



Handy Handouts®

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Hippotherapy

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Hippotherapy does not involve hippos; it involves horses (“hippo” is Greek for “horse”). Beyond a pony ride, hippotherapy uses the horse to target motor (movement), cognitive (thinking), and language goals. The movement of the horse gives lots of neuro feedback to the child’s brain, which is ideal for therapy. Generally, hippotherapy uses a team approach, which means physical therapists (PTs), occupational therapists (OTs), and speech-language pathologists (SLPs) work together to create the best results.

Hippotherapy is evidence-based, meaning that many researchers have shown hippotherapy benefits children in the areas of language development, sensory integration, and motor control.



Many theories explain why hippotherapy works:



- Children learn and absorb information while moving. Since the brain is talking to the child’s muscles in order to sit on the horse and control it, other neurons controlling the muscles for speech are activated as well.



- Absorbing and organizing sensory input, like the trot of a horse, can be challenging for many children. Strength, balance, and coordination are targeted while the horse is moving, which can carry over to other activities in a child’s life, such as walking and talking.



- There are social and emotional benefits observed in hippotherapy. Working with animals has been shown to be calming and motivating for children. A child who struggles speaking with adults and peers may be more motivated to give a horse commands to trot and stop. The child also builds confidence as he/she rides!

Many different children with a range of neuro-cognitive/motor disorders can benefit from hippotherapy, such as children with autism, cerebral palsy, or a traumatic brain injury. Adults who have arthritis or have suffered a stroke may also benefit from hippotherapy.



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In addition to their professional licenses, PTs, OTs, and SLPs become an American Hippotherapy Certification Board (AHCBS) Certified Therapist, and others go on to be AHCBS Board Hippotherapy Clinical Specialist (HPCS). Some insurance companies have started covering at least part of the cost of hippotherapy from certified providers.

Visit <https://americanhippotherapyassociation.org/> to discover more about hippotherapy, review research, and find a therapist near you.



Resources:

American Hippotherapy Association. (n.d.). What is Hippotherapy? Retrieved from <https://americanhippotherapyassociation.org/>

Koca, T. T. & Ataseven, H. (2015). What is hippotherapy? The indications and effectiveness of hippotherapy. *North Clinics of Istanbul*; 2(3), 247-252. Doi:10.14744/nci.2016.71601

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