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NEURODIVERSITY ISSUE

Making Sense

Expand Your Toolbox

Successful Strategies for Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Neurodiversity: Making the Invisible Visible

PATH INTERNATIONAL

EXPAND YOUR TOOLBOX

By Marissa LaGassey

PHOTOS COURTESY OF RIDING TO THE TOP

TIPS FOR TEACHING EAAT TO PARTICIPANTS WITH ASD

Chances are, if you work in the equine-assisted activities and therapies (EAAT) field, you are serving individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). As the understanding of this diagnosis continues to change and develop in real time, the tools for working with this population continue to evolve. Because the behaviors and signs associated with ASD may vary depending on the individual, this makes one toolbox seem inadequate. Yet some considerations are universal.

Because a participant's exposure to EAAT is often fairly limited, usually one hour or less each week, it is important that this time is purposeful, objective-driven and goal-oriented. Understanding the life goals, strengths and struggles of participants helps to create a jumping-off point for session goals and lesson objectives. While the role of a PATH Intl. Certified Professional is to establish and work toward horsemanship skills, in addition, those skills should promote the life goals of each participant. Individuals, families and caretakers are the best source of information about what might be motivating and helpful for participants, as well as what is likely to be difficult or triggering. These details can aid in planning lessons and in creating a learning environment that will be more comfortable for participants.

Because a horse stable can be a very sensory experience with unusual sounds, sights and smells, it's important to create a consistent routine and expectations for successfully introducing EAAT to participants with ASD.

FACILITATING COMMUNICATION AND INTERACTION

Difficulty with social communication and interaction are defining characteristics of ASD, with about one third of individuals being nonverbal. Regardless of the level of support an individual might require in social communication and interaction, understanding each individual's preferred style of communication is important. Participants who are nonverbal may use a communication board; the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), which allows communication using pictures; symbols; sign language or other similar systems. For those requiring less support, avoid longwinded explanations, metaphors and imagery, which can be difficult to process.

Intake assessments are an opportunity to ask and learn about an individual's communication strategies in their day-to-day life. This allows time to prepare and gather the appropriate tools for the first lesson. If you are unfamiliar with a certain tool or technique, participants, parents and caregivers may be able to point out helpful resources or act as resources. Integrating the communication techniques and tools a participant is accustomed to as a part of EAAT will help alleviate confusion and create a sense of familiarity. Asking a participant to begin a new activity and a new communication style at the same time is likely to be overwhelming and frustrating for everyone involved.

No matter what communication method is used, be sure to create strong cause-and-effect relationships so the participant knows when their action resulted in a reaction from the equine. For example, if you want to teach a participant to tap the horse with their hand to go forward, in the beginning, any attempt to do this should result in the horse moving on. While participants may communicate effectively outside of EAAT, they may not have the language for these new experiences to begin. Being consistent from the onset of the activity can help create a new

system of communication everyone understands. It is critical to include volunteers and caregivers in this process to ensure consistency across the team. Clear, concrete and concise communication is important for individuals with ASD who require any level of support for social communication and interaction.

HANDLING RESTRICTED AND REPETITIVE BEHAVIORS

Manifestation of restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests or activities among participants with ASD varies as widely as differences in social communication and interaction. This might include the presence, or history, of at least two of the following:

- repetitive motor movements, use of objects or speech
- insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns
- highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus
- hyper- or hypo-reactivity to sensory input
- unusual interests in sensory aspects of the environment

Simply being on a farm is a very sensory experience with unusual sounds, sights and smells. Creating a consistent routine and expectations in this new environment is critical for the successful introduction of EAAT to participants with ASD. Although being on a farm with animals comes with a degree of unpredictability and flux, in many ways, EAAT is inherently routine. Instructors establish a process that must be followed each lesson before participants can ride, drive or work on the ground with an equine. Deliberately introducing a consistent routine, including the how's and why's of each step, can help participants adjust and gain confidence. Planning each interaction breeds a sense of calm and consistency, allowing them to feel more comfortable with changes to routine that are outside of an instructor's control, such as an unexpected horse change or an absent volunteer.

Because a participant's exposure to EAAT is often fairly limited, usually one hour or less each week, it is important that a session is purposeful, objective-driven and goal-oriented.

