

## Benefits of Equine-assisted Activities and Therapies

Working with horses can have a major physical and emotional impact on people with a wide variety of issues and disabilities. A few (but not all) issues and disabilities for which EAAT are useful are listed below.



### Attention Deficit Disorder

Children with attention deficit disorder (ADD) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) have difficulties with attention and self-control of behavior. Therapeutic horsemanship requires attention to the instructor and the horse. Children who participate in a riding program are taught sequential steps for learning to control their horse and becoming more independent. Riding lessons can be modified in length to accommodate for decreased attention span.

### Autism

Children and adults with autism participate in a variety of PATH Intl. center programs including riding, driving, vaulting, hippotherapy and equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP). Both equine-assisted activities, such as riding and vaulting, and equine-assisted therapy, such as hippotherapy or psychotherapy, can impact the life of a person with autism.

Bass, Duchowny, and Llabre (2008) studied children with autism participating in a 12 week therapeutic horseback riding program. Two instruments were used to measure social functioning before and after the intervention: the Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS) and the Sensory Profile (SP). They found the children with autism who participated in the therapeutic horseback riding program improved in sensory integration and directed attention as compared to the control group.



### Cerebral Palsy

People of all ages with cerebral palsy may enjoy interacting with horses. Children can learn a sport such as riding to share with their peers. Adults may treasure riding as a life-long leisure activity. Horseback riding requires skills including good posture, coordination and balance to direct the horse. Riders with cerebral palsy may progress from riding with sidewalkers to riding independently. Some people with cerebral palsy may prefer to learn carriage driving and may even be able to drive from their own wheelchair in a specially designed carriage.

### Hearing Impairment

People who are deaf or hard of hearing may experience improved self-esteem and a sense of independence and empowerment by becoming an independent equestrian. People with hearing impairments will develop unique ways to communicate with their instructor and equine partner while learning riding or driving.

### Developmental Delay/Cognitive Delay

PATH Intl. centers are able to provide a variety of recreational programs that reflect personal preferences and choices for the person with developmental delays. Learning horseback riding skills includes leisure and recreational activities alone and with others, riding socially with others, taking turns, extending the time of the riding lesson and expanding one's repertoire of skills toward independent riding. Some persons may choose to compete in programs such as the Special Olympics.

### Down Syndrome

Children and adults with Down syndrome may participate in EAAT if atlantoaxial instability (AAI) has been ruled out with current x-rays and/or the participant has no signs or symptoms of this condition per their physician.

### Learning Disabilities

Participants in a PATH Intl. program are presented information about riding and driving skills and horsemanship in a variety of methods. People with learning disabilities have the chance to learn through visual, auditory and kinesthetic methods while learning to ride or drive a horse. They may be motivated to learn more about horses than they are in their school classroom. The horse's response to the aids given by the rider or driver is natural positive reinforcement and helps participants build skills.

### Multiple Sclerosis

Therapeutic riding can be a great source of exercise in which people with multiple sclerosis may choose to participate. They can participate in riding within their limits of strength and energy and still enjoy an active recreational activity or sport. Riding may help people with multiple sclerosis stay limber and active.

### Muscular Dystrophy

People with muscular dystrophy may participate in programs at PATH Intl. Centers to keep active while engaging in an enjoyable

activity. Riders may start out more independent, but may need more support as their disease progresses. Riding lessons may be tailored to the abilities and stamina of the rider. The PATH Intl. instructor may support their transition to a non-mounted program such as driving or a hippotherapy program as their needs change. This flexibility helps the person with muscular dystrophy stay active and engaged while coping with changes in their abilities.

### Spina Bifida

Participants with spina bifida may participate in equine-assisted activities or therapies at a PATH Intl. center. Prior to participation, the client's doctor will need to carefully screen the participant for concerns such as tethered cord, hydromyelia or Chiari II malformation. Any changes in neurological status must be carefully monitored during participation in riding programs. Learning to ride a horse may be an empowering experience and allow someone with limited mobility from spina bifida to experience a greater freedom on the back of a horse.

### Spinal Cord Injuries

People who have had a spinal cord injury may have varied levels of impairments from sensory loss to quadriplegia. A complete spinal cord injury above T-6 is a contraindication for riding, but would not necessarily prevent a client's participation in other types of equine programs such as driving and unmounted activities. Many people who have had a spinal cord injury may participate in therapeutic riding lessons, carriage driving or may choose an equine-assisted therapy program to address challenges with trunk control or coping with their injury.

### Visual Impairment

People who have a visual impairment are able to learn to ride or drive independently and compete in equestrian events. People with visual impairments may participate as part of a vaulting team. Strategies to help people with visual impairments include use of intercom systems with the instructors, learning to count steps/strides, or auditory markers in the arena. These strategies are frequently used at PATH Intl. Centers and both instructors and horses are able to accommodate and accept the rider or driver's differences.

