



Puzzle Ponies

Ponies Reach Out to Children with Pervasive Developmental Disorders

Ponies fully engage a child's senses

Target Audience: PDD (Pervasive Development Disorder)

As many as one in 150 children in the United States are affected with pervasive developmental disorder (PDD). These children are often characterized by having poor social/communication skills, delayed language skills, obsessive or repetitive routines, poor fine and gross motor skills, and behavioral challenges. Currently, there is no known cause for the various PDD spectrum disorders, which include Asperger's Syndrome, Autism, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder and PDD Not Otherwise Specified. The number of children diagnosed with PDD is rising at an alarming rate. For example, in California the number of children diagnosed with autism has quadrupled during the past fifteen years and Massachusetts reports that 1 in 122 children are diagnosed with autism as cited by The Autism Society of America - Massachusetts Chapter. There is much speculation as to why these numbers are increasing, but what is more important is the fact that services need to be made available to these children in order to provide a higher quality of life. Due to the large volume of clients requesting services for these distinct diagnoses, a special program called Puzzle Ponies at Flying High Farm is being created to address their specific needs.

Presenting Issue

Pam is a 6 year old girl diagnosed with PDD NOS. Her mother reported that she is resistant to change, is minimally verbal, has poor eye contact and has sensory hypersensitivity. Pam's mother was concerned that all of these behaviors would severely impact Pam's development if they were not mitigated.

Through the assistance of Puzzle Ponies the focus of Pam's treatment is to increase awareness of her environment and improve her interpersonal and communication skills.

Intervention

The first time Pam came to the barn she cried and seemed very distressed. Her mother and the therapist felt that Pam would become more comfortable after a few sessions at Puzzle

Ponies. Initial sessions had Pam brushing the pony with a hand-over-hand aid and encouraging her to pet the pony. Pam's mother participated in sessions since she wanted to be able to follow through with this treatment as much as she could at home.

Given Pam's sensory hypersensitivity there were many sights, sounds and smells, that alarmed her initially - seeing the ponies' large heads stretching over the stall doors; hearing the ponies whinny, nicker and snort; smelling the odors characteristic of a horse barn; hearing the ponies stamp their feet; feeling the flick of the pony's tail; touching the soft hair; feeling the pony's warm breath on her hand; feeling the pony's mouth as he eats a treat from her hand. All of these various experiences helped to desensitize Pam little by little each week. Being snorted on didn't startle her and she didn't recoil when her mother guided her hand to pet the pony.

When riding, Pam was encouraged to answer basic questions, "Who are you riding?," "What color is the pole?," "How do you make Pixie stop?," "What is my name?" These are samples of the types of questions asked of Pam to encourage her to respond to another person and to be aware of what is happening around her. Eye contact seemed to come naturally as a result of the intervention. Pam spontaneously looked the therapist in the eye when asked questions.

Results/Observations

Pam has made great progress with her communication skills and environmental awareness. Her mother reports that she mentions the "Puzzle Ponies," Pixie and Duncan, at home. This seems to demonstrate that Pam is interested in the ponies and her mother links the ponies to Pam's enhanced ability to engage in new activities and to a reduced rigidity with routine.

For more information, contact Christine Randle, LICSW, at 978-582-7103.