

# How horses are helping children with disabilities learn

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Horses have changed Mia Sloan's ability to communicate with the world.

The 11-year-old has Down syndrome and struggles with speech and forming sentences.



Children also learn horsemanship and life skills.  
(ABC News: Maren Preuss)

But when she was introduced to a herd of horses at Marion Bay, in Tasmania's south-east, two years ago, her world changed for the better.

"On a horse, she's absolutely fearless," Mia's mother, Clarissa Leary, said.

"Her confidence is next level compared to when we were trying to communicate. She would be getting quite angry and irritable because no-one could understand her.

"But on a horse, it (her speech) was a surprise....her being able to ride around and spitting a word out and saying a sentence, 'I can ride a horse' as she goes around."

Mia is one of more than 50 kids with disabilities who've taken part in an equine-assisted learning program, True Trails, which teaches literacy, numeracy and horsemanship.

The learning environment centres around a herd of five horses, a riding arena and blackboards.

"Horses are fundamental. It is equine-assisted learning. The horses become the learning buddy for the learner," True Trails founder Cheri Allanby said.

"We have found that with horse riding and blackboards around the arena, that kids who are struggling with reading will just grab it while they are on a horse and moving.

**"There's research that the movement from riding stimulates brain activity."**

Ms Allanby said it was powerful for parents to see the connection between their children and the horses and the learning.

"They're outcomes they've been wanting for their kids for years," Ms Allanby said.

**All began after bushfire disaster**

True Trails started with a community funding grant in 2013 after the Dunalley bushfires.

"We ran programs for youth to help with cohesion after the bushfires after everyone was scattered, a riding to recovery program," Ms Allanby said.

"Having a heart for struggling learners, the idea dropped, why not combine it with horsemanship." Rhiannon, 16, has autism, and vision issues have made reading challenging.

"(Since starting the program) Rhiannon he has read a novel for pleasure at home with her eyes for the first time in her life."

The horses have been calming and confidence building.

"Horses are her happy place, she speaks animal much better than she speaks people," Libby said.

**"For a child who is different and who feels different, having a space where she excels is really powerful."**

Sean Andrews, 10, has autism and "struggled with reading and writing" before starting the program.

"I have been struggling for years to get help from the school, as far as getting one-on-one help with literacy," his mother Beth Andrews said.

"If it wasn't for True Trails, I can absolutely guarantee you he would probably still only be at a grade one reading level, but now he's at a grade three/four reading level and he's in grade five.

"It's not just his learning, it's things to do with his physical abilities, his self-confidence has also come along immensely."

## **Animals bridging the gap**

Animal therapy, which includes equine-assisted learning, is a growing sector.

Wendy Coombe set up Animal Therapies Limited three years ago, with the aim of building a directory of service providers.

The charity now has more than 250 registered providers, with animals used ranging from lizards and chickens to alpacas and horses.

**"One of the most common things we hear from parents, especially when it comes to children who are non-verbal, is the very first word that child has spoken was to an animal," Ms Coombe said.**

"There's a lot of evidence that supports autistic people being able to relate to animals in terms of the body language, some autistic people find it difficult to maintain eye contact.

"The animal bridges that gap between the therapist and the client and helps that person engage with the therapist to achieve better outcomes."