Therapeutic Riding and Relationship Skills

Tom Schreck
Director Of Communications

Horseback riding is known as a fun activity especially for animal lovers. Therapeutic riding, however, is so much more.

“Therapeutic riding isn’t merely learning to ride a horse. For Wildwood riders and handlers it is also a vehicle to learn and experience things like companionship, communication and social skills,” Tom George, Wildwood’s certified therapeutic riding instructor, said.

People who have a developmental disability often struggle with the interpersonal skills that lead to building relationships. Equine assisted activities require that a close relationship between the handler and horse be developed. These successful bonds can be a bridge builder for people who haven’t had the success they’ve wanted in developing their interpersonal relationships.

“The trust and loyalty the horses show the participants is a true confidence builder. Our handlers start to recognize their worth and value to the horses and that self esteem begins to naturally carry over to other areas of their lives,” Tom George said.

A horse’s behavior and emotional process is simpler than a human’s and there is clear cause and effect between what a handler does and how the animal reacts. When a handler understands what they do and how they act influences the horse, they can also begin to understand how the subtleties and nuances of their actions affect their human relationships. There is a very direct correlation between a handler’s actions and the horse’s reaction and that predictability is just what some people need to understand their role in relationships.

Therapeutic riding offers individuals who have a developmental disability an opportunity to feel more in control and understand their impact on other people. As they begin to grasp what can make a horse uncomfortable, react negatively or simply have a bad day, they can adapt that understanding to their own social situations.

Improving social interactions and learning the skills that deepen relationships may not be what draws people to riding programs but it is without a doubt a benefit that is consistently seen.
Dear Friends...

I believe the following: Each generation of people with autism lays the groundwork for the next to obtain an improved quality of life. Each generation also serves to educate those without the disability and ‘desensitize’ the world at large by de-stigmatizing the characteristics and behaviors of the disorder. Everyone with autism will be recognized as individuals with existing abilities and talents and limitless potential.

For John and I, Aiden’s diagnosis was not a surprise. Instead, it was a directional sign on map, allowing us to really focus on what services and interventions would best meet Aiden’s needs. We had parameters in which to work and a framework of expectations. Anyone who knows me knows, when the ‘general’ bar is set at a certain level, my expectations are almost always one notch above that bar. This is also true of my expectations for and of Aiden. Albeit, battles must be chosen carefully and priorities must be set and these are different for each family.

Now 10 years old, Aiden has developed functional language and achieved so much as an individual. He can play the piano, is a great artist - drawing his favorite cartoon characters (Thomas the Train, Ben10, Mario, Blues Clues, etc), swims, skis and has a very playful nature and a beautifully contagious laugh; We just wish we always knew what he was laughing at!!! Over the years we have tried various programming, community based sports and recreation, traditional and non traditional therapies, home based programs, sibling groups, intensive feeding/eating clinic (this is a story for another newsletter but proved to be a life changing program for Aiden and us as a family), countless hours and days attending conferences, workshops, presentations and support groups, several discussion hours (and many cups of coffee) with other parents.

In terms of our philosophy and approach to living with a child with autism (interventions, strategies, programming, etc) we have always been willing to try something new, make certain concessions for some difficulties (some of the time), but always insisted on Aiden living and functioning in ‘our’ world. If we like it and it is beneficial we keep doing it! Of course we do our homework, weigh pros and cons, possible outcomes (or setbacks), plan for implementation and set time frame to work at it. Introducing something new, whether it be a new experience, a change in process, a different expectation or outcome, takes planning and a time frame in which to achieve desired results. As the saying goes, ‘Rome wasn’t built in a day’. In our experience with Aiden, he often does not like something when we first start it. We have to ‘make’ him participate and try new things for a period of time, which we determine. Otherwise, he would never take the leap to expand his repertoire of experiences, skills and behaviors AND learn enjoyment and pleasure derived from activities that go beyond his current desires and comfort level.

