



## Therapeutic Horsemanship

# VOLUNTEER GUIDE

### Introduction to Therapeutic Riding

Therapeutic riding provides educational and recreational opportunities on horseback for individuals with various disabilities. Therapeutic riding can improve riders' cognitive, physical, social, and emotional abilities. Cognitively, the horse can motivate riders to learn.

Educational/academic goals including letter, number, and word recognition; sequencing, and cause-and-effect can be incorporated into riding activities. Memory and attention span may be improved, as well. Physically, the horse's movement can stimulate riders' bodies in a manner that closely resembles the gait of a human. This motion increases riders' muscle tone, relaxes tight muscles, increases muscle flexibility and joint mobility, and improves posture, balance, and coordination. The horse's movement, also, provides vestibular stimulation to the rider, which can help mitigate sensory integration issues. Holding the reins and manipulating various objects with the hands can improve fine motor control, hand/eye coordination, and spatial awareness.

Socially, therapeutic riding allows riders the opportunity to form relationships with horses and volunteers that develop confidence, patience, and self-esteem. Activities enable riders to learn effective and appropriate communication, as well as develop teamwork through interactions with their peers. Emotionally, therapeutic riding provides a non-competitive setting for learning new skills, responsibility, and self-discipline; as well as overcoming fear and anxiety: all which increase a rider's self-esteem and independence.

## Volunteer General Information

- Volunteers must be at least 14 years of age to volunteer at Let's Saddle Up Riding Program as required by insurance restrictions. However, younger individuals are welcome to clean tack and the stable area.
- Working with horses has its risks and dangers. All prospective volunteers are required to complete a volunteer packet which includes authorization for emergency medical treatment and release of liability.
- Dress code: For safety and comfort, volunteers should dress in close-fitting clothes. Loose, floppy clothing can get caught and tangled with equipment. Close-toe, comfortable shoes are a must- there is a risk of being stepped on by a horse, and you will be doing a lot of walking. Avoid dangling earrings, bracelets, and long necklaces that can hamper your movements, be pulled on by a rider, or distract the horse.
- Lesson cancellation: In the event of a need to cancel lessons, one of the staff will call all volunteers and riders.
- Be on time! It is very important to the riders that you make your scheduled lessons. They look forward to their riding experience and need as much consistency as we can give them. If there is any need for your absence as a volunteer, please give the program coordinator a call at 864-871-1744 or 864-575-3636 so that we can schedule a substitute for you.

## Paperwork for Volunteers

- Your volunteer time is important to us for funding purposes and recognizing outstanding volunteers. Please be sure to sign in every time you are here for lessons or training.
- The Let's Saddle Up Riding Program documents all accidents and safety problems. If an incident occurs involving a rider, volunteer, or anyone on the facility, please report your observation to one of the program staff.
- Confidentiality: Let's Saddle Up Riding Program strives to preserve the right of confidentiality on medical, social, referral, personnel, and financial information for all individuals involved in the program, to include riders, family members, volunteers, staff, and board members. The program will not tolerate any unauthorized disclosures of confidential records.
- Liability: Under South Carolina Law, an equine activity sponsor or equine professional is not liable for an injury to or the death of a participant in an equine activity resulting from an inherent risk of equine activity pursuant to Article 7, Chapter 9 of Title 47, Code of Laws of South Carolina, 1976.

## Volunteer Rules and Regulations

- Staff and volunteers should act in the best interest of the students' safety, ability, and privacy.
- No smoking is allowed in the barn and building areas or while classes are being conducted.
- Please drive slowly and safely through gate and to the barn.
- All children must be supervised by an adult when on the premises.
- No dogs or pets are allowed on the property.
- Only instructors, volunteers, and riders are allowed inside the arena during lesson hours.
- No illegal activities will be tolerated on the premises, including but not limited to: possession or consumption of alcoholic beverages or illegal drugs, sexual misconduct or harassment, assault, physical or verbal abuse, animal abuse, etc.
- Volunteers should report concerns of any nature and incidents immediately to program staff.
- No climbing, sitting, or standing on fences and gates.
- All gates and stall doors must be kept closed. Unauthorized personnel are not allowed in the fields, barn, or trail.
- There should be no entry into tack room or office without program staff's permission.
- No running around horses or riding areas.
- Horses are not to be handled without program staff's supervision.
- NO cell phone or personal objects are to be carried or used during the lessons.
- Volunteers must be 14 years old to help with lessons and must have parent's permission.

