

Welcome to the Newsletter of the Equine Therapy Unit in ChildVision!

We hope you are all staying well and are enjoying the good weather as much as our horses! They have been having a well earned break in the field for the past few weeks. They are still in training daily to keep them fit and ready to start back to work when the time is right.

Here is a photo of Fred and Blue playing in the field. They are like foals again! They are certainly seeing the upside to all the social restrictions at the moment!



On Friday the 1st of May, the Government set out a road map to plan the slow but progressive re-opening of services in our country. As yet, it is unclear where ChildVision Equine Centre's therapeutic provision of services fit into this road map with regard to timescale. However, we are working hard in the background to start planning how we can manage and adapt what we do to start providing some level of service again over coming weeks and months in conjunction with ChildVision campus. We will keep you updated on this process as it progresses.

Introducing Buddy

In this newsletter we would like to introduce Buddy, our friend with the mustache! Buddy is so patient he stood still here whilst lots of children enjoyed painting him all over.... Buddy Rules!



Buddy is a cob, like Fred. This means he is short but strong. Short is good as we can stand beside a child on him to support them easily (without stilts!) and strong means we can also back ride with him - this is where one of the instructors sits on the horse with the child to maximise the proprioceptive input that the child is receiving. Buddy has a lovely bouncy walk and trot, which means he gives the person on him lots of this proprioceptive input while he is moving. If we compared him to a chocolate bar, Fred's movement would be a smooth plain chocolate bar, but Buddy's movement has a crispiness like a Crunchie!

Buddy loves food of any kind and is always happy to get a treat. When he discovers something tempting, he gets very creative and overcomes any obstacles to get food. In the photo below, he had just escaped from the paddock, and made his way to the Arch where the food was stored. He knocked the bag to the ground to open it and helped himself! He had a sore tummy for a day or so after all that food!!!

He has also been known to break loose when tied in the arena during sessions to slide out the pedestrian gate into the arena to get to that yummy grass just outside ;-)



He is a clever boy & can be easily underestimated as he is easygoing, but he is no fool & knows what he wants. He loves fun, especially pony games! He is steady & reliable always. And he loves a good old lie down. In fact he also loves to lie down in any patch of mud he can find in the field or paddock, creating quite a mess to clean him up!



As you can tell, Buddy is one of a kind and quite a gem for the work we need him to do in ChildVision.

Using Horses for Therapy – social benefits

Occupational Therapists assess the development of children and where they have difficulty progressing through developmental stages, they provide support and intervention to help them move on to the next stage. In ChildVision, we are lucky enough to have horses as the therapy medium. We have looked at some of the reasons why using horses for therapeutic input is valuable, including the physical, sensory, educational and psychological benefits. In this newsletter we look at how therapy with horses helps social development.

Development of respect and love for animals

During our sessions we incorporate caring for the horses. Children who have a disability in particular often have everything done for them as they find it hard to do things for themselves. So in sessions we teach them about caring for someone other than themselves. Starting with acknowledging the horse and giving them a treat after their work, to grooming, mucking out and fetching water for them. Children learn that horses need us to care for them, and this develops an interest in them and helps create a bond. They also learn that horses can be scared of sudden or loud noises, and they learn to respect that and not do it around the horse.

Increased experiences

Being around horses is not an everyday occurrence for most of us, and involves doing things that are not part of our everyday repertoire. There is so much to learn, from caring for the horse, to riding skills and participating in activities on the horse with others. All of these activities are sensory based and give us a 'feel good' sense during and after participating in them, which in turn makes us more open to more challenging activities as we progress.

Friendship

Often the children that come to us have some level of difficulty making or maintaining friendships in their everyday life. However, here they find a peer group who share a similar love for horses and the activities we carry out with the horses. They are part of something together, and learn to respect each other and value each other as participants together in that.

Enjoyment

There is no doubt about it, being around horses, and around others who share that enjoyment of horses, is fun! Children look forward to their time in the yard and this enjoyment creates motivation and engagement, which in turn creates a platform for new learning. As the horse carries us, it creates a feeling of security and safety. What is not to enjoy about that!

Equine Assisted Occupational Therapy

The role of Occupational Therapists working with children and young people is to provide intervention, support and/or advice to children and their families, where there is disability or impairment which impacts on their performance and participation in everyday activities of life. To start with, assessment is used as a platform to discuss and identify the child's needs, strengths and interests, and then plan next steps. From this point, therapeutic programs tailored to your child's need and possibly home programs or school programs are designed and carried out to support development and the child's well-being.

Occupational Therapy is most useful to children/young people who are having difficulty joining in with the activities they need and want to do every day e.g. dressing, using cutlery, completing jigsaws, riding a bike, writing, integrating with others etc. These difficulties may be due to poor gross and fine motor co-ordination, poor core stability, poor motor planning skills, visual perceptual difficulties, cognitive skills such as concentration and attention, or sensory difficulties.

