


# Horse Therapy

## *for a Healthy Future*

How equine therapy is helping Katyites overcome challenges

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Studies have shown that horses have a calming effect on people, making equine therapy an effective treatment for a variety of people. Pictured is Kristina with her horse Arrowwind.



**P**Before meeting and working with Hootie, a local therapy horse, Cade Zimmerman was distracted by everything. The Katy 13-year-old had been diagnosed with autism and struggled with the disorder's symptoms. When he was only 6 years old, his parents introduced him to equine facilitated therapy through the local organization SIRE. "When Cade first came to us, his biggest challenge was his focus," says Joelle Devlin, Zimmerman's lead instructor at SIRE. "He is now an independent rider."

## *A Calming Effect*

Cade has always had a love of horses and has even participated in a few equine competitions. During his first such experience at the Top Hands Rodeo, he was so busy charming the crowd, he didn't seem to mind that it was an actual competition.

"When Cade first started at SIRE, he had a lot of sensory issues, self-control, distractions, everything," shares his mom, Susan Zimmerman. SIRE's mission is to improve the quality of life for people with disabilities through therapeutic horseback riding and related activities. Studies have shown that horses can have a calming effect on people, and clinical tests have confirmed there is a change in brain waves when people socialize with horses.

## *Making Strides Forward*

Through his work with the organization, Cade has taken many positive steps forward. Telling the horse what to do means keeping one's mind on task, and the bond between horse and rider helped him learn to tune out distractions. He worked through sequence exercises, until he was able to work through the entire course and focus on what needed to be done.

"Joelle Devlin was one of his first instructors, and I wasn't sure who was going to win the battle of wills," Susan shares. "He was very defiant. If he didn't want to do something, it wasn't going to happen. He just wanted to trot. She persevered, and he's riding independently now for the most part."

## *Mental and Physical Benefits*

Cade is a great example of how equine therapy can help children with autism. His ability to focus has vastly improved, along with his physical balance. Using leg muscles to go forward and back or side to side during a ride strengthens them, and that has translated into better balance for Cade when he's walking, as well. "Often times with autism, they don't have the automatic awareness about where their body parts are in gravity," says Devlin. "Riding teaches them how to learn and how to process information and body awareness to build coordination."

Even children who have severe anti-social and aggressive behavior benefit from equine therapy by becoming calmer and more communicative. Riding has given Cade something to talk about with his friends at school, an opportunity to forge relationships with children his age, and an incentive for him to do his school work. "Let's get this done, so you can ride on Saturday" is a phrase often heard in the Zimmerman household," Susan laughs. "It gets a positive response when he might otherwise put off finishing a page of homework."

## *Learning from Horses*

Horses make good therapy animals, because they are believed to give you immediate feedback on your actions and body language through mirroring. When considering horses for therapy, trainers look for qualities like having a calm, patient, and malleable disposition.

"Without the work they do and the benefits they provide, we would not be able to assist so many people seeking this type of therapy," explains Devlin.

Equine therapy provides a variety of physical, emotional, communicative, and educational benefits. "We have people come to us who are unable to walk, and they begin to make those movements, if not actually walk," Devlin shares. "We have adults who have never spoken, speak their first words. When you put them on a horse, they don't feel sick. They are mobile, and they are not only a 'normal' kid, they are also a 'cool' kid."

## *Impressive Results*

Cade's parents are so impressed with the results from the program and love seeing how much their son enjoys riding that they anticipate this will be a lifelong activity. "This year, he came in fourth in the barrels," Susan reflects. "We were very, very happy that he didn't pay attention to the crowd." It's that type of enthusiasm and positive reinforcement from parents that can make all the difference. Devlin shares, "Without their courage to step back and allow the children to be challenged, all of these accomplishments would not be possible." KM

*NOREEN STAVINOHA lives in Katy with her husband and miniature schnauzer and loves to tell the stories of interesting people.*



Katy teen Cade Zimmerman began working with his therapy horse Hootie to help with symptoms of autism like sensory issues and the inability to focus



Since starting the therapy horse program with SIRE, Zimmerman is now able to ride independently most of the time and has even competed in barrel racing