

Animal assisted therapy has existed in some fashion for centuries. In many cases, animals most beloved by man, especially dogs and horses, have played an integral role in the physical, occupational, emotional, and play therapy for many individuals. They have been used with good results in working with the chronically ill, mentally disabled, physically disabled, and emotionally disturbed children. The benefits gained from animal assisted therapy are not restricted to therapeutic values, but also contribute to the improvement in the quality of life for patients with severe physical and mental limitations. Unfortunately, as with many other necessary services for the disabled, animal assisted therapy is often beyond the means of the families and of the schools in which disabled children are enrolled.

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, disabled citizens made up 12.0% of the national population. In Texas, the number is slightly lower at 11.5%. In the San Antonio area, however, Bandera, Bexar and Comal counties have higher disabled population rates; 21.4%, 13.2%, and 12.3% respectively. On the other hand, Kendall County has a smaller disabled population of 10.4% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013).

Disabled children in Texas are provided academic support through their school district's Special Education programs. Children enrolled in Special Education programs within the State of Texas must meet the eligibility criteria specified in the Texas Education Code (Texas Legislature, n.d.). Specifically, a child is determined to be a "child with a disability" and eligible for special education if any of the following disabilities are present:

- Autism
- Physical disability
- Mental retardation
- Emotional disturbance
- Learning disability
- Speech disability
- Traumatic brain injury

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) (2013) reported that in 2012-2013 school year, 440,570 of the 5,075,840 students enrolled in the state of Texas were Special Education Students, totaling nearly 9% of the student population. The chart below summarizes the percentage and number of students enrolled in special education in the current school year for the Foundation's four counties of interest:

2012-2013 Special Education Student Enrollment

County	Number of students enrolled in County	Number of Special Education Students	Percentage of total
Bandera	2,713	282	10.4%
Bexar	340,030	33,865	9.95%
Comal	26,934	2,416	8.97%
Kendall	1,115	125	11.2%

(TEA, 2013)

Animal Assisted Programs

Animal Assisted Therapy is the deliberate inclusion of a pet or animal in a treatment plan. Pets are frequently prescribed in order to provide companionship that will combat loneliness, stress, depression, and other emotional problems (Arkow, n.d.). Animal assisted therapy has also shown to be an effective type of therapy for children and adults with special needs. It is unique in that it can supplement the physical, occupational, and emotional therapy needs of a patient. It has been found that many animals, even rabbits, birds, or fish, can be beneficial for therapeutic purposes (Equine Therapy, n.d.c). For the elderly, pet assisted therapy frequently provides needed companionship to improve emotional health, by making a clinical room more comfortable or by providing a safe relationship in which to let one's guard down (Equine Therapy, n.d.d).

Health benefits of owning a dog or pet have been reported as including:

- Calming effect resulting in lower heart rate and blood pressure
- Help reduce stress better than human companions
- Aid in recovery from heart attacks
- Owners experience less obesity due to increased physical activity
- Owners have better mobility in their golden years
- Increased opportunities for socialization
- Owners have decreased cholesterol and triglyceride levels
- Increase socialization and comfort in Autistic children

(Capra, M., 2011)

Compared with pet ownership and visitation programs, animal assisted therapy allows animals and handlers to work with an individual towards achieving specific therapeutic goals, with progress being measured (Therapet, 2013). It has been demonstrated that human-animal interaction is linked to improved health and well being. Additionally, the interaction has been shown to teach important lessons:

- Love, attachment, and comfort
- Sensorimotor and nonverbal learning

- Responsibility, nurturance, and a sense of competence
- Learning about life, death, and grief
- Therapeutic benefits to psychological and physical health
- Nurturing humanness, ecological awareness, and ethical responsibility

(Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, 2012)

One of the most common types of animal assisted therapy is canine therapy. Canine Assisted Therapy utilizes dogs to provide interaction for both children and adults. The experience of playing and being around dogs provides an anxiety release that combats depression and increases physical activity. A dog can encourage motion, for example crawling, that provides exercise for otherwise unused muscles, as well as provide companionship that persuades patients to relax and smile. This level of comfort then allows for greater diligence and progress in therapeutic activities. Dogs with the appropriate temperament are assigned to patients in order to effectively work toward the therapeutic goals (Equine Therapy, n.d.c).

