

Therapeutic riding is so much more than horse play

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Eddie Brennan is all charged up. The hyper 4-year-old, who is autistic, has already charged through a puddle, and writhes as his nanny struggles to remove his shoes and socks.

But when Brennan climbs on the back of Kattie, a dark bay therapy horse, something magical happens.

The kinetic little boy becomes like Jell-O, melting into the horse, contented and somehow soothed. He sits or lays on its back - even rides backward. It's as if he has a connection to the horse.

For 25 years, the nonprofit Therapeutic Riding Center at the Huntington Beach Central Park Equestrian Center has offered riding therapies to people with special needs ranging from autism to epilepsy.

For much of that time, Donna Brandt, president of the group and the lead instructor, has been at the center of the action. A longtime horsewoman, Brandt became involved after her daughter, Jamie, was diagnosed as severely developmentally delayed.

Like many parents with challenged children, Brandt tried numerous activities and therapies to find one that engaged her child.

"We tried them all. This is the one she liked best," Brandt said. "She'll sit around all day and wait to go riding. This is the one that stuck."

Parents and caretakers are almost unanimous - there's something about horses. The relationships and bonds the children form with the animals can be transformative.

Katy Prill is all about drama, according to her father, David Gill. The 17-year-old, who has Down syndrome and recently recovered from leukemia, often tries to make big productions out of small things and can act out.

But on this day, she hops right onto Wilma, a big bay, without any histrionics.

"Hey, dad, look at me," she calls out, waving.

"She's almost unrecognizable," Gill, 44, said of his daughter and the progress she has made since becoming involved with therapeutic riding.

On the horse, Prill is focused and confident, two things lacking since her move from Redding, in Northern California, to Huntington Beach four years ago.

"When she came down, this was one of her first activities," Gill said. "She was very fearful."

On a warm, dusty day at the Huntington Beach Equestrian Center, parents talked about the self-confidence it gave the children. They feel the experience improves cognitive, physical, emotional and social well-being.

Brandt said people who use wheelchairs can build core strength by riding a horse. It also builds self-confidence. Brandt said something as simple as a change in perspective - looking down from horseback rather than up from a chair - can feel empowering.

Plus, the lessons are conducted outdoors and away from therapy rooms.

"This is one of the therapies (disabled people) don't give up on," Brandt said. "There's something about animals."

Gill said when his daughter plays softball or soccer, it is about the social experience. On a horse she is more purposeful.

"There's a maturity that comes with it," he said.

Karen Starky, 54, says the program has been a "savior," for her daughter, Angie, 28, who has epilepsy. Starky says before her daughter was stricken, she was a fearless athlete and skier.

The disease took that away. Therapeutic riding is bringing her back.

"When she started, she could barely get on (the horse), she was so weak," Starky said.

Now Angie rides confidently and mugs for a photographer.

Danielle Stanback, 32, is a volunteer who also has epilepsy but is rebounding. She said the riding is particularly important because it pulls people out of isolation.

At the Therapeutic Riding Center, most of the riders are accompanied by three volunteers, one who leads the horse and two side-walkers, who protect riders from toppling off. Classes are an hour, once a week, Monday through Wednesday and Saturday. Riding is divided into 10-week semesters, which cost \$410 per semester. There also are scholarships for those in need, and in addition to classes, Brandt often offers special extras. This year, there was a Halloween horse parade, and she took 30 students to the 2015 Kiwanis Equestrian Competition for

Special Athletes at Hansen Dam Equestrian Center in Los Angeles.

Brandt said a film crew from South Korea was scheduled to visit to make a documentary film and possibly create a similar program.

The therapeutic capabilities of working with horses date to ancient Greece. In the 17th century, interaction with [horses](#) was prescribed for ailments ranging from gout to low morale. It was not until the 1960s, however, that equine-assisted therapy and hippotherapy was formalized.

Brandt said insurance programs don't pay for riding as therapy, but she hopes that will change.

"It's becoming more mainstream. One of these days it will be accepted," she said. "I encourage everyone to file with their insurance. One of these days "

Karina Barlow, 42, watches as her 9-year-old son, Leo, is led around the ring. He has a rare genetic defect called agenesis of the corpus callosum that affects the white matter that connects the hemispheres of the brain.

"We were trying so many things that we were overwhelmed with therapies," Barlow said.

When Leo found horse riding, she described it as something akin to souls communing.

"It's so good to know there's always a way for them to participate in the world," she said. "You realize it's just in a different way."

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