## Getting to Know Someone with Special Needs

### Interaction:

Being around people with special needs may be a new experience for you. You may be overwhelmed at first with things you have never seen before or do not understand. These are natural feelings. Allow yourself time to get use to being with someone with special needs. Do not give up on being a part of the program without a fair try- your experience can be very rewarding! If working directly with the riders is difficult for you, there are other ways you can help our program.

It is important to remember that every person is an individual and wants to be treated with that understanding and respect. An individual with a disability feels no differently. People with disabilities have different learning styles, unique personalities, and temperaments. Try to treat them as you would a close friend or sibling- not as a child. It is vital that we encourage them to be as independent as possible.

### Suggestions:

- Be yourself!
- Speak directly to the individual with special needs and not to someone with them when trying to communicate with them.
- Use conversation and social behavior that you might use in any new situation.
- Offer assistance when asked or when the situation obviously requires it. Do not overwhelm the person with help or insist upon helping when they are managing alone.
- Do not hinder the rider's ability to expand their skills and independence even when their movements may appear awkward to you.
- Do not be afraid to say, "I'm sorry, but I cannot understand you." or "Say that again."
- Appreciate what the rider can do. Remember that the difficulties that the person may be facing could stem from society's attitudes and barriers rather than from the disability itself. People with special needs generally do not view themselves to be as disabled as society perceives them to be.

### **Description of Disabilities:**

The following is a brief, educational description of some of the disabilities and conditions of riders that you may work with at Palmetto Equestrian Therapeutic Riding Program. This general overview should give you some insight as to how therapeutic riding can be a beneficial service for individuals with various disabilities.

**Autism and Aspergers Syndrome:** Autism is considered a neurological disorder that manifests itself in responses to social situations and the sensory systems. Characteristics can include, but are not limited to withdrawal from interaction with others, poor eye-contact, language delays, self-stimulating behaviors; sensitivities to extreme or unusual light, noises, smells, and textures; repetitive speech or behaviors, difficulty adjusting to change, hyperactivity, unusual behaviors (i.e. smelling or mouthing objects), and developmentally delayed. Aspergers can be considered as a high-functioning form of Autism or a separate disorder with similar characteristics. Individuals with Aspergers possess strong academic skills, but have difficulty with social situations and controlling emotions.

**Benefits:** Interaction in a group setting stimulates the rider's interest away from him/herself and toward others and the horse. Vestibular and verbal stimulation.

**Cerebral Palsy:** Speech, hearing, vision, and learning and/or memory deficits may be present; however, normal intelligence is generally not affected unless further brain damage has occurred. There are three main types of cerebral palsy:

- Spastic: occurs in approximately 70% of all cases. May affect motor function in one or more limbs. Muscles stay flexed and tense, facial muscle involvement may affect speech. Balance is poor.
- Athetoid: occurs in approximately 20% of all cases. Movements are disorganized and uncontrolled. Arms are unable to support weight; hands/fingers are unable to grasp or hold on to objects. Disability appears more obvious during periods of emotional tension. Speech is usually affected.
- Ataxic: occurs in approximately 10% of all cases. Characteristics include weakness, poor coordination, and difficulty with fine motor movements.

Benefits: Riding may improve balance, posture, muscle strength, and muscle flexibility.

**Down Syndrome:** Individuals with this genetic disability have physical and mental delays. They can be very loving and show signs of noncompliance.

Benefits: Riding may improve expressive and receptive language skills, gross and fine motor skills, balance, posture, and coordination.

**Emotional Disabilities:** Individuals with this disability tend to have trouble coping with everyday life situations and interpersonal relationships. Characteristics include, but are not limited to, a short attention span, avoidance, aggression, and paranoia.

