

THE SENSORY BENEFITS OF RDA SESSIONS



Mounted Work

Therapeutic riding offers a multi-sensory experience for participants. This can be beneficial in many ways in that the visual, tactile, auditory, proprioceptive, vestibular and kinaesthetic systems are involved. It is important for those involved to have an understanding of the impact that horse riding can have on the sensory systems and how to work towards achieving a positive experience for participants when experiencing new and different stimuli. Finding out information beforehand is important to establish a baseline with which to work from to enable participation and personal achievement. Sometimes a behavioural response is seen to a sensory overload, for example where there is just too much noise for a participant to deal with. Quiet sessions such as run by the Wilton group are one way of recognising and dealing with this.

Therapeutic riding offers a rich and varied environment to promote sensory interaction in a positive way. The temperature of the horse, which is slightly higher than that of a human, promotes muscle relaxation and makes stroking and touching the horse a pleasurable activity. Visual activity can be encouraged by improving looking skills at pictures and letters around the school. Hand / eye co-ordination improves by looking at, reaching for and holding on to objects during games and horse care sessions. Listening skills improve as instructions are given during lessons. It cannot be stressed too much how important it is to give participants time to process sensory information such as giving an instruction then waiting for a response before jumping in and giving the answer!

One aspect that cannot be planned for is when a horse makes a loud noise. This sudden, unexpected sound can result in a huge sensory response from a participant who has a poorly integrated reflex system. The response and behaviour of the team in this instance is of vital importance to settling the participant. An age appropriate explanation of why the horse is making that noise helps their understanding.

The olfactory system can also be stimulated with new and different smells. There is a direct link from the olfactory system to the brain which is why smell can produce such strong and vivid recall of previous events. However for some participants whose sensory systems are not fully integrated either because of the medical diagnosis or developmental experience then sensory processing can be poorly integrated and overload is possible. Sometimes this can result in a behavioural response and a negative reaction to a task. The palm of the hand is extremely sensitive but often if a typical developmental sequence has not been achieved for a variety of reasons the hand can be hyper sensitive and withdrawal reactions to holding the reins, handling objects for games and wearing gloves may be seen or poorly tolerated.

The 3 dimensional movement of the moving horse transfers proprioceptive input to the seated rider. This repetitive, rhythmical input can have a calming effect on a heightened arousal system and so it is important to spend more time on the move rather than standing still at halt for some riders. It is important to have an understanding of the level of understanding of the rider, the way they communicate and the type of language or style of communication that works best. Mounted sessions can sometimes be very noisy and exciting which can result in poorly regulated behaviour for those with sensory difficulties. For some riders with poor communication skills then a behavioural response becomes the only available option to make their "voice" heard.

It is of importance that the RDA team can regulate and adapt their own behaviour to suit the sensory needs of the participants. An understanding of a "sensory diet" for each rider promotes achievement for all.

Unmounted Work

Unmounted sessions can offer some RDA participants the opportunity of sensory interaction and close contact with a horse/pony. The participants may be recruited for these sessions because they are unable or unwilling to take part in a mounted session for a variety of reasons but have expressed an interest in horse related activities. There may be medical contraindications that would make riding a horse unsafe or uncomfortable or there may be emotional and behavioural issues that might give cause for concern for the well-being of the participant, horse and team.

The structure of the unmounted sessions requires the same attention and planning as a mounted session, with clear risk assessment, goal setting and plan of intervention. The judicious selection of the horse / pony and the team is essential. The welfare of the horse/pony is very important and the location and the equipment used for the activity. The activity has to have clear therapeutic intent and is not just pat a pony time. It is explained to participants/parents/carers that the focus of the sessions are horse related and interactive and are led by an experienced RDA coach but are not psychotherapy as this requires professional training. Wheelchair users can also take part in unmounted sessions with due care and attention.

Whilst horse care and stable management activities may form part of the activity, it might be that the purpose and intended outcome of the activity may be different. For example handling grooming kit may be designed as a tactile and sensory exploration activity rather than learning specifically about the use and application of each item. Touching items with different textures, sizes, shapes and smells can help with tolerance of unfamiliar objects and hand desensitisation which can then carry over into everyday life.

Participants with challenging behaviour often have restricted social relationships and find it difficult to interact appropriately. Working on the ground with a horse can help people begin to learn how to interact and engage appropriately.