Benefits of Therapeutic Riding for Visually Impaired Individuals

By
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When people think of appropriate physical activities for visually impaired children, horseback riding is usually not one that comes to mind. Riders typically function through their visual sense to steer and cue their horse. Imagine a child with low to no vision controlling a 1,000 - 1,300 pound animal. They must move through space on the back of this large horse without the aid of a cane or even the feel of solid ground beneath their feet. However, at Sebastian Riding Associates, we have found horseback riding to be a wonderful activity for visually impaired children. A visually impaired rider does not have such a dependence on vision and can therefore move into the feel and tactile aspects of riding more quickly. A goal for all riders is to advance to an ability to operate through touch and feel.

Sebastian's is a non-profit therapeutic riding facility serving over 100 riders with the a large variety of disabilities, such as Cerebral Palsy, William's Syndrome, partial paralysis, developmental delays, mental retardation and blindness. Our riders find physical and cognitive benefits while enjoying the freedom of horseback riding. For individuals with these and other disabilities, the fluidity of riding offers them an experience that is otherwise unattainable.

Beyond the freedom and self-confidence that is gained by riding, visually impaired children reap tremendous physical benefits, as well. Posture is often affected when a child is blind or has low vision. Some children tend to carry their head tilted upward, stretching their neck muscles and throwing their shoulders back. Conversely, some children tilt their head downward causing their shoulders and chest to slump forward and cave in. This "blind posture" affects more than muscle and bone development. Posture translates into body language for seeing the world. A visually impaired child cannot pick up on subtle cues of how others carry themselves. They must be taught how it feels to stand tall with square shoulders and head up and forward. An individual's posture significantly impacts balance when horseback riding. Likewise, riding can significantly impact one's posture, and therefore balance, in a very positive way. "Weaving" is one of the many exercises that help the child improve balance and posture. This exercise is done by having an experienced aid lead the horse in a zigzag pattern with unannounced stops. If a child is new to horseback riding, has other medical conditions, or extremely low tone, two side walkers will be used. The support given by the side-walkers provides safety, but riders must use their muscles to maintain a comfortable balance. In order to be balanced, the rider must sit up tall, allowing the pelvic area to follow the motion of the horse. Trunk muscles become strong, the head comes up, shoulders become square and the riders become increasingly aware of their body in space.

Riding a horse approximates a normal walking gait in the pelvic, trunk, and upper body area of a person. This is very helpful for children who shuffle their feet, tend to walk in a circle because of a dominant leg, and have what can be called a "blind gait". Orientation and mobility specialists work with visually impaired children to lengthen their stride, hold their head up and shift their center of gravity to lessen the shuffling, flat-footed walking pattern that characterizes a blind gait. While riding does not replace the exercises needed to walk straight with a comfortable heel down motion, it does support the strength, flexibility, and body awareness to facilitate the learning. In a normal human gait, the pelvic area and shoulder girdle move in counter rotation. A horse's walking gait facilitates this same counter rotation in the human rider. The rider's body responds as if long, heel down, strides are taken.

Horseback riding also offers many opportunities for the visually impaired to learn navigation skills. Grooming a horse involves large and fine motor movements while working with the animal. At Sebastian's, the horse is cross-tied in the barn. Riders must chose the appropriate grooming tools in the proper sequence and use them on each side and section of the horse. The hands-on interaction with the horse teaches the child about the size and conformation of this large animal. It also requires focus and the ability to navigate in a busy and unique setting. When grooming is

completed, the saddle and bridle are put on the horse. Buckling straps and attaching the therapy lead and lead rope require fine motor skills. Visually impaired children can participate in each of these activities with the ultimate goal of performing these tasks independently. Visually impaired riders lead their horses out of the barn and into the arena or riding ring. Riders follow verbal cues from the instructor and take cues from footing and sounds to determine when they and their horses have arrived at their destination.

Mapping is a navigational skill that can be done prior to and during a ride. A three-dimensional map is used to replicate the riding arena. The rider tactilely explores the arena through this tool. This three-dimensional map gives the rider an understanding of his riding environment. While on the horse, the rider can determine the long and short sides of the arena from the distance traveled, the sounds of the spectator arena, the whinnies from the barn, etc. Visually impaired riders stop, start, and steer their horse to sounds and verbal cues. These cues include direction from the riding instructor, music from the tape recorder, and noise-making instruments. The games and activities included in the riding experience are practically limitless and lead to fun and educationally relevant sport for the visually impaired child.

Visually impaired children also gain muscle strength, balance, body awareness, confidence and self-esteem through horseback riding. Therapeutic riding facilities are becoming more available as families experience the remarkable benefits. Some facilities are small with only one or two horses. Others are very well established with top of the line equipment and many, many horses. However, most are somewhere in-between, and almost all depend heavily on volunteers and donations. These programs are filled with volunteers, instructors and horses that give of themselves because of a love for the special riders they serve. If you are considering a program for your visually impaired child, here are some things to consider:

How is your child's mobility?

Is your child a fearful child?

How is your child's balance?

Is your child's attention span and focus developed enough to participate in the riding experienced?

When choosing a riding program, speak to the program director and its instructors.

Does the program have other visually impaired riders? Some programs, such as Sebastian Riding Associates have a weeklong camp designed specifically for visually impaired riders.

Are the instructors certified by the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association?

How are the horses trained? While there is no such thing as a "bomb proof" horse, a therapeutic horse should be calm, gentle and extremely tolerant.

When you visit the facility, is it a safe environment? Are the walkways clear of tack and grooming equipment, but is that equipment readily available to the riders? You will want your child to have a safe environment that encourages exploration and eventually independence.

Horseback riding is not an activity that is usually associated with visually impaired individuals, but perhaps it should be.

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