

WORKING WITH HORSES: A BRIDGE TO OURSELVES

A NEW EQUINE THERAPY PROGRAM
FOR THE CHILDREN AT SERENITY EDUCATION & DAY TREATMENT CENTER

THE SMITH AGENCY, INC.
3400 S. Fairplay Way
Aurora, CO 80014
(303) 699-6373
Contact: Linda Lindsay

Regina's Story

Regina, a five-year-old little girl diagnosed with severe autism, was a typical student at Serenity. Because of her overwhelming emotional and physical needs, she had been referred from the public school system to Serenity Education & Day Treatment Center. Regina suffered terribly from joint pain and was haunted by nightmares that she couldn't articulate to her family or staff. As a result of her extreme discomfort, she frequently erupted into violent fits during the day. When caring for her at home became too difficult, Regina's family placed her in one of The Smith Agency's residential treatment facilities.

In 2006, with some funding raised through a spaghetti dinner hosted by the school, several students were able to experience a series of equine therapy sessions at a nearby ranch. Regina's family – always on the lookout for something that might reach Regina – enrolled her in the equine lessons. At last, Regina found her true home!

Over a period of weeks, Regina's behavior changed in dramatic ways: there was a marked decrease in blow-outs and nightmares, and a new calmness encircled her, even when she wasn't with the horses. In working with the horses, Regina found a peace that had eluded her for her entire life.

“Being with the horses was the only time Regina wasn't in constant pain, torment and confusion,” says her mother, Caroline.

At the age of six, Regina passed away due to complications related to her autistic disorder. As a tribute to Regina and her love for horses, she was carried in a horse-drawn carriage during her funeral procession.

The inspiration for Serenity's Equine Therapy Program comes from Regina and the many children like her, who, given the opportunity, find a bridge to themselves with a horse by their side.

Serenity Equine Therapy Program

The Smith Agency, Inc. serves to maintain a strong, therapeutic milieu in which students with disabilities will reach their full potential. It serves approximately thirty-six children and adults per year, ages 7 – 45, who are severely disabled with autism related disorders.

The agency began as a small group home for autistic children. Because of the growing demand for support services for children with autism, the home-based operation rapidly grew to fifteen homes. Today, the Smith Agency, Inc. operates multiple programs for children and adults with autism related disorders, including residential treatment centers, foster homes, and day programs and education facilities.

The Smith Agency, Inc. houses and treats some of the most cognitively disabled and violent children in the state of Colorado. The majority of students at Serenity are dually diagnosed with low emotional and cognitive skills. Because of the intensity of their needs, the majority of the children can no longer be cared for at home by their families and live in homes provided for by The Smith Agency. Of the thirty-six children and adults served in 2006, only 3 children were still with their families of origin. For most of the students who arrive at Serenity, it is the last viable option for them before institutionalization.

Summary of Program to be Funded

The Smith Agency is seeking funding for an Equine Therapy Program for the children at its Serenity Education & Day Treatment Center. Based on preliminary experiences, the program promises to be tremendously rewarding for the students and their families, and treatment team.

The agency will implement an innovative program for 30 students with autism at a local therapeutic riding association. The students will attend sessions once a week for eight weeks and will be guided by certified equine professionals through a carefully structured process with the horses. Each student will have a customized treatment plan with established goals and objectives and will be closely monitored for progress in a variety of categories. Based on evaluation outcomes, the program will be expanded to a year-around alternative therapy for the school.

Serenity Education & Day Treatment Center

The Serenity Education & Day Treatment Center will be at the core of the Equine Therapy Program. Serenity provides therapeutic treatment and educational services for children affiliated with The Smith Agency who are unable to attend mainstream and/or special education classes in the public school system. Serenity receives referrals from the

Department of Human Services, the Colorado Department of Education, and individual families. Serenity employs a speech pathologist, occupational therapist, a school social worker, and licensed teachers and paraprofessionals to provide for the intensive needs of its students. There is a ratio of five staff members to one student.

Statement of Need

“Autistic kids learn to talk about horses. Using horses to open a person's diaphragm and get them breathing better – that's physical therapy. But horses that give a child the desire to talk – that's magic.” ~ Barbara Glasgow, a founder of the 500-member American Hippotherapy Association

Autism is a life-long developmental disability resulting from a neurological disorder. Children and adults effected by autism and its related disorders typically struggle with developing effective communication and social skills, and processing sensory information.

In a report published in February 2007, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) indicated that according to its multisite collaborative study in the U.S., approximately 1 in 150 children have an autism spectrum disorder. While the figures have increased dramatically in the past decade, it is unclear whether the rate of autism is growing as quickly as feared, or if an increased awareness of the disease coupled with the expanded criteria for reporting autism has contributed significantly to the high figures. Regardless, the prevalence of autism is a serious concern for hundreds of thousands of families in the U.S. alone, and underscores the need to develop better methods of treatment.