To support our goals and endeavors, we often use social stories and schedules for specified activities and reinforcers, There are many times we use iPad free time as the reward for something or minutes on Wii. Our latest experiment/goal has been to get Aiden moving. At 10 years of age he is nearly 5’4” and weighs 155lbs. He is a big boy! Like so many kids on the spectrum, he has low muscle tone, poor core strength, no endurance and in general has a sedentary lifestyle. It’s hard work for him to be moving and what is the payoff or motivating factor for him to exercise? Nice abs? Toned legs? Better health? Svelte physique? Although as parents (and a community) we care, he is oblivious to it all and cares about none of it. So.....enter the Wii, which he does care about. We have devised and implemented a plan that requires walking on the treadmill to earn minutes on the Wii. It is basic in the beginning, 15 treadmill minutes=30 Wii minutes. Once mastered, the parameters change, 20 treadmill minutes=30 Wii minutes and we keep tweaking the plan (and many cups of coffee) for Aiden evolve.

The goals John and I have always shared for our three kids is to help create and foster loving, sensitive, thriving, humane, kind, thoughtful and generous human beings, helping each to meet their fullest potential, what ever it is. That will never change. Our desire for EACH, including Aiden is to live fulfilling and rewarding lives, experience love, disappointment, joy, independence, etc. To achieve this, we as parents must remain open to others suggestions (Yes, including your spouse, LOL), learn something from EVERYONE, engage in learning at all times, create your own approaches, rework/revise/retry a once unsuccessful attempt at a new process or experience, be an intentionally transforming individual-ensuring your child(ren) is the same, share experiences and NEVER, NEVER accept mediocrity (in an individual, services or programming, etc.) as ‘good enough’; push, push, push.

Do not confine your children to your own learning for they were born in another time. ~Chinese Proverb~

The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man. ~George Bernard Shaw~

Sheri Gaylord
Mom to Trey, Aiden & Vincent
The ABC's of Behavior
Understanding and Addressing Challenging Behavior

Marianne Simon, PsyD
Licensed Psychologist

We all engage in “behaviors” each and every day...we also all exhibit “challenging behaviors” from time to time. However, many of us are able to regulate our emotional or behavioral reactions and are equipped with fairly well developed coping strategies (some of us better than others!) that allow us to move through difficult situations without impacting our ability to function, or impacting those around us. Yet, many children with developmental disabilities may exhibit challenging behaviors that impact the child, as well as his/her families in a variety of ways. For example, challenging behaviors may delay learning and development, they may cause disruption within the family system and community life, and they may alienate the individual and his/her family. Given the serious consequences of such behaviors it is imperative to develop ways to prevent or reduce the occurrences of such difficulties.

Traditionally, disciplinary approaches have been used to address challenging behavior. This would involve waiting until a behavior presents itself, and then react by applying negative consequences, aka “punishing” (e.g., taking favorite items away) in hopes that the child will “learn” and not repeat the behavior again. However, research has shown that these traditional approaches don’t teach new skills to replace the problem behavior with more appropriate, positive ones. Further, children with deficits in executive functioning such as higher level cognitive skills-including planning, organizing, and flexibility, which are often associated with many developmental disabilities are not able to plan out what potential consequences may occur following a behavior, and therefore consequence-based strategies are not effective. However, Positive Behavior Supports is a research-based approach that provides an alternative framework for understanding behavior. PBS focuses on determining the purpose of the child’s behavior, situations that set the stage for the behavior, and finding more effective ways to prevent, teach, and respond.