As sensory processing is something that needs support for a lot of the children who attend our service, in this section we have been focusing on learning about the different sensory systems and how we can support their development. Equine Assisted Occupational Therapists help children with sensory processing difficulties through the use of equine related activities. Equine activities and being on horse are wonderfully sensory experiences that can be tailored to meet the individual needs of each child, and as such provides a very powerful therapeutic tool.

In the last newsletter we had a look at the sense of smell. In this newsletter we are looking at our sense of hearing, and how this sense can be supported and developed at home.

Auditory (hearing)

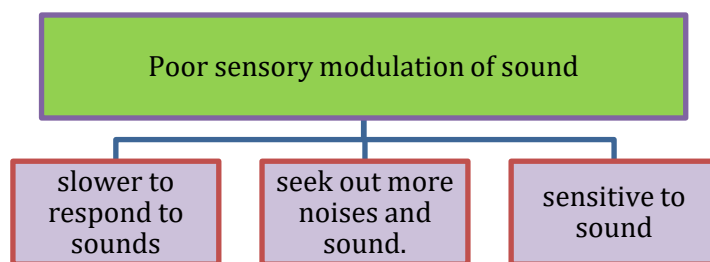


Our hearing sense, or auditory sense, is a sense everyone has typically heard of. It responds to noises in the environment. These noises, or sound waves, travel through our ear to the brain. The brain then processes this sensory information. Our hearing sense:

- Alerts us to sounds within the environment
- Tells us the direction sound is are coming from
- Lets us know if a sound is safe or dangerous
- Helps us to communicate with each other

Poor sensory modulation of the auditory sensory system - what does it mean?

When the hearing sense doesn't modulate sensory inputs well there are three different responses.



Some children are slower to respond to sounds. They may need more time before they respond to the noise or to be closer to the noise before they notice it. Common signs of this are

- Not responding when his or her name is called
- May not hear sounds in the environment

Sometimes children seek out more noises and sound. They may make more noise themselves or deliberately move closer to sounds. Examples of this are

- Loves to play music and television at extremely loud volumes

- Enjoys noisy environments such as sports arena, shopping centres, malls and the cinema

Finally, children can be sensitive to sounds. This means their brains can be quickly overwhelmed by noises. Sound sensitivity is often one of the first sensory issues noticed by parents and teachers. Children with Autism also often have sensory processing difficulties including sound sensitivity.

- Dislikes loud, unexpected sounds (sirens, school bells)
- Startles easily to unexpected sounds
- Easily distracted by background noises such as a lawn mower outside, an air conditioner, a refrigerator or buzz from fluorescent lights

When there is sensitivity to sounds the child can have constant overreactions, or bigger reactions, to everyday sounds in the environment. This distracts the child or adult from what they need to be listening to. It may mean they avoid certain places, for example, children avoiding public toilets because they don't like the sound of the hand dryer. Sensitivity to noise can also often result in a 'fight, flight or freeze' response in the brain.

Poor auditory discrimination - what does it mean?

Sensory discrimination refers to the 'what' and 'where.' For the hearing sense, this relates to the qualities of the sounds. For example, how loud was the sound? What pitch was the sound? Which direction did the sound come from? Was it a familiar noise or new? Was it your mother's voice or your father's? Is it a sound you like? Was there any rhythm to it? Children with poor auditory discrimination skills can find processing all of these sounds more challenging.

Why is our hearing sense important for learning and participation?

The ability to focus and attend to the correct sounds is essential for learning and participation. If you're at a party and a friend is telling a story you need to be able to ignore the other sounds in the background and focus on their voice. For children with sensory processing disorder sometimes this can be impossible. The background music may be all that their brain tunes into rather than that of the speaker making it really hard to listen and join in.

At school and work, you must be able to pay attention to lessons or meetings. Sometimes children with sensory processing disorders are trying to listen but their sensory issues make it more difficult to process the sounds they are hearing. They must be able to know which sound is the lunch bell and which bell is a warning alarm. They need to be able to discriminate between their teacher's voice and general chatter. It's also important to know which direction

the voice is coming from so you can look the right way. The same is true at work or at home, understanding the 'what' and 'where' of sounds is really important!

Finally, our hearing sense is very important to help to support our communication. Whilst there are options to communicate if you have hearing loss, speaking is the typical way that humans communicate their ideas and needs. We need to be able to discriminate the differences between sounds and combinations of sounds. We can also figure out emotions or extra meaning from by the pitch, pace or volume the speaker uses.

So how do we help with these difficulties?

So like any other skill in life, exposure and practice helps it to develop. Being aware of and identifying the type of difficulty a child has with the auditory sense is the first step. Then, gently and supportively exposing them to slowly increasing auditory challenges will help develop their abilities and reduce issues in this area.

There are two widely available auditory training programs. 'Therapeutic Listening' is a widely used, evidence-based auditory intervention. It was designed to support people who experience challenges with sensory processing dysfunction, listening, attention and communication. The 'Listening Program' is another one of these programs. Generally they involve using headphones to listen to classical music. The child is asked to be involved in activities during the listening. Ideally it will reduce sensory sensitivity in particular and help listening skills.

For children who are very sensitive to sounds, it is often mechanical sounds that are troublesome. By spending time outdoors in the natural environment, they can have positive experiences of sound that help calm this sense.

