

## **Julia Has Formed An Enormous Attachment to Her NARHA Center:**

By Connie Lee

My daughter Julia is a nearly 3-year-old child with multiple cavernous angiomas, a very serious medical disorder that has caused her to have three brain hemorrhages and resulting surgeries. She has been involved in the Child Development Resources early intervention program for two years and has been participating in DreamCatchers therapeutic riding program since April. Julia is being challenged and is growing in every developmental area. And amazingly, for Julia, her hours at DreamCatchers are simply fun.

She arrives and is greeted warmly by all of the staff. Sally Derrig has been working as Julia's primary instructor, so Julia seeks out Sally to give her a big hug. The riding session begins with Julia allowing Sally to put on and adjust her helmet. All of these things address Julia's need for social development.

The session continues with Julia and Sally working together to groom Blackie, the horse. It is Julia's responsibility to carry the grooming tool basket, and now that she has some experience, she is allowed to choose the grooming activities. Julia chooses to use every single tool in the basket, and Sally aids and supports her choice. Julia is learning self-efficacy, a vocabulary of horse terms, and the rudiments of caring for and respecting an animal.

Sally's assistants saddle Blackie while Julia practices patience. The riding itself helps Julia with her physical challenges. She is often encouraged to test her balance skills, by riding backwards on the horse, or by riding without using her hands. She develops leg and torso strength and control as she encourages Blackie to "Trot!" Julia's upper body coordination is challenged as she balances a ball on a plastic shovel that she is carrying while she is riding a horse (wow!).

Julia practices focusing and attending skills as she follows Sally's many directions. Sally is wonderful at placing limits on Julia's behaviors without seeming punitive. Julia also practices using her words to meet her needs as she commands Blackie to "Whoa" or "Walk". Higher level cognitive development is accomplished by exercises which include color naming, letter recognition, and counting. Julia came home recognizing the letter "B" the other week-a new achievement for her.

Already, Julia has formed an enormous attachment to Sally, to Blackie, and to the DreamCatchers program. The one thing I appreciated most about CDR also holds true here: Sally and her staff accept Julia without condition. I know that if Julia should ever come to their program with a shaved head and large scar, they would greet her and train her exactly as they had any previous session. This is invaluable for Julia and for me as her mother. I attribute the caring of the program to Sally Derrig's compassion and leadership.

Connie Lee is the Mother of 3 year old Julia