MAKE SPACE FOR THE FAMILIAR

For participants with restricted interests, it may be hard to get them to focus on and be motivated by this new activity. Plan for time in a lesson where discussion about their interest is permissible. Create clear boundaries around this so the participant understands they will have an opportunity to discuss their interests and knows when that time will be by using "first, then" statements. For individuals who may be hyper-focused on a certain activity, such as a certain toy or game, plan to make it a part of the lesson, but set a time limit. Spending an entire lesson on that one activity may be enjoyable for the participant, but it does not promote growth and likely does not progress the lesson, session and life goals for the participant. Creating a small amount of space for the activity or interest gives them something to look forward to while still working toward the lesson objective.

This is the strategy an instructor used with Nate, who loves to play with the See 'n Say when he comes to riding. He is nonverbal and uses PEC symbols to communicate. Throughout a typical lesson he will make choices between two activities he would like to complete. If the See 'n Say is an option, he will choose it every time, often looking around the immediate environment for the image when it is not an option. Because of this, the symbol

Make the best attempt at horse and tack choice before the equine-assisted activity or session begins, while staying open to the fact that seemingly suitable choices may not work out as expected.

stays hidden away until his instructor is ready to present that choice. The See 'n Say does have benefits for Nate; it requires strength and gross motor skills to pull the knob. It helps with animal recognition and allows him to practice transitioning in and out of an activity he enjoys. However, if the entire lesson is spent on the See 'n Say, Nate doesn't get as much input from the horse's movement, he doesn't have as many opportunities to practice fine motor skills and he avoids interacting with volunteers and his horse.

DOCUMENTING PROGRESS

Just as planning lessons is important to growth and productivity, so too is documentation. By documenting what happened, including strengths, weaknesses, triggers and enjoyable moments, an instructor can better detect patterns and learn from past experiences. Without documentation, an idea from the end of one lesson may be totally lost by the time the next lesson comes around. This is not only helpful week to week, but is valuable in the case of a substitute instructor or instruction change. Documentation means not having to reinvent the wheel with each visit or staffing change.

Documentation should be specific and pertinent. For example, saying, "Jake had a great lesson today!" isn't particularly informative, but saying, "Jake was able to maintain two-point position for six steps by placing his hands on a towel on the horse's neck and counting to six with his team," tells how the instructor created a positive experience and offers ideas for how to build off of that growth.

MAKING EQUINE CHOICES

When choosing the best equine match for a participant, many factors must be considered: horse and participant size, level of support needed, a horse's workload, tolerance for unexpected behavior (for both horses and participants), speed, gait and demeanor. Some of the questions you should ask are:

- Will the participant need a lot of physical support from sidewalkers? A shorter horse allows sidewalkers to more easily reach the participant and will be preferable to a tall one.
- Is the participant particularly anxious? Horses with less unexpected behavior are going to help participants feel at ease.

- Is the participant likely to make loud, unexpected noises? Make sure the horse is not reactive to sounds.
- Do you expect the participant to move slowly and require time to get comfortable? Pick a horse that doesn't mind standing still.
- Does the participant have hypersensitivity to feeling unbalanced? Choose a horse with a wide base of support and steady movement.
- Is the participant a sensory seeker? Select a horse with a quicker gate and concussive foot fall.

Some factors will be more obvious, while others may come as a surprise. Kayla, for instance, is a participant with ASD and a lot of anxiety. Believing that a slower horse would make her more comfortable, she was started on a medium-sized Quarter Horse with a slow, steady gait and lots of patience for standing. In theory, it was the perfect choice, but over time subtle issues came to light. The horse sometimes sneezed, which was upsetting for Kayla, and not possible to control. The more surprising discovery was that Kayla was unsettled by the horse's low headset. Equipped with this information, a similarly sized Morgan with a much faster pace, higher headset and similar patience for standing seemed a better match. Despite good intentions and thoughtfulness, sometimes a horse-rider pair is a total miss, while an unlikely pair turns out to make a great team. Remember this cooperation may not happen in the first lesson. It can be tempting to make horse changes after a single lesson, but it is important to give both the horse and rider a chance to find harmony, unless there are obvious safety concerns.