In addition to canine therapy, there are several types of animal assisted therapy that are becoming more increasingly used:

- Dolphin Assisted Therapy (DAT)
- Feline Assisted Therapy
- Bovine Assisted Therapy
- Elephant Assisted Therapy

(Equine Therapy, n.d.c).

Equine Therapy

Equine Assisted Therapy involves using a horse as a therapeutic tool. With the help of both a mental health professional and a horse professional, patients learn to work with the horse either by caring for it (grooming, feeding, leading), or by riding it (Equine Therapy, n.d.d). There are two main types of equine assisted therapy that differ based on objectives and focuses: therapeutic riding and hippotherapy. Therapeutic riding is geared toward teaching the disabled individual how to ride a horse. This exercise enables increased strength, coordination, and control, as well as social and

psychological benefits. Hippotherapy, on the other hand, focuses on treatment of the disability as a form of speech, occupational, and physical therapy, by allowing the horse's movement to influence the rider. Therapy goals are set in order to achieve greater balance, control, and orientation (The Saddle Light Center, n.d.). These forms of therapy are unique in that a horse's stride is similar to a human's and allows the rider's body to strengthen and develop muscles that are weak because of a limited ability to walk. Muscles that lack development due to certain disabilities are strengthened and toned.

Research has shown that equine therapy is beneficial for patients with many disabilities, including the Pervasive Developmental Disorders, Asperger's and Autism, which are characterized by communication impairments or hyper-focus. Equine Therapy assists with the behavior modification through the rhythmic motion of horse riding. The produced calming effect allows increased focus to develop. Motor skills can also be addressed through the processes of riding, grooming, and tacking. In addition, social skills are improved with the interaction between other members of the group, or the counselors supervising (Equine Therapy, n.d.a).

Gross motor function has been shown to increase among children with neuro-muscular disorders (Herrero, et al., 2010). Animal assisted therapy has also been demonstrated to decrease anxiety among children with emotional disorders, and increase vocalization among children with neurological disorders that limit their speech (Scribd, n.d.).

Disabled and special needs children find many benefits from equine therapy. Horse riding requires the development of balance and coordination, which leads to muscle growth and increased motor skills. Grooming leads to an increased awareness of the importance of others; commanding the horse provides confidence in communication skills that leads to developed social skills. Studies show that a wide range of

disabilities can be improved, such as Cerebral Palsy, Down Syndrome, Multiple Sclerosis, Attention Deficit Disorder, stroke, and visual impairment (Equine Therapy, n.d.b).

Therapeutic Centers

Various groups, such as the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH), formally known as the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA), provide training and stringent accreditation processes for animal handlers and therapy facilities. The animals utilized during therapy sessions are rigorously selected for, and trained prior to being used in, the therapy context (PATH, 2013).

There are several centers for animal assisted therapy in the San Antonio area. The **Saddle Light Center** in Selma, TX serves Bexar and Comal Counties. As an affiliate of the PATH, the Saddle Light Center provides horse-assisted therapy to disabled people of all ages, with the help of trained riding instructors and physical therapists (United Way, 2012). The **Horse-Connection**, located in Boerne, Texas, was established in 1999 to provide specialized equine-based programs that work privately or with local schools. The Horse-Connection offers private lessons, camps, and hosts fieldtrips for students in the San Antonio area.

The **Triple H Equitherapy Center**, located in Bandera County, serves as the facility for the 501(c)(3) non-profit organization Horses for the Handicapped, Inc. As a member of the PATH, Triple H uses equitherapy to develop and enforce basic life skills for those with mental and emotional disabilities, physical impairment, or limited mobility. Three programs in particular, *Hooves, Hearts and Heroes*, *From Fear to Responsibility*, as well as *Riding to Independence*, target individuals with mental, emotional, or physical challenges. In addition, Triple H provides financial assistance to their patrons through a sponsorship program that adjusts fees to allow access to all who require it (Triple H Equitherapy Center, 2013.).

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