Games like the ones outlined below can be helpful to work on sound discrimination, and attention to sound.

Activities of the Week

The hearing containers!

In this game we try to distinguish sounds, which provides lots of organised sensory input to the auditory system, and helps it to develop.



What you need:

- A number of small, opaque containers with lids
- A range of 'fillers' for the containers that will create the sounds when shaken inside the containers (examples could be marbles, dry beans, lentils, rice, couscous, sand)

Preparation

- Make two containers with each 'filler' by putting a small amount of the filler into the containers and closing the lid



Playing the games!

Game 1

Sound identification

Start by you and your child each having one container of each 'sound'. You shake one, and your child has to find the same sound amongst their containers. You can shake yours as often as the child needs to help them identify the same sound.

Tips on playing

- Each container will make different sounds when shaken due to having different fillings.
- The game encourages concentration on the different sounds, which may be very challenging. To help, make sure this is done in a quiet place.
- Similar sized fillings in the containers make similar sounds. If the sizes are very different the containers will be easier to distinguish. You can grade the level of difficulty for your child by considering the range of fillings you put into the containers.
- Remember to give your child time to explore the different containers before you start the game. That helps them to become familiar to the sounds, and focus more easily on the task with minimal distraction.

Game 2

Sorting sound

For this game, you use only one container of each sound. Help your child sort the sounds from loud to quiet, or coarse to fine. You can explore the textures inside the containers with your child to help explain these concepts. Then mix up the containers and ask your child to sort them again!

Game 3

Direction hearing

Pick one of the containers and ask your child to close their eyes. Then shake the container and ask your child to tell you where the sound came from. Your child can tell you the direction in words (in front, behind, left, right, high, low), by pointing or by turning their head. This game is easier when you are close to your child and more challenging, if the distance is larger.



Game 4

Follow the sound

Hide a small treat in a room. Ask your child to close their eyes, or if your child feels comfortable with it, cover their eyes with a scarf. As soon as your child is ready, you can start making a sound (ie. By tapping on a pot with a wooden spoon). Ask your child to follow this sound to find the hidden treat.

Other hearing activities

Building a rainmaker - Take an empty roll of kitchen paper and close one side by taping it, or covering it with paper or fabric and gluing it down. Fill the roll with something like rice or lentils (about 1/3) and seal the second side also. Now you can slowly turn the roll from one side to the other side, to create a rain sound. This sound can be very calming for children.

Pouring games for hearing

This game is easiest if you have two plastic jugs. You fill one jug with one of the following: rice, sand, water, dried beans etc. Pour the contents from one jug to the other. Change what is in the jugs to make different sounds. Pouring is a calming activity, the sound is gentle and soothing, and as a bonus the child is working on hand eye coordination and fine motor skills!



Activity Videos

In this newsletter, the Activities at Home video is about how we can adapt 'Free Play' to the outdoor environment. Free play is a really important skill to help development of learning and imagination, and even those higher level processing skills in the brain. By setting up a sensory environment for your child and allowing them to explore through vision or touch, they can develop new levels of understanding of the world around them. It also mentions how you can learn lots about your child's interests and what motivates them to engage just by observing them free play. Knowing these interests is key to finding ways to support your child to engage in new learning. Playing alongside your child during these sessions can also be highly beneficial for their learning and understanding.

So do try out some of the suggestions with your child if you can and let us know how you get on!

<https://vimeo.com/418126166/2f70ca520f>

Cool information for this week!

Have you ever wondered why your child has difficulties going some places like the shopping centre or places they have never been before? Often what can be bothering them is sensory overload. This is when sensory input from around them becomes overwhelming. They can often be bothered by things that you or I may not even be aware of, like sounds in the background, a plane going overhead, the hum of the lights or computer fan. Often the sensory stimuli that will cause a child to get overwhelmed are auditory.

This video shows us what it is like for a boy (Alex) who has autism going to the shopping centre with his mum, and how all the sounds and visual stimuli around him cause him to be overwhelmed. It is an excellent insight into how sensory overload happens and how to watch for triggers.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QdhwsK7E6cc>

In this second video, Aubrey is a girl with Aspergers Syndrome – a form of Autism. She is trying to make a video about Alexithymia (the inability to identify emotions). However due to sounds in the environment she gets distracted to the point of sensory overload. It is highly informative as to how sounds can affect a person with auditory sensitivity and what it feels like to be overwhelmed.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N32lhQBxj94>

With some more insight into what causes a sensory overload in new or busy places, how can we help?

By minimising the sensory input we can reduce the stress. So if your child wears ear defenders when facing new challenges, it may help them cope.



As you may have seen on the ChildVision Facebook page, the Occupational Therapist in the Equine Therapy Unit is available to you for support or help with home programs whilst we are not seeing you regularly in the yard. We can do email, phone or video link consultations as is easiest for you. Please feel free to contact me at audreydarby@childvision.ie if you would like to arrange this.



Do stay safe and we look forward to when we can be together again.

The Equine Therapy Unit team.