

## Help on horseback | Lakeside program uses equine therapy for some disabilities

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### Document Text

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LAKESIDE -- Two-year-old Brandon Knepher sits backward on a horse, raising his hand to give a high five to a volunteer walking alongside him. Brandon's eyes light up when physical therapist Ann Vatet praises him.

Laureen Forman of La Mesa said the perch of a horse's back is a far better place for her son Brandon, who has developmental delays, to learn balance and coordination than in a sterile medical office.

"To him, it's not therapy," Forman said. "He likes it. He's smiling, laughing and getting excited."

Using horses to provide physical therapy for patients with neurological or musculoskeletal disabilities is the guiding concept behind San Diego Hippotherapy, a program that Stacey Nelson, 33, began in Lakeside four years ago.

Hippotherapy, from the Greek word "hippos" for horse, uses the rhythmic movements of the animal as a treatment method. San Diego County has other therapeutic horseback riding programs, but San Diego Hippotherapy is the only program involving licensed therapists.

Horses, and everything involved with them, become part of the treatment. Nelson said the horse's movement is similar to a human gait, teaching riders balance and coordination. Sitting on the horse -- forward, sideways or backward -- while it walks stretches leg muscles. Vatet's instructions to riders help teach them listening skills.

Anything around the corral can be part of a session. One boy practiced sweeping a rake to improve his physical skills, Nelson said.

"We use a lot of what's out here to work on our treatment goals," she said.

Best of all, the treatment takes place outdoors in the sunshine instead of in a stuffy treatment room, with the smell of horses instead of antiseptic.

Valentina Annerino of University City said the equine treatments have helped her 10-year-old son Nick, who has cerebral palsy.

"It's outside, it's alive. The horse is a living, breathing being," Annerino said. "It's like all his senses are engaged."

Nick rode on Sheila, a chestnut-colored pony, as a volunteer guided the animal and two others walked on each side. At one point, Vatet leaned Nick's upper body back onto the horse to stretch his muscles.

Annerino said the sessions, which Nick began in January, help his self-esteem. Normally, Nick must use a wheelchair. Riding on a pony, he is eye-level with those around him.

"This makes him feel that he's participating in the world," Annerino said. "He doesn't have to be on the sidelines."

Twelve patients a week visit the corral, all but one of them children. Each session costs \$60, which often is covered by insurance with a doctor's prescription.

Hippotherapy is still little known as a treatment method. Officials at several San Diego County rehabilitation centers said they were not familiar enough with the therapy to comment on its value to patients.

About 15 to 20 volunteers help Nelson and Vatet run the program, walking the horses, grooming them, and assisting with the therapy sessions. Nelson said she is seeking additional volunteers.

Nelson said she has been around horses her whole life, so hippotherapy seemed a natural fit when she was working toward her master's degree in occupational therapy at the University of California Davis. She also works as an occupational therapist at Sharp Grossmont Hospital.

Nelson said young patients easily get bored with traditional physical therapy, such as repetitive exercises with a ball.

"They just get sick of it," she said. "Out here, they're not realizing it's therapy."

Annerino said her son smiles when she tells him they are going for a lesson. After a recent session ended, the two sat and lingered so Nick could watch the horses.

"He loves this more than anything else," she said. "Except maybe fast cars and cute girls."

Therapy outdoors

To volunteer with San Diego Hippotherapy or learn more about the program, contact Stacey Nelson at (619) 390-8700.

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**Abstract** (Document Summary)

3 PICS; 1. [Valentina Annerino] helped her son Nick pet Pokey Joe, a horse at San Diego Hippotherapy. Nick, who has cerebral palsy, participates in physical therapy sessions with horses at the Lakeside corral. 2. Physical therapist [Ann Vatet] (front right) adjusted 2-year-old [Brandon Knepher] on a horse with the help of volunteers Kathryn Peet and Suzanne Parker (back right). The Lakeside program uses horses to provide therapy for patients with neurological or musculoskeletal disabilities. 3. Nick Annerino- Meyers, 10, of University City is surrounded by volunteers Kathy Kimmich (left), Suzanne Parker (front right) and Kathryn Peet during a physical therapy session late last month at San Diego Hippotherapy in Lakeside.; Credit: 1,2,3. Nancee E. Lewis / Union-Tribune photos