

Why riding's the best therapy

Find out about the equine-based therapy that's changing the lives of physically-challenged individuals and their families

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OUR EXPERT

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It's easy to take our bodies for granted. Basic tasks from dressing ourselves to walking are second nature, while simple pleasures like riding a bike and kicking a football come naturally. Now imagine a life where these things don't come naturally, where you're trapped in your own body, unable to move properly or do things for yourself. That's what many children and adults with physical disabilities face on a daily basis. But thanks to our four-legged equine friends, many of these people are quite literally finding their feet again.

Hippotherapy is a form of riding therapy that helps people build their core, manipulate their muscles and tap into their inner strength. It can help them learn to walk, move more naturally and do things for themselves.

Believe it or not, it has nothing to do with hippopotamuses! Derived from the Greek word 'hippos' meaning 'horse', hippotherapy literally refers to treatment or therapy aided by horses. Originally developed to help people with physical disabilities, these days it's branched out to help those who are mentally handicapped too, but this tends to be known under the umbrella term, equine-assisted therapy.

Read on to find out more about this amazing therapy and find out how horses have changed two little boys' lives for the better.



Turn the page to find out how Jay's time in the saddle has improved his life

Stretching exercises on the horse help children develop their balance



How hippotherapy works

“Hippotherapy is a multi-sensory experience for people who suffer from neurological conditions or injuries and those with muscular-skeletal injuries,” explains Valerie. “The movement of a horse’s back in walk actually mimics the human pelvis in walk. The forwards and backwards, side-to-side and turning motion exerted on a human’s trunk and the constant repetition of movement helps to relieve tight muscles and build existing muscles which in-turn improve a person’s mobility on the ground.

“The repetitive and rhythmical movement of the pelvis helps to free up the muscles in the spine and normalise muscle tone. It enables the

muscles to work in a more normal way, allowing for good posture both on the horse and on the ground.”

Valerie explains that hippotherapy differs from the excellent work done by the Riding for the Disabled Association (RDA), although RDA volunteers and leaders work closely with therapists. “The RDA uses therapeutic riding techniques to teach children to ride, help them to learn and, in turn, become more mobile,” she says. “Hippotherapy is used by physiotherapists and is usually done on a saddle pad without a saddle to allow for more freedom of movement.

“Many RDA riders go for hippotherapy sessions to help them improve their riding and sometimes, riders with a very specific disability might have hippotherapy sessions before they join RDA classes to help them gain strength.

“Depending on each individual patient’s case, hippotherapy might consist of non-conventional riding techniques. For example, an individual may need their pelvis to tilt backwards slightly, so riders may sit backwards on the horse. They might sit sideways or prop themselves up on the horse using their hands. They might even lie or kneel on the horse depending on what they’re trying to achieve. It’s an interesting sight, but it works wonders. “In hippotherapy, patients don’t

Leaning of the horse helps to develop their core balance



tend to trot - walk is the optimum gait to mimic a human’s natural walking movement. Some therapists might suggest different paces of walk or walk-to-halt transitions. These sorts of changes in pace will help to activate and develop core muscles.

“Patients undergoing hippotherapy are led by an experienced leader to ensure the horse develops a truer movement, as if he was actually ‘on the bit’.

“In cases where patients are severely disabled, physios may perform back-riding, which is where they sit behind the patient on the horse so they can help to manipulate their movements.

“Hippotherapy can also be beneficial for able-bodied riders who want to improve their position and their riding and it’s of huge benefit to both adults and children alike.”



EXPERT TIP

Many patients with movement difficulties use their arms and legs to balance, but horse riding and hippotherapy teaches them to use their core for balance in order to free up their arms and legs for steering and staying in control.

RDA exercises help children with their mobility



Jay loves his time in the saddle

How riding helped Jay to walk

At the RDA centre in Cambridgeshire, the focus is on the therapeutic aspects of riding for children with autism and learning difficulties. The students perform different activities while on board, from counting to throwing balls and reaching high and low to touch plastic poles.

However staff and volunteers still notice, and are astounded by, the physical benefits riding has for their students.

Jay Lumsden-Din suffers from cerebral palsy, a neurological condition that affects a child’s movement and coordination. Before he started riding, he couldn’t walk to the mounting block and needed the horse to come to him. But after a few sessions, he took his first steps unaided in his classroom and now moves much freely around school and at home. His teachers and parents believe it’s thanks to the repetitive

walking movements during his riding lessons that helped to build his strength. The team at the RDA were thrilled to hear of his progress and he now finds the exercises on board the horses much easier too. He can stretch and bend and hold himself up with ease.

“Riding is such a beneficial therapy,” says Jay’s RDA instructor Bella Craven. “If you look at pictures of the Para-riders when they’re on board a horse, you’d struggle to tell that they’re disabled. It’s amazing what riding can do for disabled people once they’re back on the ground too. Some of the famous Para-riders we saw take to the stage at London 2012, from Natasha Baker to Sophie Christiansen, started out in the RDA after advice from their physiotherapists, and just look at them now!

“No matter how physically



Jay can now walk short distances thanks to his riding

challenged they are, all the children we teach always communicate their enjoyment of seeing the world from a new perspective. Quite often, children with autism or learning difficulties don’t get the chance to join in with many sports, so riding helps to get them moving.

“The rhythm and repetition of the horse’s movement gives them the ability and confidence to tackle new things at home and school and we’re thrilled to be a part of this learning process with them.”

HOW YOU CAN HELP

All RDA groups welcome new volunteers to get involved with fundraising projects and help with the horses and riders. For more information on how to get involved in your area, visit www.rda.org.uk

Why riding’s meant piggy-back fun for Ben

Ben is an eight-year-old boy who, like Jay, has cerebral palsy. He’s unable to sit upright on his own and the muscles in his legs are extremely stiff and tight, so he can’t stand or walk properly. He struggles to communicate through speech and has to make himself understood with sounds and facial expressions.

He was referred to Valerie for hippotherapy sessions by his community physiotherapist. Valerie and physiotherapy students from Robert Gordon University carried out the treatment, using the movement of the horse to aid normal postural reactions and muscle work.

They were helped by volunteers from Gordon RDA group using a very special pony called Roycey to stimulate Ben’s postural reactions and free up the tight muscles in his legs and pelvis.

Ben has been having the hippotherapy sessions for a year now. Since the start of his riding sessions, he’s gone from strength to strength. When he first started, he needed Valerie to ride behind him for support but now he’s able to sit and balance and prop himself up with his hands all on his own.

His sitting balance and range of movement in his legs now makes it easier for his parents to move him at home and perform basic tasks such as dressing him.

Ben’s dad has even been able to give him his first ever piggy-back ride as the horse riding has helped improve the mobility in his legs. Most importantly Ben loves riding Roycey and is taking a more active part in his therapy every week. 🐾



Riding has helped Ben to become more mobile