The first step in applying PBS is to understand that all behavior is communicative. We use our behavior to get our needs met and we will continue to act in a certain way if the behavior “works” for us and the outcome

The ABC's of Challenging Behavior
A = Antecedent, events that occur before a challenging behavior
B = Behavior, the challenging behavior
C = Consequence, events that immediately follow the challenging behavior

Steps to Address Challenging Behaviors:
1) Identify antecedents and consequences surrounding the challenging behavior
2) Take a best guess as to the “purpose” or “function” of the behavior
3) Change the antecedents (e.g., provide choices, use visual schedules, presets, “first-then” statements), teach new behaviors, and change the consequences (e.g., provide positive reinforcement for replacement behaviors)

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Behavior

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is what we want. Simply stated, “people do not have behaviors; rather they use behaviors for very specific reasons”.
Therefore, we need to determine what purpose the behavior is serving. Is the child engaging in the behavior to avoid someone, a task/activity, or an unwanted sensory input like hitting oneself when something hurts or is uncomfortable? Or is the child using his/her behavior to obtain a preferred item/activity, or is he/she gaining attention from others, or obtaining a desired sensory input?

We can answer the above questions by examining the environment and social setting prior to the behavior occurring, as well as looking at what happens following the behavior. These aspects of the environment or situation that occur before and after the behavior, are referred to as the antecedents and consequences. Once the antecedents and consequences are identified you can look for patterns as to when the behavior is most likely demonstrated. For example, lets take “Jimmy” who hates completing any chores at home. One night, Jimmy is asked to clear the table following dinner. In response he yells and bangs his head on the kitchen table. His mother asks him to go to his room to calm down, and while he is there she clears the dinner table so she can put the dishes in the dishwasher and move onto her next task. Looking at this situation it appears that Jimmy’s behavior “worked for him.” It appears that when presented with an undesirable activity, Jimmy used his behavior to “avoid or escape” the demand.

What could Jimmy’s mother do differently the next time she needs to place a demand on Jimmy? Once she is able to take her “best guess” as to the purpose of Jimmy’s behavior, she would implement strategies that prevent the challenging behavior, teach new skills or a replacement behavior, and establish consequences that increase the likelihood Jimmy would demonstrate the positive behavior. Proactive or preventative strategies would involve altering the antecedents to the behavior. For example, maybe Jimmy would respond better to a written/visual prompt as opposed to a verbal preset, or maybe the use of a “first-then” phrase may be effective (“first you clear the table, then you can go play your video game”). Jimmy may also respond better when he feels he has some control, such as offering him choices which may result in him responding more positively when he is asked to engage in undesirable tasks (“do you want to clear the table or take out the garbage?”). A key strategy would be to teach a more appropriate replacement behavior. Instead of Jimmy banging his head and yelling to communicate he doesn’t want to do something, his mother could work with him on learning to say “not now.” In the beginning this response of “not now” would be seen as more acceptable and he should be praised and this response should be reinforced and accepted. Over time, Jimmy should also be taught better coping strategies for when “not now” won’t be an acceptable answer.

Lastly, Jimmy’s mother should manage the consequences of Jimmy’s behavior so he is rewarded for showing positive behavior, and she does not inadvertently reward his challenging behavior. By sending him to his room and finishing the chore for him, she reinforced the challenging behavior. Therefore, a more effective approach may be to have him take space to calm down, but then when he returns he is still expected to complete the chore. When attempting to understand any challenging behaviors, it is imperative that we question whether the challenging behavior is due to a “skill-deficit” as opposed to an unwillingness to not perform the more appropriate behavior (i.e., a performance-deficit). For example, if anytime Johnny is provided with negative, constructive criticism he reacts aggressively, it may be that he has not gained the skill of being able to accept negative feedback. Therefore, the interventions chosen should be focused on teaching him this skill.

By engaging in the process of analyzing the antecedents and consequences surrounding challenging behavior, and determining what might be the purpose of one’s behavior, what results is a set of strategies that prevents challenging behaviors from occurring, teaches more effective ways of behaving, and improves the quality of life for the child and his/her family.
Social Stories Prepare for the New and Different

Marie Awn Floyd
Director of Family Support Services

Situations or interactions that may be new and unfamiliar can often cause anxiety. This can be the case for anyone, but can present particular challenges for children or adults with disabilities.

A way of preparing for such an event is through the use of a social story. A social story is a tool to explain and demonstrate what will happen or what to expect, in a way that is adapted to an individual’s communication style. Simple or more complex stories can be told and can be enhanced through pictures, video or music.

