

From the Hospital to the Great Outdoors Kids' Therapy Shines in Many Forms

By Julie Van Benthuisen

Children are being exposed to more non-traditional therapies to aid in healing from illness and injury, or in dealing with any range of health or neurological issues. From yoga to horseback riding, kids of all ages are benefiting from unique opportunities to mend body, mind and spirit through indoor and outdoor activity and play.

For nearly a decade, EquiCenter has provided special programs for children and adults in need. The nonprofit facility, located at the spectacular 178-acre William and Mildred Levine Ranch in Mendon, offers a wide range of therapeutic equestrian activities for people with disabilities, veterans and at-risk youth. Children, especially, seem to thrive in this bucolic setting surrounded by pastures, farmland and woods, where horseback riding and related activities serve as a progressive forms of therapy.

Horseback riding helps improve muscle stimulation, strength, coordination, flexibility, posture and balance for people with physical, mental/emotional, neurological and cognitive challenges. These range from Autism, ADD and ADHD, Cerebral Palsy, Developmental Delay, Freidreichs Ataxia, Hypotonia and Intellectual Challenges to Post Traumatic Stress, Traumatic Brain Injury, Tourettes Syndrome, Visual Impairment, Spina Bifida, Down Syndrome, Multiple Sclerosis, Epilepsy, Stroke, and even Spinal Cord Injuries. Beyond the physical benefits, equestrian activities increase communication, social and organizational skills, and enhance self-confidence, relationship building, teamwork and independence.

"The multi-dimensional movement of the horse recreates the human gait more effectively than any other means of physical therapy," says longtime EquiCenter volunteer Ruth Meyers. Horses are dynamic, sensitive animals that communicate through the subtle use of body language. They respond to situations giving immediate, honest feedback without judgment. Horses are large and powerful animals, which naturally create an opportunity for people to overcome fear and develop greater self-confidence. With their own unique personalities, attitudes, moods and backgrounds, horses provide endless experiences and situations for growth, healing, learning and relationship building, she adds.

"Not all of our participants ride, but for those who don't, there are great benefits derived from grooming, enjoying a therapy dog, gardening and harvesting crops, and even helping grow the hay for our horses." For many families, she says, the EquiCenter has been the one form of therapy that really made the



Photo: courtesy EquiCenter

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difference for a child with complex problems. "Participation at the EquiCenter provides a unique healing experience for children and adults with physical and emotional challenges in a way that doesn't feel like going to therapy."

EquiCenter participants perceive therapeutic horseback riding as a more positive experience than traditional therapy, serving as a strong motivator in achieving their therapeutic goals, she adds. As a member of PATH (Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship), EquiCenter offers a variety of equine-related activities – from therapeutic horseback riding and hippotherapy, to interactive vaulting (like gymnastics on horseback), as well as equine-facilitated learning and mental health programs, using the horse as a partner in cognitive and behavioral therapy. Participants can also participate in grounds work and stable management. EquiCenter's instructors are internationally-certified, and the facility's volunteers and horses have been carefully selected and trained for their vital roles.

EquiCenter was recognized early on as one of only two programs in the state achieving both Premier Accreditation from the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA) and certification by the New York State Horse Health Assurance Program. EquiCenter works with numerous community agencies, including the Al Sigl Community of Agencies, Autism UP, Hillside Children's Center, Golisano Children's Hospital, Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (ABVI), Lifetime Assistance, Ontario ARC, St. Joseph's Villa, The Norman Howard School and the Veterans Outreach Center.

Healing Body, Mind and Spirit

At the start of a riding lesson — when the rider is securely mounted and the horse leader and side walkers are in place — all are ready for the words that tell the horse it's time to move. At the instructor's signal, the team begins the countdown: "one, two, three" ...and then pauses for the rider to give the final command to "Walk On." Some participants shout it enthusiastically, says Meyers; while others, challenged by disabilities that compromise their understanding or speech, say or signal it as best they can. "Regardless, the joy is universal as the team — both human and equine — moves forward, taking new steps on the student's life-changing path."

Since the program's inception in 2004, Meyers credits EquiCenter's success to its team approach to therapy — between staff, volunteers, Board, Advisory Board and Health Advisory Board members, and numerous community partners. "Our reputation for changing lives every day has spread ... and so our programs have grown." In 2010, Equicenter received visionary funding from the William and Mildred Levine Foundation, which enabled the move to its new, larger home from its original location at Mendon's 23-acre ABC Farm.

With a waiting list and more interested organizations, need for continued expansion has become acute, she adds. "Our goal is to build on what we currently offer to provide a comprehensive therapeutic community for individuals with disabilities and their families, including military veterans." Additional plans include expansion of its canine therapy and horticultural therapy programs, and exploring a job development skills program based on all its current therapeutic offerings. "Our fondest hope is to provide expanded programming across a person's lifespan." From children born with a health condition to seniors with Alzheimer's or other dementias, all can benefit from broader offerings.

"It's difficult to fully understand the power of the EquiCenter without seeing it," says Myers. "I've been volunteering here in many capacities for years and I can honestly say that every day there's something beautiful that brings a tear to my eye: a child who can sit up without support; a soldier who feels peace and connection for the first time since returning from war; a volunteer whose work with these wonderful students and horses helps to heal her own grief."

