

A little healing therapy

Central Oregonians with chronic diseases benefit from physical therapy on horseback

By [By Heather Clark](#) / *The Bulletin*

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"Walk on, Diego," instructs 5-year-old Colin O'Conner.

The retired barrel-racing horse dutifully responds. On horseback, Colin shoots hoops, trots over poles on the ground and weaves in and out of cones at the indoor arena.

But these games aren't so the High Lakes Elementary School kindergartner can learn to ride a horse. Rather, he's a patient in a physical therapy program offered through Healing Bridge Physical Therapy and held each week at Healing Reins Therapeutic Riding Center southeast of Bend.

The treatment, called hippotherapy (from the Greek word for horse: hippos), is a tool pediatric physical therapist Georgia Merrifield of Bend uses to help about a dozen of her patients.

Hippotherapy is different from the therapeutic riding program that Healing Reins has offered since its inception in 2000. In therapeutic riding, the goal for challenged riders - either physically or mentally challenged, or both - is to learn the skills of riding a horse, and to eventually reach independence at the walk, trot and canter.

Hippotherapy, on the other hand, is essentially a medical appointment, in many cases one for which health insurance will pay. Patients don't use reins or a saddle. They merely sit on a foam pad that stimulates the most benefit from the horse's movement. Some riders use a girthlike leather surcingle with handles for maintaining balance. Patients may ride backward or sideways, and the equine "tool" is guided by three helpers, including Merrifield, who directs the patient's therapy.

Following a 30-minute horseback ride, Merrifield and her patient move to a trailer adjacent to the arena, where they engage in more conventional physical therapy methods.

Of the 12 therapeutic riding horses at Healing Reins, Merrifield notes that four are suitable for hippotherapy. All four are retired working horses, such as former barrel racers or reining horses that are more than 20 years old but are still in good physical condition.

Merrifield looks for horses with an even, forward- and free-moving gait. An animal with a short stride in one leg or a dragging gait would not impart a symmetrical movement to the rider.

"Hippotherapy is more fun (for the patients) than being in a clinic all the time," she says. "We try to make therapy fun, because they have to be in therapy so much."

At 2½ years old, Eli Golden of Redmond is one of Merrifield's younger patients. He's been using hippotherapy for several months now to help overcome the muscle development effects of cerebral palsy. His mother, Theresa Golden, couldn't be happier with Eli's improvement.

When Eli arrives at the barn, as he did earlier this week, he's a young man on a mission. With the assistance of a walker, he offers Merrifield a hug, cruises into the tack room to be outfitted with a helmet and safety belt, then makes a beeline for the barn's mounting ramp - a chest-high ramp and platform that allows the children to mount a horse with little or no assistance.

Eli, Merrifield and a bay gelding named Foxy work on stops and starts, serpentines and direction and speed changes, all of which require Eli to make adjustments in his trunk muscles.

"He can maintain his arms and head better," said Theresa Golden. "It really has helped his strength. (Before hippotherapy), he couldn't dip a french fry in ketchup."

Eli began hippotherapy treatment in November. After just two weeks, says his mother, he could hold a crayon to paper for the first time.

With help from the Sparrow Club at Evergreen Elementary School in Redmond - where Eli is the school's Sparrow - the Golden's are able to pay for the treatment.

Sparrow Clubs USA is a national nonprofit organization of school-based clubs that assist children with major medical needs.

Merrifield, too, has noticed tremendous benefit to Eli from the therapy.

"He sits up much better," explains Merrifield. "His trunk control has improved, and we've seen an improvement in his speech because it (a weak trunk) affects their breathing. (With hippotherapy) we can work on every part of the body."

The warmth from the horse's back helps relax the muscles for patients with stiff legs.

Beyond the medical benefits, parents sing the praises of a program that gives children the opportunity to engage in a special activity.

"This is one thing (riding horses) where they're normal," notes Theresa Golden. "They are just like the other kids."

"Even at that little age," she adds, pointing to her tiny son on Foxy, "he knows he's not like the other kids."

Although the majority of Merrifield's patients are young children, adults with brain injuries or muscular sclerosis benefit as well. She says hippotherapy can help MS patients to walk longer.

Terri O'Conner, Colin's mom, watches her son with great pride as he trots around the Healing Reins arena. A product of Colin's autism is sensory integration dysfunction, an impairment that is more cognitive than physical. Hippotherapy helps his brain better organize thoughts.

O'Conner knows that her son probably won't be signing up to play soccer anytime soon. But horses have opened a door into athletics and activities that Colin might not have otherwise known.

"It's a sport that a kid with a disability can do," she says.

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