

Instructor and Therapist Speak Each Other's Language

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This article explores the interaction that is possible between a therapeutic riding instructor and a speech-language pathologist in a therapeutic riding setting. The authors present a case study in which the speech pathologist acts as a consultant to the riding instructor. Two boys diagnosed with autism and moderate speech and language disorders had been in speech-related hippotherapy sessions and the speech pathologist felt that they were ready to transition to a ten-week therapeutic riding session. The riding instructor consulted regularly with the speech pathologist to create activities and effective prompting techniques appropriate for the boys' level of language when teaching equestrian skills.

The Students

Clinton is a 10-year-old boy diagnosed with autism whose speech is diagnosed as dyspraxic (a motor planning disorder). He has poor vocal quality, rate and rhythm of speech. He also has poor word recall, difficulty formulating sentences, and a moderate auditory processing disorder. Clinton's attending skills often fluctuate with his level of interest in the activity at hand. He is able to verbally express his wants and needs, though he rarely uses communication for social purposes. Behaviorally, Clinton can be hyperactive and non-compliant at times, exhibited by foot stomping and whining.

Christopher is an 11-year-old boy diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Disorder whose speech is characterized by impaired quality, rate, and rhythm. He exhibits a moderate auditory processing disorder and poor attending skills. Christopher has low tone in his trunk, poor motor planning and poor body awareness. He verbally expresses his wants and needs and will use language socially at times. Behaviorally, he is compliant, though he often needs redirection. He can also be very silly and he perseverates on topics of his choice.

The Lesson Plan

Before riding began, the instructor and the speech therapist worked together to define short and long term goals for the students. These goals were considered from several points of view:

- specific riding skills to be mastered
- a breakdown of the physical abilities necessary to achieve these skills
- the cognitive abilities needed to plan and carry out the skills

- the speech and language skills required to understand spoken directions and to respond with the appropriate words

Pre-Riding Activities

For the first couple of lessons, the boys mounted their horses immediately following arrival. This proved to be counter-productive: they found it hard to pay attention, and physically both boys exhibited poor posture. It was decided to engage the boys in pre-riding activities to stimulate improved attending, motor planning and body awareness before mounting. For example, the boys learned how to clean the horses' turnout space using a manure fork to pick up manure, depositing it in a large muck bucket, and carrying the bucket (*see illustration-photo 1*). They enjoyed this activity very much!

During these activities, picture symbol cue cards were used to redirect behavior, prompt turn-taking and facilitate communication between the boys, relating to their previous experience in hippotherapy (*see illustration - photo 2*). A picture schedule of the pre-lesson activities gave the boys a defined beginning and end to the session. In therapeutic terms, these activities affect arousal, attending, body awareness, posture, and tone. After the pre-lesson activities, the boys were much more receptive to learning equestrian skills.

Equestrian Skills

Once mounted, but before introducing riding skills, the boys were positioned to face the horse's tail. This helped them to engage the pelvis and improve posture and tone.

The first riding goal was to verbalize "walk-on." Initially, the instructor used commands that were too complex for the boys' level of receptive language. In collaboration, the team decided that short commands, directive tone, and orienting the boys to look at the instructor were necessary to improve processing.

Next, the boys learned the aids for "walk on" using their seat and lower back, coupled with verbalizing "walk on!" The therapist suggested using familiar vocabulary and to follow up the verbal command with a gesture. The expression that was the most effective for the boys was "move your tush!" The TRI placed her hands on her lower back to draw attention to the movement of the back. The boys imitated this hand placement on their own bodies. This over-generalization was corrected by the instructor by keeping her hands at her side, while physically demonstrating the lower back movement.

The next riding goal was teaching the halt. Both boys quickly mastered the skill, using the word "halt" while gently pulling the reins.

Then the “walk” and “halt” were used in more complex commands. The boys had difficulty responding to these commands. The primary issue was poor language processing. The boys confused the verbal commands and physical movements, for example, pulling back on the reins while saying “walk-on.” The team decided to use three techniques to improve the boys’ processing: shorter commands, increased time between commands, and visual cue cards with the words “walk” and “halt” (*see illustration - photo 3*). After two lessons, the cue cards were seldom needed.

The boys mastered steering skills easily by following the instructor who provided visual models with her own hands.

By the last lesson, using all of their acquired riding skills, Christopher and Clinton met the challenge of riding through an obstacle course, off lead, with minimal prompting!

Conclusion

In working with Christopher and Clinton, the instructor and speech pathologist consulted frequently to understand how to communicate more effectively with the students when teaching riding skills. This included choosing activities appropriate for their level of receptive and expressive language as well as using effective prompting techniques.

In the therapeutic riding setting, the instructor’s task is to select and teach equestrian skills appropriate to the abilities and needs of each student. However, each student understands and uses language in different ways. By consulting with a speech pathologist, the instructor’s goals may be reached more quickly and result in more lasting skill achievement.

Throughout this entire process, the instructor and the speech pathologist gained fresh insights into the knowledge each had to offer, and found working together both enlightening and rewarding. Most importantly, they learned the power of teamwork and its positive effects in the therapeutic riding arena.

Communication and learning is a two-way street:

Therapists’ insights to share with the Therapeutic Riding Instructor:

- Understand some principles of Hippotherapy to help the boys’ bodies become activated to improved attending, posture and motor planning
- Clearly define expectations from the language perspective for each rider
- Refine language for more effective communication with riders
- Use cue cards and other prompts effectively

Therapeutic Riding Instructors' insights to share with the Therapist:

- Realize the speech/language therapeutic possibilities within the equine environment
- Learn the component parts of individual riding skills
- Understand the correct sequence for learning riding skills
- Understand methods and activities used to teach riding skills

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