In-Hospital Comprehensive Therapy

When enjoying the therapy of the great outdoors is not an option, inside therapy programs can offer a successful alternative. Particularly within the hospital setting, children dealing with illness and injury are benefiting from integrated therapy programs. Through generous regional and local grant support, Rochester General Health System has been offering Child Life, designed to address a myriad of children's therapeutic needs.

Child Life represents the psychosocial side of pediatric care, says Director Teresa Schoell, Rochester General Hospital's Certified Child Life Specialist, by helping children understand why they're hospitalized, and what's happening while they are. A Child Life specialist brings training in child development to the hospital setting and uses various types of education and play to help promote positive coping skills. Child Life services

can be consulted for all ages of pediatric patients, from birth to age 21. Additionally, Child Life services provide support for children of adult patients facing an end-of-life, or life-limiting condition.

Schoell explains that play is a child's first tool for coping with new, and sometimes overwhelming experiences — like coming to the hospital. Essentially, a Child Life specialist's job is to play all day, with the play always having a specific purpose depending on the situation and need.

"While most children's hospitals have expansive Child Life programs, community hospitals like Rochester General rarely do, so I feel privileged and honored to help blaze this trail five years ago." Schoell divides her time between educating and supporting medical staff in Child Life techniques, and within the in-patient unit, providing therapeutic play to children who stay overnight, as well as in the pediatric emergency department, with play-based support to children with medical emergencies requiring stitches, IV fluids or CT scans.



Photo: Lynne Tseng

Therapy dogs also play an important role in therapy.

Play Therapy

Schoell identifies different forms of play and how each can provide therapeutic opportunities. 'Normalization Play' helps children feel more comfortable and less frightened. This type of play shows kids that being in the hospital is just one more place where they can play — just like at home or school. 'Developmental Play' helps them work towards and maintain their developmental milestones, despite hospitalization.

Another form is 'Diagnosis Play,' which helps children learn about their illness or injury through age-specific, hands-on play. 'Procedural Support Play' includes both preparatory play before a procedure, and in-the-moment support and coaching while undergoing the procedure. 'Medical Play' helps children become more familiar with medical equipment and staff to build confidence in the medical setting. 'Therapeutic Play' helps children express and cope with the emotional experience of being at the hospital. "Whether frightened, angry, sad, or withdrawn, therapeutic play can definitely help."

"Play is the language of children, so everything I do as a Child Life specialist is rooted in play," says Schoell. "I always invite



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parents and siblings to participate when I teach about diagnosis through play. When teaching about sickle cell disease, we make blood cells out of playdough. As we drop the larger, stickier, sickle-shaped cells through the toy vein, and watch them clump up to create a pain crisis, it's not just my young patients who learn. Parents often join in that play-based 'ah ha!' moment, gaining a deeper understanding of their child's illness. Parents appreciate the child-centered approach to medical care, and the comfort, insight, and joy that play brings to the hospital experience." Included in Child Life services is 'Sibling Support,' helping the brothers and sisters of pediatric patients understand what's happening at the hospital, and helping them feel included in family-centered care.

Bereavement Support, another component of the program, can help a child through the loss of a loved one. Whether supporting a child patient and family through legacy-making activities, or providing support to the children of an adult patient, a Child Life specialist can help children and their families navigate the emotionally complex reality of a family death. "I also work with the children of our adult patients in the ICU, or on palliative care. Child Life specialists receive extensive training in child development, including techniques to help support young children through a parent's illness or death." Families facing end-of-life, and life-limiting conditions, often turn to Child Life services for assistance in talking with the children, and helping them understand and cope with these sad and difficult transitions.

Power of Play in Action

Last October, 4-year-old Wallace arrived at Rochester General's ER with a sizable cut under his left eyebrow, having collided with another little boy at preschool. His cheeks were streaked with tears and blood. The nurse placed numbing gel on the cut to ease the pain and stop the bleeding and prepare him for stitches, while Schoell dried his tears. Wallace and his parents remembered his cousin getting stitches the year before, and feared the worst. But Wallace's experience would be nothing like his cousin's. "I blew bubbles and colored with Wallace until he felt comfortable with me," she relates. "Then I brought out one of my teaching toys – a doll with a cut on its head – and together we learned all about stitches. Wallace took the lead as we rehearsed each step of the procedure on the doll. First we numbed the doll's cut, then we cleaned it and put in the strings. Playing the role of the doctor (with a little coaching from me), Wallace instructed the doll when to hold still, which part would hurt, and how to be brave. When it came time for Wallace to get his stitches, I stayed by his side to coach him, and continue the therapeutic play. I repeated to Wallace the same words he used with the doll – 'count to 10 to feel brave' and 'blow on the silly whistle if it hurts.'"

At just four years old, Wallace held still without needing to be held down, and managed to get his six stitches without screaming or crying. "He was brave, if a little tearful, during the initial painful lidocaine injection, but then happily sang songs with me throughout the stitching. His parents were thrilled and relieved. Afterwards, Wallace told me he loved his stitches, and that they would make his Halloween pirate costume 'the best costume ever!'"

Whether easing the boredom of a toddler on the in-patient unit, singing to an infant in the emergency department, enticing a post-op patient to increase fluid intake, or educating a child about her mother's cancer diagnosis, everything about the Child Life program is based in play. "Having a solid foundation in child development, Child Life helps support positive coping skills, increases compliance, supports family-centered care, and makes hospitals less scary, and more fun, for children of all ages."



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