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Soap bubbles for children on the autistic spectrum riding horses

When the world of the horses meets the autism, it's an expanding universe... just like a bubble in the sky.

Soap bubbles, beautiful for their transparency, color and perfect spherical shape, are a source of great charm both for children and adults. They're fragile, colorful, perfect, part of the imaginary world of every child.

It's their fragility that makes them so charming, their unpredictable duration, from blink of an eye to a few seconds. They are almost alive, dealing with soap bubbles is dealing with objects been created, growing and breaking. A metaphor for the inner fragility that is autism.

The international scientific community doesn't agree on a specific cause for autism, and it seems that several factors may lead to that result. The only viable option, besides early diagnosis and early therapeutic interventions, is to focus on the technical recover of the child, which includes parent training. As of today, interesting results are attributed to cognitive behavioral therapy and psycho relational interventions, addressed to the emotional well being and the interaction with others (for example, psychomotricity and animal assisted interventions).

There is no explanation on why some children on the autistic spectrum talk and others don't, words may be perceived like a mess of sounds with no sense. Nevertheless, the child wants to communicate in some degree.

Soap bubbles are a technique used in psychomotricity with non verbal children. This game helps looking, looking together, exchanging glances, smiles, vocalizations. The bubbles keep high the attention of the child, capturing his sight, which is the first step of communication, a crucial ability for humans. Soap bubbles can lead to a variety of individual, couple or group games and their charm helps to work on the gaze, emotional and cognitive attention. Moreover, blowing to create the bubbles, is not an easy tasks, that requires focus and attention, that can be maintained easily thanks to the recreational aspect of the activity.

If the child is having fun, interacting whit him is easier, and the help of the horse increases the fun. As for all animal assisted interventions, great care needs to be paid when choosing the animal: usually horses are not frightened by soap bubbles, some are even relaxed by them, but this choice must always be up to professionals.

But how to incorporate this game into a session? First, find the right bubble type (there are small or big ones, that can be chosen either out of preference of the children, or to focus the work: on gross or fine motor skills for example). There are different ways of producing and using the bubbles: from the ground, close to the horse, the child can blow in the direction of the horse (on the neck, from the side), this can help the child touching and petting the horse, trying to reach for the bubbles. Another way is to let the horse blow the bubbles: holding the bubble stick close to his nose and waiting for him to exhale; this way it's possible to work on a deeper level, on the things that are not visible and on patience. From the top of the horse, during a stop, both to work on eye-hand coordination, as a prompt to pet the horse, and as a way to work on waiting (some children don't like the horse to stop). The children can follow the bubbles blown by the therapist, that can strategically place them further away to stimulate the stretching of the muscles and the exploring of different parts of the horse. The



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bubbles can also be a good stimulation for the child to talk, trying to articulate a word associated with positive emotions, moreover, such a positive and apparently purely recreational situation, can reinforce the child in communicating with the therapist or other figures participating in the therapy (for example, the parents could be involved in the game). Moreover, bubbles relax the child, so it can be a good thing to interrupt a crisis or stereotypy, to renew attention when the child starts getting distracted or tired by the therapy.

Inserting the use of soap bubbles in a therapy with horses with children on the autistic spectrum may increase the therapeutic value: it is good for improving also the eye-hand coordination, working from the horse enhances the benefits. Moreover, soap bubbles can work as a distraction when other elements of the setting may be scary or too demanding for the child, increasing his ability to manage frustration and prolonging his attention span.

Given the known benefits of hippotherapy (physical, cognitive, emotional, social), combining this activity with the game of soap bubbles, can therefore increase the potential for a better outcome for children on the autistic spectrum.

To conclude: this new and creative way to include a child's game in the therapy setting, should also be animated by the child and the therapist's creativity, in addition to the purposes of the personal project carried out for the child.

