

The Seattle Times reports on “hippotherapy,” and its effects on improving balance, motor skills and concentration

Partners in Progress

by Javacia N. Harris

Carter Fitzpatrick, 2, can't control the horse he rides. He doesn't even hold the reins. But that's OK; in this arena, it's the horse's job to teach Carter to walk.

For the past 3 months, Carter's parents have brought him to EquiFriends, a therapeutic riding center in Snohomish, where he gets “hippotherapy.”

Derived from the Greek “hippos” for horse, hippotherapy is what happens when physical, occupational and speech therapists take patients out of the treatment room and into the ring.

The goal is to improve balance, posture, motor skills, concentration and speech in patients with conditions such as cerebral palsy. Sensory Integrative Dysfunction and developmental delays.

Carter has Fragile X Syndrome, a genetic condition that causes physical and mental delays and low muscle tone, said his mother, Susi Fitzpatrick. She and her husband, Dennis, have seen progress since Carter started riding.

“He started taking steps and letting go of or hands,” she said. “Was it time or was it the horse?”

Dennis Fitzpatrick is convinced it was the horse.

“He went two years without a lot of progress,” Fitzpatrick said “then all of a sudden... It can't just be coincidence.”

A lot of firsts

Dr. Stephen Glass, a Woodinville child neurologist, has prescribed hippotherapy as a supplement to traditional physical and occupational therapy for more than 20 years.

Besides improving balance and motor skills, he said, hippotherapy can help kids learn where their bodies are in space, something most people take for granted.

Most people can close their eyes and still touch their knee or nose. But that's

not true of people with an impaired sense of body awareness. It's a condition often found with cerebral palsy, spinal-cord injuries or autism, and it can make it difficult for the person to integrate his senses and understand how his body relates to external forces and surfaces.

In hippotherapy, which typically involves riding without a saddle, sensations the patient gets from the horse's movement can improve body awareness, Glass said. With each step, the child is made aware of where parts of his body are in relation to the horse.

But how can a horse teach a child to walk?

As the horse walks or trots, the motion moves Carter Fitzpatrick's pelvis the

same way it would if Carter were walking, say his occupational therapist, Barbara Sifferman, and therapeutic-riding instructor, Pam Grudin.

"It teaches the pelvis what we're wanting it to do," Sifferman said. The movement also stimulates other bones, ligaments and joints by gently moving Carter back and forth and side to side.

"We see a lot of first steps and first words here," Grudin said.

Because sitting on the horse can improve a patient's posture, breathing can improve, making it easier to speak, she said. The excitement of riding can also help prompt speech.

"Sooner or later that child is going to say 'walk on' to get that horse to move," Grudin said.

Grudin and Sifferman team up with volunteers to offer hippotherapy two days a week. Clients, who range in age from 2 to 5, come once a week.

Joann Benjamin, a physical therapist in Los Angeles and a former board member of the American Hippotherapy Association, said a horse can do things she can't.

It can give her patients constant stimulation for 20 minutes. In the clinic, she may use a ball or a swing to help patients with balance and motor skills, but she can't stimulate a patient's whole body for very long - not the way a horse can. And the horse can move the patient multidimensionally by tilting, rotating and moving the rider.

"I don't have enough hands to be able to do that," she said.

Little research, so far

Even avid supporters of hippotherapy acknowledge there isn't much research behind it.

Nancy McGibbon works with children who have cerebral palsy at Therapeutic Riding of Tucson, Ariz., and has helped do a few of the handful of U.S. studies.

One involved 15 children with cerebral palsy. Some got a short session of hippotherapy, others were put astride a stationary barrel, a technique used in clinics.

Afterward, researchers measured improvements in muscle symmetry. With cerebral palsy, McGibbon explained, a muscle on one side of the body may work harder than its twin on the other side. The harder-working muscle gets stronger and strains certain joints.

Children in hippotherapy showed significant improvement in muscle symmetry, researchers found, while children on the barrel did not. The study ran last year in the *Journal of Alternative Complementary Medicine*.

McGibbon, who plan to do further hippotherapy research with the University of Arizona School of Pediatrics, said the lack of research is one of the biggest obstacles hippotherapy faces.

Both Glass and McGibbon say they've seen patients who'd stopped progressing in traditional treatment suddenly make improvements in hippotherapy, but proving the horse helped is tough.

Health insurers leery

Debra Peet-Walker, a Woodinville physical therapist, is a certified therapeutic riding instructor through the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA). She says the balance a horse teaches is invaluable. "Trunk control is the prerequisite for everything else," she said.

Peet-Walker provides hippotherapy at Little Bit Therapeutic Riding Center in Woodinville.

One other clients, Sam McNiff, 8, has to use a walker to get around and has trouble sitting up on his own. His mom, Erica McNiff, started bringing him to Little Bit four years ago.

At first, Sam needed Peet-Walker and volunteers supporting him all around his body to keep him mounted. Now, McNiff said, all he needs is an occasional hand of support on his back.

Parents like McNiff pay \$90-\$115 per session for hippotherapy at Little Bit. Though McNiff gets some help from the state Department of Social and Health services for Sam's various treatments, her health insurer does not cover hippotherapy.

Glass said he thinks insurance companies don't reimburse for hippotherapy because they view it as recreational and not therapeutic.

"They think it must be too much fun it can't be work," he said.

Before Premera Blue Cross of Washington Stat will cover hippotherapy, there will have to be more proof it works, spokesman Chris Jarvis said.

"The literature doesn't show enough evidence of it being medically necessary or effective," Jarvis said.

Regence BlueShield doesn't reimburse for hippotherapy either. Nor does Group Health Cooperative.

Little Bit and EquiFriends both have programs to help parents with financial need. "Nobody gets turned away," said Kathy Alm, Little Bit's executive director.

Inured or not, McNiff will keep bringing her son to ride.

"It's worth it," she says, watching Sam and his horse walk out of the indoor arena and onto Little Bit's outdoor grounds. "It's so worth it."