

With horses and iPads, autistic children learn to communicate

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Horses and iPads help Strides program participants communicate.

Luke, a 7-year-old autistic child had primarily only expressed requests to his parents (e.g., I want a drink), but this past year he was introduced to a 1,000 pound horse, 1-pound iPad and special program called Strides. During the concentrated eight-week Strides program, Luke used the iPad to have his first two-way conversation, share his feelings and tell his new friends about how he lost his tooth.

Children with autism have great difficulty developing verbal communications skills; 40 percent are, like Luke, nonverbal. Southern Tier Alternative Therapies, Inc. (STAT), together with Tina Caswell, a clinical faculty member in Ithaca College's Department of Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology, is addressing this issue by combining equine therapy and assistive technology through an exclusive program called Strides. Though both therapy approaches have been proven effective independently, they have rarely been used in tandem. The Strides program puts children on horseback and gives each family iPads equipped with speech-generating applications. Caswell and her team of Ithaca College graduate students provide intensive, highly customized training and ongoing support. The unique [therapeutic approach](#) has helped children reach significant breakthroughs in communication, both verbally and through effective use of the device.

"What I'm seeing in our Strides sessions is a lot of firsts," Caswell said. "It's the first time the children have been on horseback, the first time many of them are using iPads with speech software, and more important, the first time they've had any kind of access to self-expression. Parents also tell me it's the first time they've been able to have a two-way conversation with their kids. It's wonderful when the children can express basic wants, but what we're seeing through this therapy goes beyond that. Children are doing more than requesting food and toys. For the first time, they are telling narratives and sharing feelings."

Weighing over five pounds and resembling laptops, traditional assisted speech-generating devices can be cumbersome and heavy, and children tend to abandon them due to lack of interest with their limited communication options. On the contrary, iPads loaded with speech-generating applications only weigh around 1 pound, cost significantly less than traditional assisted speaking devices and are more user friendly. Each child participating in the program is given an iPad to be used as a speech-generating device. Participants and their parents are then trained

by the Strides team and the Ithaca College students and faculty to continuously update new communication opportunities on their devices.

"Since iPads are so light and mobile, the children can easily use them while they ride horseback, feed the ducks, or simply go for a walk." said Caswell. "Using the iPads in all kinds of varied and engaging environments keeps the [children](#) from getting bored and encourages them to communicate at a higher level."

The Strides project is supported by grants awarded to STAT by the United Way of Broome County (NY) and the State of New York OPWDD Family Support Services Fund. Caswell and her graduate student assistants from the Ithaca College speech pathology program conduct the eight-week therapy sessions helping to build on and enhance STAT's existing equine therapy programs.

"Many of the parents in the program are awestruck in witnessing their child express something he or she already had knowledge of," said Catherine Markosky, founder of STAT and the Strides program. "During the program, we witnessed one child communicate his understanding of addition, and the parents were completely unaware that their child even knew his numbers at all. That's the beauty of the project; discovering that there's a person in there just waiting to be heard."

Through STAT, Caswell will conduct follow-up programming to determine the long-term effects of the Strides program participants. She recently presented at the New York State Speech-Language-Hearing Association Annual Convention in April 2013.

Provided by Ithaca College

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