

Pegasus Riding Academy provides equine therapy in Palm Desert for people with disabilities

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At Pegasus, you may not be able to walk ... but you can ride a horse.

Pegasus Riding Academy in Palm Desert is a magical place where more than 200 children come weekly for equine therapy. Approved by the American Medical Association in the 1960s, equine therapy is used to treat both mental and physical disabilities, such as cerebral palsy, autism (including the profoundly autistic), epilepsy, Down syndrome, blindness (to assist in balance), scoliosis, spina bifida, ADHD, brain injuries, multiple sclerosis and a host of mentally challenges.

The participants come from **Desert Arc**, **United Cerebral Palsy**, **Angel View**, special ed classes from all three public school districts and home care participants. Therapy is provided four days a week from 8:30 a.m. to noon.

Six riders at a time are allowed in the therapy arena for a half-hour session with trained volunteers working at each participant's side. On Saturdays, home care participants are welcome to come in at 8 a.m., and therapy extends to 1 p.m.

Before riding, each participant must submit documentation that provides Pegasus their health history and a note from their physician. This ensures wellness and proper health care for each by allowing Pegasus to plan individual therapy programs. The data tells them what the participant must have to improve a physical or mental disability, as therapy for each condition is different. The documentation is an invaluable tool that allows the head equine therapist to provide consistent, custom therapy for users. To make sure the rider's information is up to date, the package must be updated and signed by a physician every two years.



Upon arriving at Pegasus, each rider has 20 minutes to practice "socialization" in their ramada. This is a priority for people with all types of disabilities, and it helps the children learn rudimentary skills, like "please" and "thank you," along with basic behavioral skills, such as taking turns, sharing books and playing games.

Equine therapy can be best described as follows: the legs and lower torso are exercised by the body of the horse moving against the muscles in the human — it's a unique form of physical exercise. The horse's movements are three-dimensional: up and down, side to side, and back and forth. They are also synchronized in a precise, repetitive pattern — the same as the human gait. The rider responds to the motions with improved body

"Socialization" helps children learn skills such as taking turns, sharing books and playing games. (Photo: Chase Berke, Pegasus Riding Academy)

symmetry, improved muscle tone, increased head and neck control, and improved balance and improved muscle strength. These movements are supplemented with specific arm, upper body and speech exercises called out by the therapy leader, who is assisted by three volunteers working with each participant.

For those with physical disabilities, equine therapy is designed to strengthen muscles, loosen joints and promote circulation to body parts disabled by infirmities. For those with mental disabilities, this therapy offers a sense of accomplishment and self-esteem by being able to steer a large animal, as well as follow directions.

Additionally, Pegasus includes emphasis on socialization for their mentally impaired participants. Autistic riders, for example, make significant progress by learning to become accustomed to new sights, sounds and textures through physical contact and interacting with others. Animal-assisted therapy is an accepted form of treatment and is closely studied by medical students.

During Pegasus's 38 years, it has never turned someone away, provided they have the necessary paperwork and doctor's approval. Pegasus looks at ability rather than incapacity, and they believe that even those most severe disabilities can make progress. Nursing candidates from the various Palm Desert-based colleges have visited Pegasus to study equine therapy for more than 20 years.

Learning is a hallmark of the Pegasus program. They are constantly adding and seeking new knowledge about all disabilities so they can treat the impaired community with innovative animal-assisted therapy emphasized on the socialization of their mentally impaired participants.



Equine therapy can offer a sense of accomplishment, boosting self-esteem. (Photo: Chase Berke, Pegasus Riding Academy)

For more information about Pegasus Riding Academy, visit pegasusridingacademy.org (<https://pegasusridingacademy.org/>). For questions about becoming a rider, call (323) 496-1948 or email Chase Burke at chaseberke@hotmail.com. For volunteer questions, call (760) 636-3685 or email info@pegasusridingacademy.org (<mailto:info@pegasusridingacademy.org>).

Robin Montgomery comes from a family of writers and provided material both as an employee and independently for large corporations such as Max Factor, Vidal Sassoon, Columbia Pictures, Norman Lear's Embassy Entertainment and the Santa Paula Times. She sits on the advisory board of KPSP, CBS Local 2, Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Desert, Act for MS and is a board member of The Waring International Piano Competition and Opera Showcase of the Desert. She has served as the executive director of Pegasus Therapeutic Riding since 2002.

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