

## Horses as healers: Equine facilitated therapy for grieving children

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### Introduction

Hippotherapy literally means therapy with the help of a horse. Centers such as the National Center for Equine Facilitated Therapy (NCEFT) in Woodside, California offer hippotherapy for individuals with various disorders, and returning vets. In 2008, Sutter VNA & Hospice in San Mateo, California paired with NCEFT to provide equine facilitated therapy for children grieving losses of a close family member. There was no charge for this event.

### Hippotherapy

The Greek word for horse is “hippos”. Hippotherapy typically uses the movement of



the horse as a treatment strategy for clients who have difficulty with neuromuscular control. This therapy has been recognized in treatment of autism and other pervasive developmental disorders, cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, spina bifida, sensory integration, speech and language disorders, traumatic brain injuries and stroke.

Therapists who make use of hippotherapy include physical, occupational, speech and language pathologists, and a growing number of psychotherapists. Heine and Benjamin, physical therapists, state that “Changes are often seen in the respira-

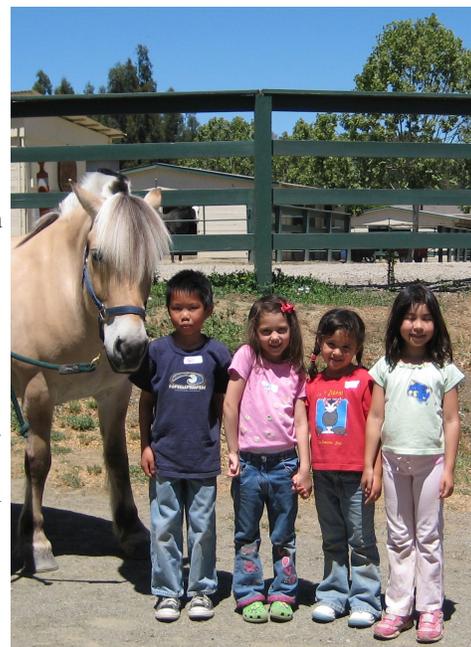
tory, cognitive, sensory processing, balance, affective, arousal and speech/language production functions” when employing hippotherapy in client treatment (Heine, B., & Benjamin, J., 2000, p. 11). The American Hippotherapy Association, which was founded in 1987, includes, among others, impairments in communication, and limbic system dysfunction due to arousal and attentional skills as conditions for which hippotherapy might be indicated (AHA, 2008).

### Grief in Children

J. W. Worden co-directed the Harvard Child Bereavement Study which interviewed and tested 125 children. Rather than a stage theory, Worden presents the **four tasks of mourning** (Worden, J., 2002, p. 27). These include (1) accepting the reality of loss, (2) experiencing the pain or emotional aspects of loss, (3) adjusting to an environment in which the deceased is missing, and (4) relocating the person within one's life and finding ways to memorialize the person; Worden says that these tasks apply to all people, but with children they have to be understood within the cognitive, social and developmental stage of the child (Worden, J., 1996, p. 12). For example, a child, aged 4-5, who has magical thinking, may believe s/he caused the death, and have to deal with tremendous guilt and pain when coping with the emotional impact of the loss (task 2); a younger child whose coping skills are less well developed than an older one may find it much more difficult to adjust to the new environment without the deceased (task 3) (Worden, J., 1996, p. 12).

### Participants

Sutter VNA & Hospice in San Mateo, California organized two separate day long events in which volunteers donated their time and expertise to help children who had lost a loved one hosted at NCEFT. Each day was limited to six child participants ranging from 4 to 12 years, with one group of siblings. The losses included parents, a close grandparent, a sibling, and an uncle. The group was diverse and included children of various ethnic backgrounds including Asian, Hispanic, Russian, and Euro-Americans. Losses had occurred ranging from few months and up to two years prior to the events, and included both unexpected and expected deaths.



