

Research Validates that Horses Positively Impact Children with Autism

(Chagrin Falls, OH) April 22, 2010 – A recently completed study concludes that children with autism between the ages of 7 and 12 showed improved cognition, communication, and motivation after participating in specific equine assisted activities (EAA). The research shows that riding, grooming, and interacting with horses had a noticeable, positive effect on study participants.

Margaret M. Bass, Ph. D. and Maria Llabre, Ph. D. focused on the impact of EAA on the children's social functioning and attention capacity. The study, funded by the Ohio-based Horses and Humans Research Foundation (HHRF), was a follow-up to a 2006 pilot study (published in the *Journal for Autism & Developmental Disorders*) by the same researchers. The new study exposed a larger experimental group of participants to twelve weeks of one hour and fifteen minutes sessions of EAA and tracked the effects for two months afterwards. The activities utilized were grooming and tacking, mounting/dismounting and mounted warm-up exercises, riding skills, and games.

Study results were determined based on data collected from participants' parents and teachers. The Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS) and Sensory Profile (SP) analysis systems were used to assess social functioning at three times during the study. The SRS is a 65-item questionnaire that measures the severity of autism spectrum disorder symptoms. The SP is a 125-item questionnaire that is administered to parents or teachers, using a 1 ("always") to 5 ("never") Likert scale.

According to the Autism Society of America, autism is the fastest growing developmental disability, which is estimated to have between a ten to seventeen percent growth rate each year. In response to these growing numbers, EAA offers a promising approach to working with children with autism. While the activities are not formally considered therapy, they are viewed as therapeutic if a participant is able to show improvement within one or more of the following areas: physical, social, emotional or

educational (NARHA, 2010). The multi-sensory equestrian environment and the relationship created between the horse and the participant can provide more than just riding skills.

Doctors Bass and Llabre state that they are “very appreciative to HHRF for funding this research project. The most significant thing that we found from this study was that the autistic children in the experimental group improved in critical areas such as sensory seeking, emotional reactive, inattention/distractibility and sensory sensitivity, as compared to the wait list control group.”

Horses and Humans Research Foundation grant awards are made possible by the generous contributions of foundations, individuals, businesses and therapeutic riding programs nationwide. An anonymous \$500,000 challenge grant matches every dollar contributed to the organization.

To view the findings and reports of this project and other awarded projects, visit www.horsesandhumans.org. More information about the 501 (c)3 organization, including contribution forms, can also be found at the Web site.

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HHRF is dedicated to facilitating universal understanding and appreciation of the significant influence of horses on humans. HHRF funds and promotes research that will 1) Benefit special program participants by improving equine assisted activity best practices; 2) Educate the public, including professional affiliates, regarding the value and benefits of horses and equine assisted activities. For more information contact KC Henry, executive director at (440) 543.8306 or info@horsesandhumans.org.