

Benefits of Therapeutic Riding

By Cindy Ross and Dee Mollema

Although students who enjoy the SPUR-sponsored riding program may have different abilities, they benefit from similar techniques. The basis for the positive effects of therapeutic riding lies in the three-dimensional movement of the horse. Riders receive sensory input from the horse as they are moved up and down, side-to-side, forward and back in a fluid circular motion. While this motion can be altered by the speed and gait of the horse, it imparts a precise repetitive pattern of movement to the student. This movement is very similar to that of a person's pelvis in the course of human gaits. The sensations passed to the rider trigger a response from the brain that affects the entire body and results in improvement of balance, coordination, speech and motor skills.

While mounted, the rider's body constantly adjusts in an effort to maintain balance on the horse. To do this, the muscles of the body, primarily in the torso or trunk, must continually contract and relax in specific ways. Our body works very hard to satisfy messages from the brain telling it to stay upright and balanced. The resulting trunk control is the prerequisite for the development of functional use of our extremities. During lessons, movement of the horse in straight lines of varying stride length and impulsion develops trunk control. To further challenge the rider's body to maintain balance, movement varies from straight lines to large circles, serpentines, figure eights and then to smaller circles.

Many riders with special needs face a great challenge because their brains may not correctly integrate sensory input from their environment. Simply put, these riders may not be able to feel what a balanced position is. They may lean far to one side and feel as though their body is in upright position. It is a state of disorientation that is difficult for us to comprehend. Therapeutic riding can aid the body in sorting out these sensations.

Positive results are noted as riders begin to "feel" for themselves when their center of gravity is in line with that of the horse. Instead of being placed by the instructor in a centered position, many riders begin to move themselves back to a centered position. Such subtle movements initiated by the rider are moments of great success. Through patience, time and close observation, one can note these moments of progress as breakthroughs for the rider and building blocks that lead to the development of other skills. Each triumph contributes to the ultimate goal—greater independence for the student, in riding and in life.