\*Reference citations for the above benefits are available at [www.pathintl.org](http://www.pathintl.org)



# Fact Sheet for Special Educators

The Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International® (PATH Intl.®) is a professional membership association providing standards, credentialing and training resources for the equine-assisted activities and therapies industry, which uses the human-horse bond to help people with special needs achieve health and wellness goals in a safe and effective setting. With more than 4,800 certified professionals and 877 member centers, 8,000+ PATH Intl. members around the globe help more than 62,000 children and adults with physical, cognitive and emotional challenges find strength and a sense of independence through the power of the horse. In addition to therapeutic riding, centers offer a number of therapeutic equine-related activities, including hippotherapy, equine-facilitated mental health, driving, interactive vaulting and ground work. Programs offer services in human growth and development to serve wide-ranging audiences for such educational purposes as leadership training, team building and other human capacity enhancement skills for the workplace and for daily use.

## What Are Equine-Assisted Activities and Therapies?



Throughout the world, hundreds of thousands of individuals with special needs experience the rewarding benefits of equine-assisted activities and therapies (EAAT). A physical, cognitive or emotional challenge does not limit a person from interacting with horses. In fact, such interactions can prove highly rewarding. For instance, experiencing the rhythmic motion of a horse can be very beneficial. Riding a horse moves the rider's body in a manner similar to a human gait, so riders with physical needs often show improvement in flexibility, balance and muscle strength.

Whether it's a five-year-old with Down syndrome, a 45-year-old recovering from a spinal cord injury, a senior citizen recovering from a stroke or a teenager struggling with depression, research shows that individuals of all ages who participate in EAAT can experience physical and emotional rewards. For individuals with emotional challenges, the unique relationship formed with the horse can lead to increased confidence, communication skills, patience and self-esteem.

[www.pathintl.org](http://www.pathintl.org)  
Click on Find a Center

(800) 369-RIDE

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**IMPORTANT: Educators must always be familiar with the rules and regulations for their school district before suggesting an activity for a student.**



Looking for the PATH Intl. Center nearest you? Want to learn more about therapeutic horsemanship? Please visit [pathintl.org](http://pathintl.org) to search for centers by state, disabilities served and activities offered.

**Just some of the special needs served at PATH Intl. Member Centers**

- |   |                           |
|---|---------------------------|
| Autism Spectrum Disorder                          | Orthopedic Challenges     |
| Developmental Delay                               | Multiple Sclerosis        |
| ADD (Hyperactivity Disorder)                      | Youth at-risk             |
| Learning Disabilities                             | Stroke                    |
| Cerebral Palsy                                    | Spina Bifida              |
| Intellectual Disabilities                         | Muscular Dystrophy        |
| Emotional, Behavioral or Mental Health Challenges | PTSD                      |
| Speech Impairment                                 | Paralysis                 |
| Down Syndrome                                     | Spinal Cord Injuries      |
| Head Trauma/Brain Injuries                        | Amputations               |
| Hearing Impairment                                | Violence, Abuse or Trauma |
| Visual Impairment                                 | Terminal Illness          |
| Genetic Conditions/Disorders                      | Substance Abuse           |
|   | Weight Control Disorders  |



**PATH Intl. Member Centers and Certified Professionals insist upon safety and focus on possibilities!**



PATH Intl. certifies EAAT professionals and accredits centers. A nonprofit organization in business since 1969, PATH Intl. is the premier professional association and an international voice for the therapeutic horsemanship industry. The PATH Intl. mission is to promote safety and optimal outcomes for individuals with special needs. This commitment to offering the safest and most productive experience is the reason medical professionals, organizations and families seek out and trust PATH Intl. credentialed professionals with the well-being of their loved ones. Certified professionals go through a rigorous credentialing process that includes testing related to horsemanship and teaching skills and disabilities knowledge.

PATH Intl. member centers in the United States and around the world range from small, one-person programs to large operations with several certified professionals and licensed therapists. And while they vary in size and/or the types of services provided, they all have one thing in common—they voluntarily operate under the direction of the PATH Intl. Standards for Certification and Accreditation. The purpose of these standards is to educate administrators, credentialed professional program personnel and the public regarding best practices in EAAT.

As the benefits of EAAT garner more attention and the industry continues to grow, more stables and instructors have begun offering services. They may not choose to follow the PATH Intl. standards nor take the rigorous professional “PATH” chosen by our members and centers. Ask your local center if they are a member of PATH Intl. or if they have PATH Intl. Certified Professionals on staff. If not, encourage them to contact us for more information. And if the answer is yes, by all means schedule a visit and observe some sessions to better familiarize yourself with therapeutic horsemanship!



**Why horses?**

New scientific research continues to reveal critical information about equine sentience—their abilities of perception, cognition, memory, and emotions such as pain and fear. Equines are able to perceive, respond to and learn from the impressions they receive from minimal sensory stimuli. The stimulus may originate from changes in human biochemistry, body language or vocal intonations. It can also come from changes in the equine’s environment, relationships with other equines or the equine’s general health. In this way, equines make decisions based upon

the stimuli they experience from others or from their environment (Hangg, 2005; Nicol, 2002; Proops, McComb, & Reby, 2009; Saslow, 2002).

These abilities are based in natural, biological, physiological and psychological traits of equines. Each equine is unique in personality and has individual likes, dislikes and habits. The information gained from equine communication can be highly useful in all EAAT settings. Listening to equine communication can have an effect on the care of the equines, their rate of burnout and the success of the human-equine interaction. In EAAT sessions or lessons, viewing the equine as a partner invites opportunities for relationship building and skill building with all participants served.