience—their abilities of perception, cognition, memory, and emotions such as pain and fear. Equines are able to perceive, respond to and learn from the impressions they receive from minimal sensory stimuli. The stimulus may originate from changes in human biochemistry, body language or vocal intonations. It can also come from changes in the equine’s environment, relationships with other equines or the equine’s general health. In this way, equines make decisions based upon the stimuli they experience from others or from their environment (Hangg, 2005; Nicol, 2002; Proops, McComb, & Reby, 2009; Saslow, 2002).

These abilities are based in natural, biological, physiological and psychological traits of equines. Each equine is unique in personality and has individual likes, dislikes and habits. The information gained from equine communication can be highly useful in all EAAT settings. Listening to equine communication can have an effect on the care of the equines, their rate of burnout and the success of the human-equine interaction. In EAAT sessions or lessons, viewing the equine as a partner invites opportunities for relationship building and skill building with all participants served.