Benefits: Riding can provide structure to a disorganized thought pattern, increase feelings of self-confidence and self-awareness, as well as provide appropriate social therapy.

**Learning Disabilities:** Individuals with a learning disability have a normal intelligence, but have difficulty with processing, sequencing, and problem-solving. New learning generally takes time to be integrated and may need to be reviewed frequently to ensure retention.

Benefits: Riding may increase attention span and skills necessary to understand and produce information.

**Mental Disability/Handicap/Retardation:** Though all three names are used to identify this condition, the appropriate terminology for today is mental disability. Individuals with a mental disability have significant delays in cognition and may have delays in speech, motor skills, and socialization.

Benefits: Riding may help increase the rider's ability to focus on an academic or recreational task, gross and fine motor skills, and socialization/coping skills.

**Multiple Sclerosis:** "MS" is a slow-progressing condition that affects the central nervous system. It usually occurs in adults between the ages of 20 and 40. Symptoms include weakness in one or more limbs, visual impairment, minor gait disturbances, weakness on one or both sides of

the body, emotional highs and lows, and inattention. It is common for individuals with MS to go through periods of remission; however, there is no known cure for this condition.

Benefits: Riding helps maintain and strengthen muscles and provides opportunities for emotional therapy.

**Muscular Dystrophy:** “MD” is a hereditary condition that usually appears in infancy or early childhood. It is characterized by progressive skeletal and muscular deterioration. There is no known cure for MD, which often severely shortens life. People with MD are easily fatigued, especially in cold or hot temperatures.

Benefits: Riding may slow muscle tone degeneration and help maintain muscle function. It, also, provides opportunities for social interactions and for alleviating symptoms of depression.

**Scoliosis:** This condition is characterized by a lateral curve of the spine, which affects posture. Severe scoliosis is a contraindication for therapeutic riding.

Benefits: Riding may stimulate postural symmetry and strengthen trunk muscles.

**Spina Bifida:** This condition is characterized by an incomplete closure of the spinal column at birth. There are usually varying degrees of paralysis of lower limbs.

Benefits: Riding may improve balance, posture, and muscle strength in the effected limbs.

## THE RIDING LESSON

- What takes places during a lesson?  
One, two, or three volunteers and an instructor can work with a rider or a group of riders in the fenced in arena, in the barn, or on the trail. The rider may learn riding skills, care of the horse, how to saddle a horse, and/or academic and social skills. While on horseback, the rider may perform exercise movements, play games, learn riding skills, or go on a trail ride. An occupational therapist may be consulted and offer assistance in positioning and recommending activities for riders when needed. Each rider will have individual goals to meet. As a volunteer, you will be involved in every aspect of the lesson from grooming and tacking to guidance in the arena to untacking and putting away horses.
- Preparing for the lesson
  1. Volunteers will need to arrive 30 minutes before the lesson starts to help with grooming and tacking.
  2. Record volunteer hours on the sign-in sheet and check the board and with the instructor for updates or directions (including horse and tack used with each rider).

3. Tie the horse on the cross ties in the aisle for grooming.
  4. Do not be afraid to ask for help- do NOT complete a chore if you feel uncomfortable. Horses can sense your anxiety.
  5. Call for assistance when ready to bridle a horse. Bridling is to be done by authorized personnel only to avoid the possibility of the horses' becoming head shy.
- Safety Rules
    1. Approach the horse calmly and gently- touch him/her on the neck rather than on the nose or head.
    2. Avoid loud noises and sudden movements that may frighten a horse.
    3. Do not duck under the neck of a tied horse, because he/she may be startled and you may get hurt. Always go around the horse; if going around the back of the horse, walk close to the horse and keep one hand on the rump so the horse knows you are there.
    4. Do NOT kneel around a horse. It's hard to get out of the way quickly. Bend from the waist instead.
    5. Watch your toes!
    6. Stand by the shoulder of the horse as much as possible to avoid being pushed or kicked.
  - Beginning of lesson

Leaders- Check the tack to make sure everything is positioned properly and retighten the girth as needed. Lead the horse through the ramp or to the mounting block as directed by the instructor.

