



A young boy enters the arena, shy and withdrawn, quietly looking down.

He is welcomed warmly and gently and is placed on the back of a horse. The horse is slowly led by one person while his therapist, Janet Alba, offers the boy words of encouragement and directs him through specific movements. There is a sense of tranquility here as the leaves move in the wind and the hooves hit the earth. The boy comes full circle, his arms held out to the bright blue sky, balancing carefully and beaming with accomplishment.

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The boy, 10-year-old Jonathan Miller, has been diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and sensory integration disorder. He is being treated at the Rehab Ranch of El Paso, which is the only therapist-owned-and-operated equine center in the region. This 13-acre facility is a unique outpatient center with occupational, physical and speech therapists who utilize the movement of the horse as a treatment strategy to facilitate functional change. This is commonly referred to as hippotherapy, and therapists have been trained to pair this with their own extensive knowledge in order to produce the right treatment program for patients of all ages. This is not considered recreational riding for people with disabilities; instead, it falls under the umbrella of medical therapy that can be prescribed by a physician and is therefore billable through insurance.

The American Hippotherapy Association believes that utilizing the horse as a treatment tool improves muscle tone, balance, posture, coordination, motor development and emotional well-being. Rachel Aguilar, an occupational therapist, is the founder of the Rehab Ranch of El Paso and is a registered therapist with the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association. “The horse passively covers all the things therapists believe are necessary through natural movement,” she says. For those who are physically handicapped and nonambulatory, the horse’s gait is similar to the human walk.

This is helpful for little Cynthia Salas. At only 3 and a half years old, she is a veteran of various therapies offered for her cerebral palsy. However, her mother, Corina Salas, noticed one big difference. “Traditional therapy tries hard to make it fun, but with this wonderful program, Cynthia is already excited about the animal. Within just a few months, I have noticed a change. She is stronger,” she says.

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Hippotherapy covers many conditions from post-stroke adults to autistic children. According to a recently released study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in 150 8-year-old children in the multiple areas of the United States have a form of autism. Doctors believe that it is important to have it diagnosed and treated because intensive early intervention is critical. The Rehab Ranch of El Paso can provide an alternative approach to helping children, and even school-based programs are participating. Both the El Paso Independent School District and the Anthony Independent School District have equine-facilitated therapy programs contracted with the Rehab Ranch that continue to grow yearly.

This summer, the facility will offer several options for children with developmental disabilities, including an Autism/Asperger’s social skills camp, a handwriting camp and a self-regulation camp to help children recognize and handle feelings.

The Rehab Ranch of El Paso has benefitted patients of all ages and varying conditions by providing trained, professional therapists and quality horses with calm temperaments. Today, the star was Jonathan as he smiled down at his mother, Laura Miller. She is proud of his progress. “We have seen a world of difference, and he handles stimuli better now. It has raised his confidence level, and he is not as inhibited to try new things. I am thoroughly thrilled with this program,” she says. 📷

For more information on the Rehab Ranch of El Paso, call 915.581.1198.

