



Integrated Psychological Connections

NEUROPSYCHOLOGICAL & PSYCHOLOGICAL EVALUATIONS

DIAGNOSTIC CLARIFICATIONS ·· CONSULTING

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EQUINE ASSISTED THERAPY & ASD

Equine-assisted therapy (EAT) can be particularly helpful for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) by offering unique therapeutic benefits that traditional therapies may not provide. However, it's typically used as an **adjunct therapy**, meaning it should complement rather than replace other evidence-based treatments like behavioral therapy, occupational therapy, or speech therapy. Here's how equine-assisted therapy can help someone with ASD and why it's used alongside other interventions:

Benefits of Equine-Assisted Therapy for Individuals with ASD:

- 1. Improvement in Social Skills:** Horses are non-judgmental and offer a calm presence, which can help individuals with ASD feel more comfortable and reduce social anxiety. Through interactions with the horse, individuals can practice social skills like:
 - **Non-verbal communication:** Understanding and responding to a horse's body language can help individuals with ASD become more attuned to non-verbal cues, which are often challenging in human interactions.
 - **Building trust and empathy:** Developing a bond with the horse can help enhance emotional connections and empathy, which may translate to better social interactions with humans.
- 2. Sensory Integration:** Many individuals with ASD experience sensory processing issues. Riding a horse or interacting with one can provide rhythmic, repetitive sensory input that helps with sensory integration. The movement of the horse stimulates various senses and can help individuals:
 - Develop better **balance and coordination**.
 - Improve **sensory modulation**, which can lead to better emotional regulation.
- 3. Emotional Regulation:** The calming presence of a horse and the structured environment of equine therapy can help individuals with ASD better regulate their emotions. The horse's consistent and gentle behavior can help reduce anxiety and promote a sense of calm, which can be especially beneficial during times of emotional distress.
- 4. Physical Benefits:** Riding a horse requires balance, muscle strength, and coordination. Equine-assisted therapy can improve:



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- **Core stability and posture.**
 - **Motor skills**, which may also enhance performance in other physical activities.
5. **Increase in Confidence and Self-Esteem:** Successfully guiding or caring for a large animal like a horse can instill a sense of accomplishment and boost confidence. For someone with ASD, mastering new tasks during therapy can build self-esteem and a sense of independence.
 6. **Structure and Routine:** Horses require consistent care and routine, which can help instill discipline and structure in an individual's life. Individuals with ASD often benefit from predictable routines, and working with horses can reinforce these habits in a therapeutic context.

Why Equine-Assisted Therapy Should Be Adjunct to Other Therapies:

While equine-assisted therapy offers many benefits, it should not be the sole form of therapy for individuals with ASD because:

1. **Lack of Individualized Skill Development:** Equine-assisted therapy alone may not address specific skill deficits commonly associated with ASD, such as difficulties with speech, language, or repetitive behaviors. Behavioral therapies like Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) or speech therapy focus on targeted interventions for these areas.
2. **Research Limitations:** Although anecdotal evidence and some studies show promising results, equine-assisted therapy is not as extensively researched or evidence-based as other ASD therapies like ABA or occupational therapy. Therefore, it should be seen as a supportive therapy that enhances, rather than replaces, traditional treatments.
3. **Complementary Role:** Equine-assisted therapy is most effective when combined with other therapies that focus on the individual's core needs. For example, after a child works on communication skills with a speech therapist, they can use equine therapy to practice these skills in a less structured, real-world environment.
4. **Focus on Social and Emotional Growth:** Equine-assisted therapy is particularly effective at addressing emotional and social areas, such as building trust and empathy, but may not address the full range of developmental needs. More structured therapies are often necessary to build academic, communication, and daily living skills.