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**PRESS RELEASE**

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **“Riding To The Top to host research study on the benefits of Therapeutic Riding”**

**WINDHAM, Maine.** The University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus (CU Anschutz) in Aurora, Colorado, in collaboration with the Maine Medical Center Research Institute, has been awarded a \$2.5 million grant to study why therapeutic horseback riding benefits children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), particularly children who have co-occurring psychiatric diagnoses.

A previous study by Principal Investigator Robin Gabriels, PsyD, a CU Anschutz researcher and Children’s Hospital Colorado psychologist, showed that a 10-week therapeutic horseback riding intervention reduced irritability and hyperactivity while improving the social and communication skills of youth diagnosed with ASD. To learn why, Gabriels is now teaming up with MMCRI Faculty Scientist Mathew Siegel, M.D., the study’s co-investigator and leader of the Autism and Developmental Disorders Service of Maine Behavioral Healthcare.

“This study is exciting because it’s not often we have a chance to try to understand why something works,” Siegel said. “Learning why will hopefully help us create other interventions that could address challenges that children with ASD face.”

The 5-year-study is the largest of its kind and will include roughly 142 children between the ages of 6 and 16 with ASD.

### **The Maine Connection:**

The Maine portion of the study will be conducted at Riding To The Top Therapeutic Riding Center (RTT) in Windham, a PATH Intl. (Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship) Premier Accredited Center providing year round equine assisted activities and therapies for people with disabilities. The research will begin this summer at Riding To The Top. After going through an eligibility screening at MMCRI, children will be randomly assigned to the therapeutic horseback riding group or a barn group (non-riding) for 10-week interventions. Both groups will wear heart rate monitors and wrist bands that record changes in electrodermal activity during each visit. Saliva samples will also be taken before and 20 minutes after the interventions to measure levels of the stress hormone cortisol.

Sarah Bronson, PT, Executive Director at RTT said “We are honored be involved in this ground breaking research. It will provide essential data as to the specific physiological changes that occur during therapeutic riding lending further understanding about the impact of therapeutic riding on social and emotional regulation.” Bronson noted that they are in the process of recruiting volunteers to assist with the research.

### **Reducing medication use and hospital stays**

“This current study will focus on looking at the physiological mechanisms that may explain our previously observed benefits of (therapeutic riding), particularly in a high-risk subset of youth with ASD and co-occurring psychiatric diagnoses,” said Gabriels. This study will investigate how therapeutic horseback riding can help these children regulate their emotions so they don’t overreact in a dangerous manner. Gabriels noted, “If we can show horseback riding is emotionally regulating, perhaps we can reduce the need for so much medication and help keep them out of the hospital.”

**Those interested in potentially participating or volunteering in this study should call RTT at 207-892-2813, X22 and ask to speak to Kate Jeton, Program Director.**

### **PHOTOS**

**Photo One: Shot of lesson in RTT arena**

**Photo Two: RTT rider, TJ McAllister on Babe during a therapeutic riding lesson, with Instructor, Kate Jeton, PATH Intl. CTRI on left and RTT volunteer, Donna Warren on right.**

### **About Riding to the Top**

Founded in 1993, Riding To The Top Therapeutic Riding Center’s (RTT) mission is enhancing health and wellness through equine assisted activities and therapies. Located in Windham, RTT is the Maine’s only year round PATH Intl. (Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship) Premier Accredited Center solely dedicated to serving people with disabilities through equine assisted activities and therapies. Annually, more than 250 clients participate in programs, assisted by PATH Intl certified instructors, over 250 volunteers, and a herd of 18 horses, all specially trained to assist with therapeutic riding, carriage driving, equine assisted learning and hippotherapy. RTT is a community-based nonprofit, receives no federal or state funding and provides scholarships to over 60% of its clients. For more information about client services, volunteering, or making a gift, please visit us at [www.ridingtothetop.org](http://www.ridingtothetop.org) or call 892-2813.

### **About the Maine Medical Center Research Institute (MMCRI)**

MMCRI is the research arm of Maine Medical Center and seeks to enhance the health of our population through excellence in research across the spectrum of the biomedical and health sciences. For more information, visit <http://mmcri.org/ns/>

### **About Maine Behavioral Healthcare**

Maine Behavioral Healthcare is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization serving more than 20,000 children, adolescents and adults at over 30 locations throughout southern, western, and mid-coast Maine, providing a continuum of coordinated mental healthcare from outpatient community offices to inpatient acute care at Spring Harbor Hospital. For more information, please visit [mainebehavioralhealthcare.org](http://mainebehavioralhealthcare.org).

### **About the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus**

The University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus is a world-class medical destination at the forefront of transformative science, medicine, education, and patient care. For more information, visit <https://www.cuanschutz.edu/>

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