

HOW DOES EQUINE THERAPY ACTUALLY HELP AN ADOLESCENT WITH AUTISM?

Therapeutic riding is not merely *therapy* for STAT's autistic teen population.

Therapeutic riding has a family component as well as the capability to integrate an extraordinary recreational element.

Adding peer mentors or "buddies" to the program adjoins an even stronger influence to the social and emotional developmental goals of a teen struggling with Autism.

What is Autism? *Autism is a developmental disorder of neurobiologic origin that is defined on the basis of behavioral and developmental features. Autism rates have risen from 1 in 150 to 1 in 100.*

How does Autism Affect a Teen? Problem behaviors of children with autistic spectrum disorders are among the most challenging and stressful issues faced by schools and parents in their efforts to provide appropriate programs. Problem behaviors place an onerous burden on families, particularly as children grow from preschool into adolescence (Bristol et al., 1993). Problem behaviors such as property destruction, physical aggression, self-injury, and tantrums are major barriers to effective social, emotional, and educational development (Horner et al., 2000; Riechle, 1990). *Such behaviors put these youth at risk for exclusion and isolation from social, educational, family, and community activities* (Sprague and Rian, 1993, rev. 2007).

The definition of problem behaviors from a teenager's perspective (who has Autism) includes the inability to understand demands of a situation, relationship, or consequence and their inability to communicate his or her needs and wants, severe difficulty in initiating and maintaining social interactions and relationships, confusion about the effects and consequences of many of his or her behaviors, and engagement in restrictive and repetitive behaviors and interests that may limit the child's ability to learn and to fit in with peers.

Therapeutic riding has aided in building self-confidence in adolescents with autism, giving them a sense of self worth and importance – a way to see they have an ability to be in control of a situation without having to act out with dangerous or anti-social behaviors. The result is a child who can better react and interpret social situations and relationships, learn to initiate and interact with family members, teachers, therapists, and peers (utilizing the animal as the tool of this connection). Thus, they find the ability to build relationships, communicate verbally without frustration, and provide their family with opportunities to interact and have fun together in a natural setting.

STAT's Promise Project is unique in that it connects families to equine-assisted services throughout the community. These services include both on-horse and off-horse activities, individual and group activities, peer and family centered activities. This technique has been proven across the globe, helping children with autism and related disorders.