

Equine Assisted Activities and Benefits for Persons with Autism

By Melissa Kasper Yarbrough

Depending on the disability, benefits of horseback riding include improvement in joint mobility, balance and coordination, relaxation of spasticity, increased muscle tone, self-confidence through self-image, improved learning, concentration, spatial awareness, and motivation to set and achieve goals. Riders also benefit emotionally, through the unique bonds they form with their horses and our dedicated volunteers. Most important is that riding a horse is fun! From the beginning, riders learn balance, coordination and self-assurance while receiving therapeutic muscle stimulation. As a result of carefully planned lessons, poise posture, strength and flexibility improve. A strong sense of responsibility develops as the rider learns to take part in the care of the horses and equipment. Advanced equestrian skills, teamwork and cooperation are learned as the rider becomes independent on horseback. Finally classes, horse shows and events encourage confidence, self-esteem and a sense of accomplishment as new levels of expertise and new goals are met.

For children and adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders, Equine Assisted Activities address the deficit areas of communication and social skills, lowered sensory skills, motor skills, and response to verbal cues and external stimuli. For children and adults with Autism, they learn to communicate verbally and physically with their horse, and receive immediate feedback from the horse. Riders with Autism also work on focusing on something that is outside themselves, whether it is an activity they are doing on the horse or the movement of the horse underneath them. During their sessions, riders with Autism are able to interact and communicate with fellow riders, volunteers and instructors. They learn to respond to verbal and physical cues from the instructor and volunteers during their session. Finally, while they are building a trusting relationship with the staff and horses, they are also getting to exercise and have fun.

If you would like more information on becoming a part of the Saddle Up Therapeutic Riding Program as a participant, volunteer, or sponsor please check out the website at www.saddleupridingclub.org. If you would like to enroll a rider please contact the Program Director, Melissa Kasper Yarbrough, via email at mkasper@saddleupridingclub.org

