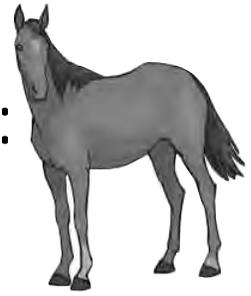




healthy kids

Animal-Assisted Therapy: A Special Connection



By Carrie Smoot

It's unusual to see a llama coming out of a school or hospital elevator, along with its trainer. People take a second look," says Louise Dillon, a second-grade teacher in a regular education classroom in the Roanoke City Public Schools. But Dillon is convinced of these animals' abilities to help children with special needs. Her nine-year-old granddaughter has autism and is high functioning, but still has trouble with sensory integration. Occupational therapy helps with fine motor skills, but school is academically and socially difficult for her; and sometimes she doesn't want to go.

However, there's one thing that motivates her — seeing the llamas at Mona's Ark in Troutville, VA. Mona Sams is an occupational therapist who works with kids who have disabilities — along with nine llamas, two alpacas, some dogs and rabbits. Her therapy program was conducted in the schools until the funding ran out. Now the children come to Sams' home for the sessions.

"The kids learn a lot from watching the llama's body language and mimicking that behavior," Dillon says. They pull the reins, card and comb the wool, walk around with them, and sometimes work on a craft. "My granddaughter loves anything with animals," Dillon says. The family hoped they could reach her through animals, and that has worked so far. As chair of a new non-profit organization called Katie's Place for Kids with Special Needs,

Dillon plans many fund raisers so that other children in the Roanoke area could receive money for animal-assisted therapy.

The bond between people and animals is strong. Many people feel much calmer, happier and have a sense of feeling right with the world around cats and dogs or other pets. Especially for children with disabilities, love for animals goes beyond caring for pets. Some animals help occupational, physical and speech therapists with children's specific needs.

"Chickens, cows, pigs, llamas and horses have all been used in animal-assisted therapy," says Veronica Laughman, a Northern Virginia Training Center recreation therapist who manages NVTC's therapeutic riding program. "But you have to be careful when selecting a program, because some focus on the connection with people and animals rather than specific therapy goals." Laughman says children benefit in many ways through animal-assisted therapy. While bonding with the animals, they build speech, language and social skills. And especially with horses, riding stimulates hip movement, relaxes legs and decreases spasticity. Standing, walking and balance are improved. When seated on a horse, it builds upper body strength. For the nervous, Laughman says equestrian skills can be taught on the ground. For safety's sake, she asks her students to wear helmets and sturdy shoes.

Nancy Hemenway lives in

Northern Virginia with her husband and daughters-Zoe, 10, and Becca, 5. For the first 15 months of her life, Becca was severely neglected and abused in an international orphanage. As a result, she has severe reactive attachment disorder (RAD) and severe posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Now there's a new addition to the family — Friday, a solid black therapy horse that has worked previously with an autistic child and is now kept by the family at a local stable. "He has a big heart," says Hemenway, who had horses for most of her adult life and wanted the same connections for her daughters. "Becca lights up every time she sees him. In turn, Friday's ears perk up, and he gives a soft whinny in greeting."

It wasn't easy to know how to help Becca at first, or to decide to travel to Kentucky to buy Friday. "Once we knew what we were dealing with in our daughter, one of the first things I did was get her on a waiting list for therapeutic riding. When we started out, we couldn't get her in — too many people, not enough programs: waiting lists, unanswered phone calls, e-mails and so on," she says. She recommends that parents in a similar situation go to local horse societies or local animal-assisted therapy groups for guidance.

Frustrated by the long wait for services, Hemenway, who has a psychology degree and more than 15 years in special education, took therapeutic riding instructor training last year. It will be a family affair; her

husband is learning to ride, and Zoe will lead her sister on the horse, as well as ride.

"One of the big things many people miss — particularly with the interaction between horse and human — is that working with an animal of this size and learning to control it, even with side walkers and other aids is a real partnership for the children," Hemenway says. "They become partners with these animals, and in the process there becomes an almost spiritual connection —not to mention the benefits neurologically."

"We often hear from parents that 'my child loves animals' — this is a great start for therapeutic riding," says Corliss Wallingford, executive director of Simple Changes, a one-year-old therapeutic riding program. Operated out of the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM's) Meadowood Special Recreation Management Area (Meadowood SRMA) in Mason Neck, Virginia, Simple Changes currently provides lessons taught by a certified therapeutic riding instructor. Although there is already a waiting list, new riders are moved into the program as quickly as possible.

Parents find out about therapeutic riding from other parents, their children's doctors or other specialists. Riders have to be at least 4 years-old to be eligible for therapeutic riding, and although there is no upper age limit, there are weight limits. Simple Changes offers

both therapeutic riding — teaching riding skills at the individual rider's ability — and hippotherapy, where a licensed therapist provides a therapy session on the horse using the horse's movements to work on specific skills.

Most children have no problem adjusting to therapeutic riding. "Even if your child is nervous, you can prepare him or her by visiting the facility in advance of the first lesson, or by looking at pictures from a brochure or the Web site. Children usually love the movement of the horse and are quite happy at lessons," says Wallingford.

"We are very fortunate that Simple Changes can operate out of



Meadowood," says Wallingford. Trails that wind through acres of woods make for wonderful trail rides. Indoor and outdoor riding areas allow year-round riding and options for inclement weather. "We also have wonderful volunteers and terrific horses," Wallingford says. "We can always use more volunteers — no horse experience required." And the horses, of course, are the

most important part of the program. Wallingford says that temperament and soundness is more important than breed.

Children that participate in therapeutic riding have a great time while improving physical and cognitive skills. For more information contact Simple Changes at 703-402-3613 or simplechanges@hotmail.com.

Since 1991, Lynda McGarry has run the Roanoke Valley Therapeutic Riding Program. McGarry says that they are one of 25 Virginia programs, and the only one lucky enough to own their land. She serves children with all disabilities: cerebral palsy, strokes, autism and Asperger's syndrome, Down syndrome and developmental delays-by physician referral. Ramps assist volunteers in helping the kids on the horses.

"As children progress in therapeutic riding, they get stronger, and their executive functioning — learning and organizing — skills improve," McGarry says. "One parent mentioned how her child could recognize right from left after a few lessons, although she was previously unable to do so. For one girl with cerebral palsy, regular riding loosened her leg muscles."

"But the major challenge within Virginia, says Hemenway, "is the lack of programs. There are not enough programs to meet the needs of children who, in my opinion, could all benefit from this type of therapy." ■

Organizations

Katie's Place for Persons with Special Needs
www.kppsn.org

Mona's Ark • www.monasark.org

Saint Francis of Assisi Service Dog Foundation
www.saintfrancisdogs.org

Delta Society • www.deltasociety.org

Lift Me Up! - www.liftmeup.org

National Capital Therapy Dogs, Inc. (NCTD)
www.nctdinc.org

Roanoke Valley Therapeutic Riding Program
lynda_mcgarry@hotmail.com • 540-334-7092

Simple Changes - www.simplechanges.org

North American Riding for the Handicapped Association • www.narha.org