Social Workers at Wildwood School frequently use social stories. Gwen Buckley recalled using one for a student whose dad was called up for military duty very suddenly and would consequently disrupt their many weekend routines.

"Mom and I met right away and put one together about dad being away, how it would impact the student and how he could handle it. It worked like a charm. He was prepared, knew what to do and sailed through a 4 week deployment," Gwen said.

Kathy Jones has found them useful in a variety of situations.

“I have used social stories to help students with moving to a new home, going to the doctor’s office, adjusting to a new pet, and following a morning schedule to get on the bus. The visual steps are often helpful for not just the student, but also for the family and staff to connect to the student in the process,” Kathy said.

Social stories can be utilized by anyone including family members, care-givers, social workers, teachers, and support staff. Kathy encourages everyone to work together on them as a team.

“Families are very creative when they can collaborate with staff and their student to put a story together. Something about the story format helps reduce everyone’s anxiety about an upcoming change or event. It makes it less threatening and even fun to look forward to. I’d have to say it’s been helpful in every situation I’ve used it in.”

There are many online resources available to help develop a social story and even pre-written general social stories for common situations. A simple Google search will bring you to many different sites. There are even “apps” for writing them on the iPad. The key is making it meaningful and using the medium that will best help the individual understand the story being told.

SAVE THE DATE
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Topics will include:
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Sexuality Education for People with ID/DD
The Impact of Cultural Messages on Sexual Attitudes
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Sexual Consent

Keynote Address presented by Perry Samowitz.
Mr. Samowitz is the Senior Director of Government Training Initiatives at Young Adult Institute. An ASSECT Certified Sex Educator, Mr. Samowitz has worked with people with intellectual disabilities for over 35 years. He has co-produced and authored many sexuality resources to support and educate people with disabilities. His experience and expertise has taken him all over the world to assist others in creating sexually supportive and affirming environments.

Conference brochure and registration available February 2013
Cost: $25 for Self-Advocates and Families, $65 for Professionals

Presented by:
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To receive conference information please contact Marie Awn Floyd:
mawnfloyd@wildwoodprograms.org
Touch and Understanding Tactile Defensiveness

Jacquie Donahoe
Occupational Therapist

Individuals with autism spectrum disorders often have tactile defensiveness. Tactile defensiveness means that they are hyper-sensitive to touch. They may dislike tags on the back of shirts, denim pants, socks and shoes or changes in clothing from one season to another. They may pull away from hand-over-hand activities, hate sponges, splashes of water or sticky substances.

There is a continuum of level of comfort with touch for those of us who are neurologically-typical. We all have preferences when it comes to comfort and tactile experiences. What makes individuals who have autism spectrum disorders different is the extent of their sensitivity to touch and texture and the interference it causes in their daily life.

You may see things like an avoidance of getting messy, continued dislike of having their hair washed, cut or dried, sensitivity to certain fabrics, irritation to shoes or socks or a dislike of being barefoot. The individual may frequently pull away, say “ouch” or lash out when being touched, rub or scratch out a spot that has been touched or they may have difficulty standing close to other people.

There are some general guidelines for dealing with people who are tactile-defensive. Individuals generally tolerate a firm but gentle touch much better than a light touch. They also prefer being approached from the front so they can see you and prepare for the interaction. Unexpected touch is more difficult to tolerate so let them know clearly about your intentions before you approach them.

Sometimes clothes and other accessories can help with the process. Neoprene shorts, tight fitting stretchy t-shirts and wraps such as “sleep sacks” can help calm or center. “Squeezes” can be helpful and are simple to do. You can do this by using both hands and starting at the upper arm. Gently squeeze, working down and counting as you go. Try to do both arms. Any type of massage, especially with lotion, is often calming and enjoyable.

