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Whoa! to Limitations

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Therapeutic Horseback Riding Strengthens Kids

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Zach “Zachman” Aldridge was born healthy, but at just 10 weeks, he was hospitalized at the hands of his birth father. Suffering from a brain aneurism, partial paralysis and multiple broken bones from shaken baby syndrome, Zach’s mother, Rebekah, was told that he might live for a year.

Rebekah’s hope for a miracle was granted as her son’s life extended into weeks, months and years. Yet, at 4, the effects of the injury still prevented Zach from walking or talking like other children.

“While some people are resigned to leave special children like Zach confined to a wheelchair, therapeutic horseback riding gives them more options and improves their quality of life,” advises Kim Minarich, executive director of Southwest Florida’s nonprofit Naples Equestrian Challenge therapeutic riding program. A medical examination ensures a child is qualified for safe participation.

During his first lessons, riding instructors had to prop up Zach’s head using “boppy pillows”. However, after just a few months, the Aldridge family saw dramatic improvements as the boy began speaking and telling his horse to “trot on.”

Next, Zach began walking, a surprise to all. His growing strength had worked to overcome the paralysis and the gentle rocking motion of his therapeutic riding sessions gently pushed his displaced hip back into place, ultimately enabling him to take steps on his own.

Zach’s achievements are not unique. Life-changing milestones like this are common occurrences at the 850 nationwide therapeutic riding centers registered with the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship (PATH) International.

Now in its 21st year, Dream Catchers, at the Cori Sikich Therapeutic Riding Center, in Toano, Virginia, is one such center celebrating its many success stories. Kendall Lecker, a PATH International-certified advanced instructor, describes the rapid progress of a new 6-year-old student living with autism as illustration. In his first session, he slumped over in the saddle and struggled to hold himself up; by his third session, he was sitting up straight and confidently giving commands to his horse.

“The riding center gave me a place to realize I wasn’t the only one with challenges. It was a place that I could go to and be normal for part of the week.”

~ *Tiffany Billings, a college student with cerebral palsy*

“Often, our riders start with insufficient core strength and may not be able to hold themselves upright, something the average person takes for granted. But, in a relatively short time, most riders can see dramatic improvements,” says Lecker.

Both Naples Equestrian Challenge and Dream Catchers have achieved premier accreditation by demonstrating the highest levels of training, safety standards and quality controls in the industry developed to protect the riders, staff and volunteers. Feedback from approximately 56,000 participants nationwide, including nearly 41,000 under the age of 18, show that therapeutic horseback riding helps participants in five key areas:

Normalizes muscle tone. Riding a horse helps children of all abilities build core strength and exercise muscles that they may not be able to work from the confines of a wheelchair.

Increases flexibility and relaxation. The natural rhythm of a horse’s gait provides a relaxing effect on tense muscles and can gently rock joints back into place. It’s a unique therapeutic benefit not easily achieved through traditional physical therapy.



Improves coordination, balance and strength. Completing tasks like picking up an object, riding across the arena and placing it in a bucket helps riders develop hand/eye coordination. The movements also help improve balance and strength.

Promotes spatial orientation and fine motor skills. Working side-by-side with their assigned volunteers and horses and reaching for objects from a different perspective than usual helps youths develop their spatial sense and fine motor skills.

Enhances self-esteem, self-confidence and self-control. Riders are encouraged to give verbal commands to their horse during sessions, which effects a command of vocabulary and boosts confidence while they bond with the horse.

While the documented benefits are derived from personal testimonials rather than clinical studies, the positive results for children like Zach are indisputable. Meanwhile, therapeutic horseback riding is gaining increased acceptance in the medical community as more doctors are recommending this life-changing activity for their patients.

PATH International spokesperson Cher Smith says, "Our mission is to help certified centers provide safe access for all individuals living with special needs."

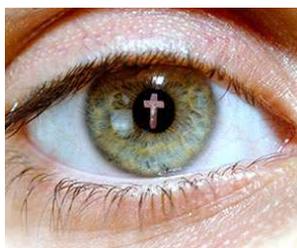
For more information, visit PathIntl.org.

Cyndee Woolley works as an advocate for therapeutic riding centers.

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