

A Smile, a Horse and Autism

By JANET SCHOELER

"What do you see?" Liz Claud, director of High Horses Therapeutic Riding Program at Brookside Farm off Route 5 in Norwich, Vt., asks a child looking a horse in the eye.

"I see myself," responds the child.

What's unique about this interaction is the fact it's an interaction at all. The child is diagnosed with autism, and children with autism have difficulty communicating and sometimes making eye contact.

Unique is also a good word to describe the overall effect of horses on children with autism — a phenomenon that brings positive results without knowing exactly why. Maybe it's that horse-child relationship.

"Children develop special relationships with horses that quickly generalize to increased contact and involvement with teachers, trainers and family members. The sense of confidence and competence they gain from their horsemanship is unparalleled by any other experience," wrote child psychologist Dr. Stephen Gutstein in an article published by the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association, Inc. That organization — www.narha.org — oversees instructor training for teaching handicapped people of all ages.

"The effect we're finding is somehow related to the rhythm of the horse," says Claud. "It allows the child to process things better and focus more."

The result may show up in a smile. Claud says several children love to trot on a horse and the slightly faster-than-a-walk motion brings a smile to their face. Results reach in



other directions, too. Claud says one child had difficulty keeping his anger in check, but is kind and never shows anger while riding.

"That's the thing. A lot of parents don't expect things like that to happen. They're thrilled when it does and want their child to keep riding," she says.

Another child cried the first time a safety helmet was put on him so he could ride. "He cried so hard, we took the helmet off," she says. On the next visit, he just sat on her lap, and on subsequent visits, got on the ramp where riders go to get on a horse. Finally, after the fourth or fifth visit, he actually got on a horse and "had an incredible ride," says Claud.

"The parent wrote that for the first time her child made full statements that had to do with his future. He had never talked about future events before. His parents are just thrilled. It's moments like this that you see such a huge jump in progress," she says.

High Horses Therapeutic Riding Program began in 1993 and is a nationally certified nonprofit financed through riders' fees, grants, donations and fundraisers. Fees range from \$300 (a seven-week session) to \$500 with third-party financial assistance and partial scholarships available. There are eight instructors, more than 100 volunteers and six special horses helping around 45 riders of all ages and disabilities.

All of the instructors have taken additional courses about autism, and the Hartford Autism Regional Program in Wilder, Vt., (one of three collaborative programs in the Hartford School District serving Vermont and New Hampshire) staff meets with instructors to help enhance the program.

For more about the High Horses Therapeutic Riding Program, contact Liz Claud at (802) 356-3386. To volunteer, contact Volunteer Coordinator Susan Goodell at (802) 429-2412 or visit www.highhorses.org