Sidewalkers- Check to see that your rider is prepared to ride and stay with the rider while the horse is heading to the ramp/block. All riders must wear a properly-fitting helmet.
  - During the lesson

Leader- The leader is to focus on the horse and instructor only!

    1. Always lead on the left side of the horse, just behind the horse's head- unless otherwise instructed.
    2. Hold the lead rope 6-12 inches from the snap to allow for the natural motion of the horse's head. Hold extra rope in your left hand, doubling the excess back and forth across your palm. NEVER wrap it around your hand!
    3. Keep a minimum of 2 horses' length distance between your horse and the horse in front of you.
    4. Make turns wide and carefully. Allow space for sidewalkers when next to a fence or obstacle.
    5. When the horse is stopped, the leader stands directly in front of the horse or just to the side facing the horse, to keep the horse stationary. Allow the horse to move his head and stretch, but keep him quiet and calm.
    6. Riders are urged to control their horses to the maximum of their abilities. If the rider is capable of prompting and steering the horse, allow them the opportunity to direct the horse. The leader should hold the lead rope appropriately and walk quietly by the

- horse's head. Only if someone's safety is at risk or at the request of the instructor, should the leader get involved in guiding the horse.
7. When changing speeds, make the transition as smooth as possible to help the rider with balance. Go from a slow walk to a faster walk to a trot, then back down in the same progression. Avoid quick starts or stops.
  8. Short tugs on the horse's halter or lead rope are more productive in getting the horse's attention than steady pulls.
  9. If the horse should ever shy or suddenly pull, release the lead in the right hand but maintain contact with your left hand on the other end of the lead to control the horse. When a rider is mounted on the horse, never let go of the lead under any circumstances. Your job is to control the horse, while the sidewalkers take care of the rider. If it is ever necessary to remove a rider from the horse in an emergency, the sidewalkers or instructor will ask you to halt and will proceed in dismounting the rider. Once the rider has been dismounted, the leader should quickly take the horse away from the situation.
  10. If there is a need to stop for a tack adjustment or any other reason, the team should come to the middle of the arena to the instructor rather than stopping the other teams.

Sidewalkers- Focus on the rider and instructor. **Avoid talking too much with the rider.** The rider needs to be able to hear and take directions from the instructor. Sidewalkers repeat instructions and redirect if necessary. Too much talking can be confusing to the rider.

1. Different methods are used with riders depending on their needs. For example:
  - a. Place your arm closest to the rider across the rider's thigh and grasp the front of the saddle flap.
  - b. Hold the rider's safety belt to assist with balance. This is done while supporting the legs.
  - c. Walk beside the rider's leg to assist when needed.
2. Observe the rider with your front or peripheral vision at all times! Never become so relaxed that you are not totally aware of the rider, horse, leader, instructor, and activities around you.
3. Be sure not to lean on the horse or rider since the pressure may unbalance the rider or irritate the horse.
4. Allow the rider plenty of time to process directions given by the instructor or restated by a sidewalker.
5. If it becomes necessary to remove the rider from the horse because of an emergency, your responsibility is with the rider. If there are two sidewalkers, then it will be

necessary for the sidewalker who can most easily and quickly remove the rider to “call” dismount or halt to the leader and remove the rider so that the two sidewalkers do not work against each other. Once the rider has been dismounted, the leader should quickly take the horse away from the situation.

6. Ask the leader to stop the horse if:
  - a. The rider is off balance and cannot regain it while the horse is moving.
  - b. The saddle has slipped or the girth is loose.
  - c. The stirrups need adjusting.
  - d. The rider’s helmet needs adjusting.
  - e. The rider is tired, in pain, or needs to stop for any other reason.
  - f. The sidewalkers need to change sides to reduce fatigue in the arms.

Sidewalkers should take turns moving to the other side- always have at least one sidewalker in contact with the rider.

- After the lesson: The leader should take the horse back to the barn and untack. The sidewalkers stay with the riders and walk them back to their parents. Take helmets and belts back to storage spot.