Occupational therapists talk about the notion of the “just right challenge”. This means providing the individual with fabrics or textures that they prefer, but at the same time, trying to find a texture that is just a little bit out of the person’s comfort zone. For example, if they tolerate commercial play dough, try making homemade play dough because it tends to be a bit more sticky. If they tolerate sweatpants, try a different brand that is a little stiffer or try neoprene bike shorts under a larger, well washed pair of denims.

Be aware that certain times of day are more difficult than others and do your best to identify what works for your child. Avoid problem times when practicing or introducing something new. During periods of stress, let them relax in the clothes and circumstances that they find most comfortable.

Some people might be startled by even the slightest touch. This can cause a flight or fight reaction and may result in aggression or withdrawal. At times, we are unaware of the stimulation we are providing. For example, we may lean over a person as we are helping them to dress and our own clothing touches them lightly and causes the person distress. It’s important to be aware of our own body in relation to the individual with tactile issues.

There are also individuals who are unaware of touch and have decreased tactile awareness. They do not notice when their face is messy, they seek out all types of textures, try to touch everything and struggle in keeping their hands to themselves. They may lack awareness of being touched, prefer being barefoot to experience different surfaces and seem indifferent to temperature and pain. This becomes serious when these individuals do not realize when they are injured and willingly repeat an activity that should have hurt them but did not seem to.

When a person is unaware of touch, the best strategy is to provide as much additional tactile input as possible in a safe manner. Some suggestions include bouncing on an outdoor trampoline with safety walls or small trampoline in a safe environment, walking barefoot on different substances such as sand, cement, wet sand, grass, dirt. You can create a “tactile sidewalk” made up of various objects such as the inside of a rug, burlap, foam, cushions, packing popcorn and other interesting items. Other activities like beach ball volleyball on sand or grass, using a massaging animal to hug or a massaging chair can be helpful.

The concept of “heavy work” such as pushing, pulling and working against gravity can be helpful for people who have decreased tactile awareness. This could include physical activities such as making a snowman, cross country skiing, biking, hiking, bowling and Wii and Xbox fitness and sports games. In addition, playing games where an individual attempts to find objects by feel alone such as Ned’s Head or Feely Boxes can be useful.
iPads and Other Devices
Open Doors

Mark Giufre
Coordinator of Instructional Technology

Wildwood School has been lucky enough to have increasing access to a variety of I-devices, mostly iPads, over the last couple of years. Staff in every area has implemented these devices in daily programming in order to practice or reinforce skills and provide a multi-sensory engaging learning opportunity for students. Student engagement increases when the I-devices are incorporated successfully into a learning environment. Here are just a few examples of the many ways I-devices are being used in the school:

Academics: Staff use iPads and apps so students can practice learned skills and to make learning more interactive and meaningful.

Speech: Staff use iPads and apps to reinforce various skills. Students also have access to a variety of augmentative and alternative communication options.

Occupational Therapy: Staff has used a number of apps to teach and support handwriting and also have used apps in a sensory room.

Social Work: Staff has used devices to create social stories with students so that they can be a part of story creation and have ownership in coming up with appropriate solutions.

Physical Education: Staff uses the iPad and integrated camera for video modeling to demonstrate correct skill methods.

Music: Staff integrates iPads in order to work on many of the embedded skills they focus on daily including dynamic concepts, finger isolation, and cause and effect.

While focus is often on consumption and basic interaction, there has been an increase in using the iPad and devices for content creation (personal social stories, movies, storytelling, etc.). The possibilities are endless and always changing! We will continue to investigate the many creation possibilities that are out there using the iPad.

It is truly an exciting time to see the many ways that iPads can be introduced and used successfully across so many areas. With the tens of thousands of apps offered and many accessibility options and features, there is truly something for everyone. Skills can be reinforced, projects can be created, and individuals can perform daily tasks with more independence. Remember, however, that technology (and any materials or equipment for that matter) is only as good as the rationale and plan behind their use. Have clear plans, goals, and objectives and use the technology to help you achieve your goals. And have fun teaching, learning, and living in this dynamic 21st century.