

Autistic children develop verbal skills

Program combines equine therapy and iPads with speech-generating software

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APALACHIN — At age 3, Romeo Rojas did not talk.

Diagnosed with autism, he was thought to be nonverbal. That was until he began riding a horse.

Now 5, Romeo, of Apalachin, participates in the Southern Tier Alternative Therapies' program called Strides, which combines equine therapy and iPads with speech-generating software to help low and nonverbal children develop communication skills. "He's starting to use sentences and ask questions," said Romeo's grandmother, Rose McCabe of Apalachin, who brings him to Fagnoli Farms in Apalachin where the 8-week spring program takes place. "Being able to communicate his needs has really helped with his behavior," she said. "He rarely has meltdowns anymore."

Romeo is one of eight children participating in the program, now in its second year. Strides is one of three equine-assisted therapy programs offered by STAT, which is volunteer-run and serves more than 200 families a year across the Southern Tier. STAT has provided \$250,000 in scholarships since it was founded in 2007 for children to attend the programs. It serves youngsters and their families in a 12-county area including Broome, Tioga, Tompkins, Chemung, Cortland, Chenango, Delaware and Otsego counties in New York and Susquehanna County in Pennsylvania.

Like all the programs, Strides is offered free of charge to families — iPad included — thanks to the United Way of Broome and Tioga counties, grants and community support.

The annual Expressions of Hope charity golf tournament, held this year on Sept. 13 at Chenango Valley State Park, also raises funds for scholarships for the programs.

Help from Ithaca College

Tina Caswell, a clinical assistant professor of speech-language pathology and audiology at Ithaca College, facilitates Strides along with her graduate students, and uses the iPads to help children practice communication skills. Children can easily tap on the touch screen and on an image denoting what they want to do or where they want to go for the ride. The software speaks the sentence or word back to the child, who repeats it.

Caswell customizes the software for each child. For Romeo, he enjoys riding the horse down to the creek and he is able to communicate that by touching on the image of the creek on the iPad and repeating what it says.

Once on the horse, the children are more attentive and relaxed, said Caswell, who has worked with nonverbal children for 22 years. The sensory experience of riding a horse can help dissipate a child's nerves or extraneous energy and help them focus, she said.

It's estimated that about 1 in 68 children in the U.S. has been identified with autism spectrum disorder and most are boys, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Of that number, 25 percent are nonverbal. For many autistic children, social interactions are challenging, and for those who are low verbal or nonverbal, beginning to communicate can be daunting.

"Once they're on the horse and they're quiet and calm, then we can present the iPad with the communication software and the child seems to be more attentive, are better communicators and more aware of what is going on around them," said Caswell, of Endicott.

New paths for kids

For many of the children in the program, this is the first time they are expressing themselves either verbally or with the iPad software. "Just because a kid can't say anything doesn't mean he doesn't have anything to say," said Stacy Horton of Johnson City, whose son Luke, 9, is in the program and is nonverbal. She and her husband have been amazed to see their son begin expressing his thoughts and sharing stories using the iPad before and after a ride. "He came in one day and shared with everyone in the barn that he had lost a tooth," said Horton. "He shared that with everyone before he got on that horse," she added. "It opens up a whole new world for him." "When you give kids the horse, the iPad and the motivation, you can get great things out of them," Horton said, noting that there is no stigma associated with a kid carrying an iPad. Luke brings it to school and uses it with his teachers and peers.

The goal of the program, said Caswell, is to promote communication and language development beyond the barn, when the children are at school or just out in the community. During the program, Caswell works with the families in their homes on how to use the software.

STAT founder Catherine Markosky, formerly of Binghamton and currently residing in Pittsburgh, Pa., knows firsthand the power of equine-assisted therapies.

She credits it with helping her son Mason, 13, who is also nonverbal, learn how to walk.

"It changed his life. ... Doctors said they didn't think (Mason) would make it past age 2," she said.

Soon after, Markosky founded STAT and was committed to offering therapeutic riding programs free to families, regardless of income. STAT runs the "Riding Connection" for children with disabilities and the "Promise Project," a riding program for at-risk teens at Fagnoli Farms, and helps run an autismfriendly summer camp in Ligonier, Pa.

Strides came about when Caswell, who was Mason's speech therapist at the time, took Mason to the barn where he rode horses. She found he loved using his communication device while on the horse.

"Catherine and I thought, why don't we have more kids using their communication devices in the community where it's motivating, enjoyable and recreational?"

Caswell has little doubt that Romeo will be verbal.

"I don't have a crystal ball, but I think he won't need the iPad for long."



Romeo Rojas, 5, diagnosed with autism, reaches his hand out to meet the horse he will be riding for the first time during a Strides program held at Fagnoli Farms in Apalachin. KRISTOPHER RADDER / ITHACA JOURNAL