



## HORSES ARE HELPING KIDS IMPROVE THEIR COORDINATION

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For years, therapeutic horseback riding has helped children with disabilities improve their emotional health. But now horses are also being used to teach these youngsters how to walk, sit and stand on their own. And for one child, this form of therapy has made a huge difference.

Three-year-old Brandon Knepher is doing something remarkable. He's walking on his own. Brandon has a form cerebral palsy and couldn't walk on his own until he was two. Gaining his independence took a lot hard work and a pony named Pokey Joe.

Stacey Nelson, an occupational therapist at Sharp Grossmont Hospital, is the director of San Diego Hippotherapy in Lakeside. Hippotherapy is from the Greek word hippos meaning horse.

Nelson says the movement of the horse improves the coordination, muscle strength and balance of children with neurological conditions and brain injuries.

"The movement that they experience at their hips when they're on the horse is very similar to what they would experience if they were also able to walk normally," explained Nelson.

As Brandon rides the horse, his therapist helps him with different kinds of exercises - each one designed to improve his mobility and strengthen his body.

By sitting still on the horse as he moves around the ring, Brandon is learning how to balance on his own - an important skill when walking. Although this may seem more like fun than therapy, Brandon's mother says the program has made a huge difference.

"This was the one therapy when he started, when he was about 18-months-old, that I noticed the biggest difference in the shortest amount of time," said Laureen Forman, Brandon's mom.

Most patients visit once a week and spend about a half hour on the horse. Their workout program is based around their individual needs. While the physical work can be demanding, Brandon is having too much fun to notice.

"He's outside and so it's not in a doctor's office, it's not sterile. So he had no idea that it's actually helping him as much as it does," Forman continued.