

## The Association Between Therapeutic Horseback Riding and the Social Communication and Sensory Reactions of Children with Autism

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This study investigated the association between Therapeutic Riding (TR) and the social communication and sensory processing skills of 21 elementary students with autism attending TR as part of a school group. An interrupted treatment design was employed to determine whether children were able to maintain treatment effects following the removal of TR. The teachers' ratings of behavior were completed at the school building and were based on the students' behaviors in the classroom in order to determine if the effects of TR transferred to the classroom. Teacher ratings on Gilliam Autism Rating Scale -2 (GARS-2) (Gilliam, 2006) and the Sensory Profile School Companion (SPSC) (Dunn, 2006) indicated that participating children with autism significantly increased their social interaction, improved their sensory processing, and decreased the severity of symptoms associated with ASD following TR. Specifically, the participants' ability to relate appropriately to people, events, and objects improved significantly. Additionally, participants showed improved attention, tolerance, and reactions to sensory input in the classroom. These gains were not maintained consistently after two six-week breaks from TR, but were recovered during an additional 8-week TR session. These results provide preliminary evidence that consistent TR lessons are important to sustaining gains.

The results of this study provide evidence that TR can be an effective intervention for children with autism and that the positive impact of TR transfers to classroom settings. Evidence from this and previous TR studies demonstrate that TR can benefit children with ASD in a number of ways, and should be considered as one potential form of therapy and leisure activity for children with ASD. More research is necessary investigate whether multiple measures and

data sources demonstrate a similar impact. In addition, research should compare findings from TR with other alternative leisure interventions such as other forms of animal assisted therapy.

#### References

- Dunn, W. (2006). *The Sensory Profile School Companion*. San Antonio, TX: Pearson.
- Gilliam, J. E. (2006). *The Gilliam Autism Rating Scale – Second Edition*. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed, Inc.