Equine therapy, a form of treatment that was first made popular in Europe in the 1950s, provides autistic children with an opportunity to develop the sensory, physical and social skills they desperately need. Since many children with autistic related disorders are primarily nonverbal communicators, exposure and contact with the horses soothes and engages the students in a way that is quite unlike interacting with adults in a verbally-dominated environment.

Many autistic children will respond to horses in a way that is markedly different than with people. They might be willing to speak for the first time ever, they may develop the core strength to remain upright and not slouch forward, or they may show an increased interest in the world around them. While a lack of interest in, or fear of interacting with others is a hallmark symptom of autism related disorders, it is further compounded when there are any issues of past abuse. Interfacing with animals, particularly horses, who are gentle yet demanding of respect, appears to provide a particularly safe environment in which these children can become less guarded and more interactive.

For many of the students at Serenity, finding a way to proactively address some of their extreme sensory needs helps to prevent destructive acting-out behavior. Spending structured therapeutic sessions with a horse provides a safe outlet where the children

can build their motor skills and sensory repertoire. The physical motions of grooming and riding horses provide crucial sensory input that the children crave in order to relax and be able to function in their environments. Moreover, physical actions such as carrying heavy pails of water and bales of hay offer relief for a variety of autism-related symptoms, such as extreme joint pressure.

Serenity Equine Therapy Program

Being with the horses in a therapeutic setting enables the children to learn the benefits of a reciprocal relationship: they discover that there is a direct causal effect with their behavior. If a horse is matted and they brush the horse, the horse's coat will become smooth and shiny. Or, if they treat the horse with respect and kindness, they will be allowed to harness the horse and ride. Using the horses as a therapeutic medium, the students learn how to nurture the horse, which often then results in improved nurturing skills towards self and others.

The direct contact with the horses provides the instant feedback that these children need in order to make a connection between their behavior and consequences. Developing a sense of responsibility and ownership for personal behavior is invaluable because it often translates back into the child's everyday world. With an increased understanding of how their actions create consequences in their immediate environment, the children are better able to function in a pro-social, responsible way in the world at-large.

Goals & Objectives of Equine Therapy Program

The overall goal for the program is for the students at Serenity to have a positive experience that enables them to become more successful in their own lives. For some students, this will mean developing improved communication skills while for others, it will include better motor skills and improved social interaction with peers and adults.

Specific objectives include:

- Better communication skills
 - language acquisition, volume control, articulation
- Improved physical strength
 - better “trunk” control, fine motor skills, flexibility, posture and balance
- Increase in pro-social behavior
 - improved emotional bonding and interaction with others, self-esteem, and a decrease in explosive behavior
- Better self-care skills and daily living skills
 - transfer of horse care and grooming skills to self-nurturing skills, more responsive to adult directives
- Increased tolerance to a variety of media
 - exposure to new smells and tactile experiences with horses expands sensory awareness and tolerance levels

Activities planned to reach these goals

Children with autism related disorders frequently seek and create movement (rocking back and forth, banging against something) in order to address their sensory needs. Working with the horses provides a multitude of activities for these children that are eminently appropriate for their sensory and physical diets.

Serenity Equine Therapy Program

- Each participant in the equine therapy program will have a customized treatment plan with individual goals and objectives for each session and for the overall program. These plans will be developed by treatment leaders, home staff, parents, and wherever possible, the children
- One week of pre-program preparation and orientation
- One week of post-program follow-up and closure
- Weekly equine-related discussions in classroom setting
- Program participants will work with certified equine professionals for one 90 minute session a week for eight weeks

Equine Therapy Activities will include:

INITIATION PHASE:

- Introduction to horse stable environment
- Reviewing safety procedures, basic care and handling, and equipment
- Learning how to approach horses and make appropriate contact
- Grooming horses (identify different tools and steps for effective grooming)

FOLLOW THROUGH ACTIVITIES:

- Tacking up the horses (using blankets, saddles and pads, and bridles)
- Grounding activities with the horses (round pen training)
- Learning safe mounting procedures
- Riding horses under close professional supervision

CLOSURE:

- De-tacking the horses
- Feeding (refreshing water and hay supplies) and turning out horses
- Stall and barn duties
- De-briefing with staff and assessment of progress towards treatment plan objectives

Data Collection & Evaluation Procedures

- Staff will monitor weekly attendance and performance and make progress notes according to individual goals

Serenity Equine Therapy Program

- Data tracking with each participant's development in specific areas (gross and fine motor skills, verbal articulation, pro-social behavior) will be recorded and compiled at end of program
- Participants will be assessed according to evaluation outcomes and considered for ongoing equine therapy training