### The day's activities

10:45 Check in and picnic under the trees

11:30 Tee-pee time, talking stick, drumming and singing

12:15 Back to the barn to meet the animals and learn the safety rules

12:45 Three rotating stations:

1) Riding, games on horseback

2) Playing with the goats, and

3) Horseshoe memorial art project

2:15 Closing ceremony



## The venue

The National Center for Equine Facilitated Therapy (NCEFT) is located in Woodside, California, and is 37 years old. It is a non-profit corporation dedicated to providing equine assisted activities, education and research for persons with disabilities, and in addition to two arenas, it has an Outpatient Physical and Occupational Therapy Clinic which supports year round programs, including for returning vets.



## Interventions

### Sharing group in a tee-pee/talking stick

The leader introduced a rain stick as a “talking stick”, asking that participants listen while the stick was being passed, and that only the person holding the “talking stick” speak at their turn. The leader explained how this was a tradition that many Native people use when speaking.

The children were asked to first share who had died in their life (Worden’s first task). Then each child was asked to say something that they enjoyed doing with this person (Worden’s second task). Lastly, they were asked to share what they missed about the person (Worden’s third task). Research shows that bereaved children who have lost a family member greatly benefit from safe, structured group settings in which they realize that they are not alone in their experience.

### Drumming our emotions

There were drums in the tee-pee for each child. Eventually each person was encouraged to pick up a drum. Together the group explored how to express different emotions with the drum, such as how one might play a drum to indicate they were very angry versus sad. The assistant leader led the children in a Native American song in which the group drummed together and sang to help form group cohesiveness, as the closing for the initial group activities in the tee-pee.

### Creating a horseshoe memorial

When the children first arrived and were checking in, they were asked to choose an actual horseshoe (provided by NCEFT), and most chose to spray paint it. The horseshoes were moved up to a picnic table in the shade for the children to later decorate. Beads with alphabet letters, feathers, shells, leather, lanyard material and other objects were provided, along with quick drying glue. As the children decorated their horseshoes as a memorial for their

loved one, and a commemoration of the day, experienced grief counselors sat with them at the table, and listened to what they wanted to share while they worked (Worden’s fourth task). Later in sharing about making the memorial the leader reminded the children that these were actual shoes worn by the therapy horses, and that provided a metaphor for thinking about the journeys that people experience in life, and what it is like to walk in the shoes of another.

## Resources

School counselors and grief counselors alike can both benefit from finding local centers that offer hippotherapy in their area. School counselors may want to refer clients with disabilities such as autism or cerebral palsy for this treatment. Grief counselors may want to try the sorts of activities suggested herein. Here is a list of resources for counselors.

Sutter VNA & Hospice

1-650-685-2822

[wilsonj2@sutterhealth.org](mailto:wilsonj2@sutterhealth.org)

The American Hippotherapy Association

1-888-851-4592

[www.americanhippotherapyassociation.org](http://www.americanhippotherapyassociation.org)

The National Center for  
Equine Facilitated Therapy

1-650-851-2271

[www.nceft.org](http://www.nceft.org)



### “Simon says” on horseback

The riders were brought into a side-by-side position with each other, and the leader played “Simon says” with them. The commands included sitting sideways on the horse, sitting backwards, laying supine, laying forward, thanking the horse and eventually Simon said to whisper a secret to the horse about their loved one who died, and to share something important with the horse.

## Conclusion

It was clear to all who participated that these day long events were worth while and important in the lives of the children, their families and the volunteers who participated to make a day of hippotherapy and grief work possible. Further research is needed to explore the efficacy of hippotherapy and these types of interventions in their use with grieving children. The approach used here worked to facilitate children’s work on Worden’s Four Tasks of Mourning. All the children who participated were enthusiastic about their interactions, especially with the therapy horses. Counselors are encouraged to seek out hippotherapy resources in their local areas to add this unique approach into their repertoire. Working in partnership, Sutter VNA & Hospice, and the National Center for Equine Facilitated Therapy created a wonderful healing, unique and therapeutic intervention for bereaved children – one that holds promise for future exploration.