Equine Assisted Occupational Therapy
What is Special About Horses?

It is widely recognised that the interaction between people and horses has a powerful and varied benefit.

The benefits are physical, mental, emotional and intellectual. Horses compliment the work of many practitioners such as Occupational Therapists, Physiotherapists, Speech Therapist’s, Educationalists and Psychotherapists, who use equine facilitated activity to enhance their work. The movement of the horse’s walk closely mimics the human walk and through riding, the horse’s walk stimulates and synthesises the human walk making it a transformational treatment base. It provides an intense, multi-sensory experience which is highly motivating, and also promotes awareness of another being. EAOT offers the connection of being around the animal and the interaction within the stable environment, and it offers the physical act of riding. The horse’s large size, unique characteristics, and its ability to read body language are some of the significant benefits of EAOT.

Who Benefits from Therapeutic Input on Horseback?

Children with physical disabilities ranging from Cerebral Palsy to Acquired Brain Injury, Cognitive Difficulties, Mental Illness, Autism Spectrum Disorders, Sensory Processing Disorder, Developmental Delay and Social / Emotional Disorders have all responded positively to equine facilitated activity.

Individuals who are unable to bear weight are often limited in their range of exercise choices. Riding can offer an effective alternative to develop muscle tone and improve posture, with the added advantage of the dynamics of the horse’s movement. It also promotes cardiovascular fitness, supports development of fine and gross motor skills and coordination and balance, helps promote efficient sensory processing and aids with social skills. The bond that develops between human and horse, promoted through our non riding therapy, also opens up many new opportunities, such as independence skills, social competence and responsibility.
What ChildVision offers

Here at Childvision we provide a program of Equine Assisted Occupational Therapy (EAOT).

This input provides horsemanship experiences to persons with physical, sensory, mental health, psychological and intellectual disabilities in order to enhance the quality and productivity of their lives. The program involves an Occupational Therapist assessing the needs of each rider, setting goals that can be achieved within a designated timeframe, and achieving those goals through equine interaction either on an individual basis or within a group setting.

Benefits of this programme can include:

- Meaningful, personalised goal setting and achievement with high motivational incentives through the use of horses as a therapeutic tool
- Improved sensory processing abilities
- Improved learning, concentration, spatial awareness
- Improvement in joint mobility, balance and coordination
- Positive changes in muscle tone
- Increased self-confidence and social interaction skills
- An incentive and opportunity to take responsibility and control
- The transfer of learning outcomes in an equine environment to daily living skills

Occupational Therapists

Occupational Therapists are specialists at assessing areas of need, and adapting activities so that specific goals can be achieved for the person.

They are experts in the management of sensory processing difficulties. They are also trained in facilitating groups, and managing group dynamics, so that each participant gets the maximum benefit from the therapeutic input. Our service is supported by qualified riding instructors working in close collaboration with our Occupational Therapists.
Resources

In recent studies conducted to look at the efficacy of equine assisted therapy, it was found that children engaged actively in sessions and were able to listen and verbalise commands. They were also noted to have a continuous level of attention. Positive results were noted in the post test period and follow up evaluations in areas such as sensory seeking, cognition, communication, motivation, sensitivity, emotional reaction and distractibility.

The following are a number of published studies that highlight the benefit of working with horses to meet therapeutic goals:

- Bass et al., 2009; Benda, McGibbon & Grant, 2003; Rothe et al, 2004 - it is thought that riding motivates and engages the child.
- Cherng, Liao, Leung & Hwang, 2004 - The movement of the horse is a similar gait to the human walk, and the movement may encourage erect posture.
- Hardy, 2011 - the movement of the horse stimulates the sensory systems.
- Hout and Bragonje 2010 – this study tested sixty children with ASD, aged between 2 and 14 years, over a ten week period with one session a week. Their results suggest that the horse riding programme may be effective in reducing symptoms in ASD children. They found that the more sessions they had the better the outcome and the less severe participants benefited most. The areas that most improved from the therapy were sociability and sensory / cognitive awareness, while communication, and physical behaviour also improved.
- Gabriels et al 2011 - forty-two participants between six and sixteen years (36 male, 6 female) were recruited to participate in a ten week course, with each lesson lasting one hour. They found significant improvements in areas related to self-regulation, language and motor skills. They also found improvements in stereotypical behaviours, hyperactivity and irritability.
- Ghorban et al (2013) - this study also found positive results. They found the social skills of the children with autism children significantly improved.
- EAGALA (Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association) state that Equine Assisted Therapy is “a powerful and effective therapeutic approach that has an incredible impact on individuals, youth, families, and groups” (2013).
- EFETA (Equine Facilitated Education and Therapy Association) Ireland describe Therapeutic Horse Riding as “the use of horses and equine related activities to achieve a variety of therapeutic goals. It combines the use of Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy, Speech and Language Therapy and Psychology. (www.stridescfsites.org).

The findings of all these studies and many more are all consistent with each other and there appears to be a very beneficial therapeutic effect between the children and horse.

Summary

We encourage other services to use our Equine therapy unit for suitable clients who they feel would benefit from access to the programme. We can organise appropriate blocks (5/10 week terms) for individuals or groups of up to 10 people, and therapy sessions are between 30 – 45 minutes of riding, and 30 – 40 minutes of Stable management. Assessment by an Occupational Therapist with subsequent goal setting and therapeutic input planning is the starting point for all interventions.