TACK CHOICE

Just like horse choice, tack choice is often a work in progress. While it is useful to try to foresee challenges, some challenges may not become clear until the lesson has begun. Consider areas such as sensory input, comfort of horse and rider, practicality and safety. When adapting equipment, it is important to be aware of any impact those adaptations might have on pre-existing safety features, as well as the safety of the adaptation itself. No adaptation should restrict the participant's ability to fall freely from the horse or the equipment. The adaptation should also be the least restrictive approach needed for support and should promote independence. Some adaptations may be used for the duration of a participant's time engaging in EAAT while others may be temporary. The purpose and intent of the adaptation should be considered at the onset. Does it advance the lesson and life goals of the participant? Is it necessary for completion of the session? Could it be used as a supplement during a lesson and have the same impact?

Holding beanie babies with the reins may be a fun way to engage the participant in steering to start, but it is probably not practical for continued use. Think before the lesson about how you will introduce and remove the equipment, toy or supplement. Consider alternatives to adaptive tack that may cause over stimulation to the senses: touch, smell, sound, balance and proprioception. Rainbow reins, for example, might help a participant keep their reins the correct length, but the bumpy rubber may be intolerable to hold. The desired effect could be achieved using fabric reins with colored stoppers or by simply placing vet wrap, clips or tape on leather reins to indicate where to hold. Keeping a record of tack setups and equipment a participant is comfortable with can help prevent last-minute tack changes or the need to adjust the participant's stirrups each week. Some tack choices may be nonnegotiable for certain horses, so consider how this may impact the participant and the need for potential adaptations.

ARENA SETUP

When setting up the arena, it is important to make sure you have enough choice and variety while still keeping the arena uncluttered. Consider items and obstacles that can serve multiple purposes. Multi-colored cones can be used for steering practice as well as color identification activities. Ground poles can be used to practice two-point or as "stalls" during a game.

Consider an arena design that can be broken down into smaller steps and then sequenced together. A good example is practicing steering using serpentines. Start with a simple two-loop serpentine, then add a three-loop serpentine and finally, combine the two- and three-loop serpentine paths to create a four-loop serpentine. The participant can practice three distinct patterns in each direction, creating variety and allowing for skill progression. Using colors, letters, numbers and clear landmarks can help with instruction and direction throughout the lesson. The best arena setup speaks for itself and can be explained in a few words or short phrases. For some participants, consistent arena setups can be helpful. Try introducing changes slowly while still providing variety through the objective.

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In any lesson, deliberately introducing a consistent routine, including the how's and why's of each step, can help participants adjust and gain confidence.

GAMES

Be careful not to confuse complicated instructions with difficulty. Games with simple rules and little setup can still provide challenges for participants. Musical walk and whoa, musical two-point and musical stalls target various skills and use a concrete indicator for the given task. A Twister board is another amazing jumping-off point. Set up pairs of colored cones that correspond to Twister colors and have participants spin to create their own steering pattern. Increase the challenge by increasing the number of spins, and therefore gates, in the steering sequence. Be creative and have fun while keeping the objective clear and instructions simple.

When working with those with ASD, no two participants will be the same, but that does not mean the same tools don't apply. Remember to start by understanding an individual's life goals. Learn about their communication style and what levels of support they require in daily life. Create structure and plan for things that can be controlled. Document progress, challenges and strengths. Make the best attempt at horse and tack choice before the equine-assisted activity or session begins, while staying open to the fact that seemingly suitable choices may not work out as expected. Think outside the box when it comes to arena setup and games, but don't confuse complexity with challenge. Keep in mind the most important tools are creativity and curiosity. Include the participant as much as possible in all of the areas mentioned, as they can provide the most direct feedback. Work closely with parents and caregivers, and don't be afraid to ask for help or suggestions when needed. Every individual is different and while experience may provide some insight, each participant deserves an instructor open to change and growth.

Marissa LaGassey is a PATH Intl. Certified Registered Instructor, CTRI and ESMHL at Riding to the Top, a PATH Intl. Premier Accredited Center in Windham, ME. She has been an instructor at the center since 2013, teaching therapeutic riding lessons and other equine-assisted activities part time. Marissa also works in a hospital setting, teaching students with behavioral needs requiring inpatient-level care. She can be reached at lagasseym@gmail.com.