

**Is there evidence to support recommending the activity of  
Therapeutic Horseback Riding or Hippotherapy for  
School Age Children with Disabilities?**

**What is Therapeutic Horseback Riding (THR)?**

Horseback riding that is typically conducted by non-therapist riding instructors and assistants who teach the disabled rider how to control the horse using basic riding skills.



**What is Hippotherapy?**

A treatment strategy used by physical therapist, occupational therapist, and speech therapist which incorporates the movement of a horse to improve functional outcomes.

**Goals of Hippotherapy and Therapeutic Horseback Riding may include...**

- To improve physical characteristics such as flexibility, strength, balance, posture, and grasp/release patterns
- To encourage gross motor development, especially in the areas of walking, running, and jumping
- To develop communication skills and social skills
- To encourage participation in physical activity and leisure within the community

**Sample Activities in a Hippotherapy or Therapeutic Horseback Riding Program:**

- A change of positions and weight shifting
- Understanding barn safety rules and equipment
- Weaving through cones, figure 8's, uneven terrain
- Articulating commands (if able), making choices, and turn taking

**Bottom Line: Is the activity of Therapeutic Horseback Riding and/or Hippotherapy effective for school age children with disabilities?**

- Hippotherapy and THR can be recommended as effective interventions that target a broad range of motor and functional outcomes in school aged children.

## **Current Research shows:**

In children with Cerebral Palsy:

- THR leads improved grasp (MacKinnon, 1995).
- Hippotherapy improves muscle symmetry (Benda et al., 2003).
- There was a significant decrease in the energy cost of walking following hippotherapy treatment (McGibbon et al., 1998)
- Riding therapy has a positive impact on gross motor skills (Sterba, 2007), particularly in the areas of walking, running, and jumping (Cherng et al., 2004; McGibbon et al., 1998).
- The positive effects of one THR program were sustained for at least 16 weeks after the program had ended (Cherng et al., 2004).
- Hippotherapy may help to reduce their reliance on canes or walkers by helping to develop postural control and trunk stabilization (McGibbon et al., 1998).

THR has a positive impact on gross motor development of children with developmental delays (Winchester et al., 2002).

THR is effective in improving balance in adolescents with intellectual disabilities, particularly for individuals with Down Syndrome (Biery and Kauffman, 1989).

Hippotherapy may be effective in improving the speech and language abilities for children with language learning disabilities (Macauley and Gutierrez, 2004).

THR may be effective in decreasing abnormal behaviours in children with autism (Gray, 2007).

The benefits of participating in therapeutic riding can include; enjoyment of the activity, child/animal connection, social relationships with volunteers, physical benefits of therapeutic activities, mental and social benefits of program (Elliott et al., 2008).

## **Practical Considerations for Overcoming Barriers**

Potential barriers to participation could include lack of time, financial constraints, and transportation issues.

Helpful strategies may include:

1. Fundraising (PAC, local charities)
2. Pairing students to ensure safety and most efficient use of EA time
3. Partnering with other schools in the district to share transportation
4. Participating in 3-4 month blocks, rather than continually

## Community Resources

### Victoria Riding for the Disabled Association (VRDA)

6917 Veyaness Rd. (Keating X Rd. area)

Contact: Stella French or Samantha Howe 658-6272 (barn) or [vrda@shaw.ca](mailto:vrda@shaw.ca)

<http://members.shaw.ca/vrda>

Contraindications: rods in back, uncontrolled seizures, >150 lbs

Canadian Therapeutic Riding Association

<http://www.cantra.ca/home.shtml>

North American Riding for the Handicapped Association

<http://www.narha.org/>

American Hippotherapy Association

<http://www.americanhippotherapyassociation.org>

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