



Asociación  
Española de  
Equinoterapias



Horses teach me to Find my Way

## Hippotherapy and playing

Hippotherapy is the queen among Animal Assisted Interventions, it's the most complete and effective, as it contains already all the structural elements of games.

Playing is universally recognized among all cultures and countries, since the very beginning of human kind. It collects various things at once:

a sensor motor exercise;

an emotion and energy releaser;

discovery and acquisition of abilities (for independence);

knowledge of new things and reinforcing older ones, with repetition and predictability (emotion and reassurance);

a way to free oneself from anxiety and distress, to return to a state of peace and calm (repairing deep wounds);

a way to grow in the relationship between the self and the world as a bigger entity;

representation of Reality before language and thought;

knowledge and respect of rules and procedures;

space/time orientation.

Hippotherapy is a therapy that is perceived as a game, in a natural and pleasant environment, rich in sensor stimuli, far away from a closed and sanitized place. The basis of hippotherapy are instead movement and analogical communication.

Analogical communication is the non verbal one, made of gestures, posture, gaze, sounds, contact. The body is the mean of this type of language, which, as the game, is ancestral and universal, preceding the verbal one. Moreover, analogical communication is clear and direct, it does not produce misunderstandings: it is the one used between a newborn and his mother, man and animal.

For the child who cannot use verbal communication, or for an adult with a severe psychical problem, having clear, authentic and univocal communication is crucial.

Hippotherapy conveys the movement of the horse to the person with a physical or psychic impairment, where sensor motor system and emotional sphere interact with the movement of the horse and with the therapist, who mediates this relationship.

The peculiarity of hippotherapy is its mean: the horse. The horse is a communicative, living being, with his warmth, his sounds, shape and color of his body, with regular and rhythmic movements, but also with his sudden movements, oppositions, pleasure and calm expressions, as well as sufferance and annoyance.

The hippotherapy session: on the ground and on the horse.

The child with cognitive retard is stimulated, thanks to the ground work, in all his five senses: he can look and admire the animal, his different body parts; can hear his neighs; can feel his warmth, the softness or hardness; smell his odor and the ones around the horse...

Taking care of the horse, with the pleasure he displays, arising primordial sensations of delight, reinforcing self awareness and self care.

Afterwards, when the child mounts on the horse, he can feel himself and the animal, first as a whole entity, without boundaries, but then, slowly, the child realizes that he, the horse and the therapist are three different identities: they are a whole composed of single, separated entities.

During a hippotherapy session, both on the ground and on horseback, as in a game, next to the cognitive solicitations (space, time, tasks, motor abilities) there are emotional stimuli: deep and primordial emotions are awakened, such as joy, surprise, but also rage and fear.

In the autistic child, for example, it is very important that, during the session, he can display his emotions, both positive and negative ones, but it is just as important that they are recognized by the therapist, contained and measured. These children live with great anguish, the surfacing of the emotional sphere, since they put so much effort in trying to lock it down with rituals and stereotypes.



Asociación  
Española de  
Equinoterapias



### Horses teach me to Find my Way

The competence of the therapist, who will choose the right horse with the help of the vet, expert in such interventions, will be modulating the exercises and understanding the difficulties of the rider, being able to fulfill the therapeutic program and transforming an obstacle into a developmental stage.

For the child, experiencing a negative emotion, like losing control (of oneself, of the horse, or both), can foster turning to a third person, the therapist in this case: it is the hippotherapy trio, made of horse, therapist and rider, that creates communication and interaction, gives confidence and promotes responsibility and independence.

The person with a severe motor deficit, like spastic quadraparesis, with the use of the saddle can ride and lead the horse, increasing pleasure and independence, but also fear. The position is higher compared to the ground, the one who was not able to walk, now can move forward thanks to the horse, whose movement (tridimensional in space) precisely replicates the human walking. In detail, the child experiences a feeling of omnipotence, but at the same time he learns his own limits and the ones of the horse, just like in a game, where the child learns to calibrate his im/possibilities, in a normal psycho-physic development: "I can't jump two meters high, I need to accept that I don't know how to ride a bicycle yet...". Riding a horse, when you cannot walk, promotes the acquisition of the body scheme, the conquering of space, the exploration, the discovery of one's ability, at the same time helping to accept the limits. In the pleasure of riding a horse, even the child with severe deficit, finds the motivation to engage in activities that go beyond playing games, making rehabilitation more appealing.

Moreover, hippotherapy is surely effective in children and teenagers (but also in adults) with psychic and behavioral issues, such as hyperactivity or attention deficit, emotional attachment problems, personality disorders. In these cases group sessions of pedagogical vaulting are very useful. In the vaulting session, the playing part of hippotherapy comes out more vividly: sensory motor abilities and delight are higher, but also discipline, rules, attention to the horse, comparison with others, with the "best ones".

With this activity, the child who has issues measuring his instinct, with a low threshold for frustration, always requiring attention and not knowing how to create a real bond with other children or the horse (he would like to use the horse as a lifeless tool), will learn to cope with failure, to train and put effort in it, to bear not being the centre of the scene. In these cases, it may happen that the child with less abilities retires from the group, isolates himself, regresses, refuses the activity or, if unable to control himself, to show aggressive or disruptive behavior, making the session chaotic (as he probably does in school and within the family), and making the other children unwilling to participate. In the first case, if the functional regression is understood and the child is supported in overcoming it, he will feel the protection of the group and will be ready to try again, imitating the best ones, to ensure that the shared game continues. In the second case, if the child does not want to be left behind and isolated, but wishes to make friends and be appreciated, will have to learn how to control himself, his sensitivity and impetuosity, also in regard to the horse (which is upset as well by this disruptive behavior). The child will make himself capable of such change, to keep playing and be part of the group. This will lead to an improved relationship with others, with himself, relaxing, quitting running away, and finally, realizing the crucial passage from the Pleasure Principle with no rules, to a game governed by rules, the Reality Principle.

Last but not least, if the game is a "transitional phenomena" (Winnicott), we can consider the horse as a true "transitional object" and hippotherapy, as the space of the game, becomes an area where the child gains independence, as it happens in the gradual separation between mother and child, with the discovery of the Other and the Self, switching from "Autosphere" to Reality.

Hippo therapy is also this.