

Hippotherapy Offers Tremendous Benefits To Kids With Special Needs

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Kevin has Cerebral Palsy and exhibits poor head and trunk control, spasticity in his arms and legs and cannot maintain independent sitting. His devoted family takes him to physical, occupational and speech therapy every week without fail. However on Saturday's he has the opportunity to ride a horse he calls his own.

His goals and objectives remain the same as his traditional therapies throughout the week. Kevin's pride is evident sitting on top of his horse in front of a cheering crowd of parents and peers. Progress is made quickly due to his enthusiasm and willingness to maintain an upright position on the horse.

Hippotherapy has been used as a treatment tool by physical and occupational therapist for well over 30 years. Hippo is a Greek word meaning horse.

Therapist use the movement of the horse to improve balance, coordination, strengthen postural muscles and target deficits such as one side weakness. A typical hippotherapy session last between 30 minutes to 1 hour. In that time, the child is put through various positions and exercises. While on a bareback pad with a single handle to hold on to called a surcingle, the child often assumes forward, backward and side sitting, quadruped, tall kneeling and standing in the stirrups. Many activities are geared towards weight bearing to influence tone and strengthen muscles.

The horse is quite a remarkable animal and provides a therapeutic benefit simply by sitting on its back while the horse walks. The child's pelvis is influenced by the movements of the horse. In fact, while riding on a horse the child's pelvis is moved in a pattern mimicking ambulation. The therapist directs the horse handler to have the horse move in such a way to provide a challenge to the rider to produce therapeutic results. The children work so hard to stay upright on the horse and simultaneously enjoy riding that they do not realize just how hard they are working. What a sense of freedom these kids feel that are always dependent on others to help them move. The smiles on the faces of the children tells the whole story.

Kevin attends the hippotherapy program at Sunshine Therapy in Miami, Florida. They have over 5 years experience in hippotherapy and aquatics. There are countless success stories of the therapeutic benefits of these therapies. When they decided to open a suit therapy program last year using the Therasuit, a decision to combine a 3 week intensive therapy program using the Therasuit and combining it with hippotherapy, aquatic therapy and swimming with the dolphins has been more successful than ever imagined. This unique combination of these proven therapies are producing positive results and improving the lives of children with cerebral palsy and other disabilities.

Hippotherapy is not to be confused with therapeutic riding. Hippotherapy is only done under the direction of a licensed therapist in which the focus of treatment is the movement of the horse helping the children progress towards their goals. Therapeutic riding is actual riding lessons that teach disabled individuals to ride properly and at the same time therapeutic.

Parents wishing to find a hippotherapy program for their child can log onto www.narha.org and check their state listings. Hippotherapy can be a wonderful treatment tool to help accelerate a child's progress and increase their self esteem enormously.

