

Health Benefits of Therapeutic Riding

Look up any Therapeutic Horseback Riding Centre on the internet and they will list ways that people with special needs can benefit from the awesome experience of riding or just being with horses.

Most research sites the benefits to the rider in the areas of physical, cognitive, communicative, social and emotional well being. During World War 1, therapeutic riding gained recognition in England when horses were used to help wounded soldiers rehabilitate and gain self motivation. In 1952, Liz Hartell, disabled by polio, won silver in dressage at the Helsinki Olympics and brought the value of the horse/human connection to the world stage. Credibility for Therapeutic riding has continually increased and is recognized by the medical profession, educators, physical, occupational, speech-language therapists and mental health practitioners as a beneficial treatment option for their clients.

Red Roof Retreat, a Niagara Region charity, has been helping children and young adults with special needs since 1990. Starting out by offering summer camp on a hobby, they now own an 11 acre property known as “The Ranch”, where they offer weekend respite. Respite provides a fun-filled weekend at an accessible home out in the country, while their families get a much needed break. In 2007, Red Roof Retreat started offering horseback riding to their special needs clients. Medical professionals, therapists and teachers have long recognized the benefits of riding as great addition to traditional approaches of intervention. With the addition to the existing barn, and the purchase of “just the right horse”, the riding program has become very popular.

But why horses? Well, humans can learn from their equine friends. Horses are non-judgmental and eager to learn and work together. They are trusting don't care about anyone's limitations.

From a physical perspective, horseback riding can improve balance, posture, core strength, mobility and function. The sensory input provided by the horses' rhythmic, repetitive gait creates a response in the rider that is similar to the natural movement of walking. Postural control is an important goal for many riders as it helps with breathing, digestion, circulation and of course mobility. Lessons focus on body awareness, balance in motion, and praxis (the ability to plan and organize movement). As postural control improves, so does neck and head control, fine motor skills and vision. In time, and depending on ability, some riders can move to more independent riding using rein or leg aids, or voice commands to direct the horse. But it is more than just “the ride”. As Physiotherapist Tamie Aubin from Woodstock, Ontario points out, “Children with sensory processing difficulties benefit from riding as it is a multisensory experience in a non-clinical environment. Their bodies respond to the natural movement of the horse, as well as all the aspects of grooming and caring for the horse. They engage all their senses while learning in an alternate setting.”

From a social and emotional perspective, we know that the key to good health is being happy and living in the moment. People with special needs can be limited by the

experience they have access to. But with good planning, providing opportunities to work with or ride a horse, helps the rider overcome obstacles, build self confidence and feel success, often in ways their able bodied peers have never even experienced! Connecting with horse is so emotionally powerful and positive. The bond that can be created on mutual trust is immeasurable. Margaret Coates, author of “Connecting with Horses” says, “Horses can get right inside our heads and hearts, a connection that has endless possibilities”. For many people with special needs, riding a horse is indeed a happy, unique and empowering opportunity.

The benefits are obvious and subtle, big and small, instant and progressive. So if children and young adults with cerebral palsy, spina bifida, Down’s Syndrome, autism, vision and hearing impairments to name a few, can feel better after a day at the farm with their equine partners, imagine what you can do. So support a local riding centre, or better yet, get out there, saddle up, ride on and feel better too!

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Red Roof Retreat: providing respite, recreation and riding for those with special needs
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