

# 'Much Brighter'

Horseback riding is good therapy for children with disabilities

By VINCENT F. IOSUE

Over the years, animals have been used therapeutically with people who have disabilities or severe injuries.

A program of the New York Therapeutic Riding Center conducted at the Claremont Riding Academy in Manhattan has used horses for the past year and a half to help handicapped adults, and this summer it expanded the program to children with disabilities. It involves children with autism, blindness, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy and hemiplegia.

For 11-year-old Robert Hernandez, the program already has paid dividends.

"He's been very cheerful," said Dr. Barbara Schofield, his pediatrician. "He seems much brighter."

Robert, who resides at the Terence Cardinal Cooke Health Care Center's Specialty Hospital in Manhattan, had a stroke when he was 2 years old and suffers from left hemiplegia, a condition in which he has limited control of the muscles on the left side of his body. He is unable to speak and is somewhat developmentally disabled.

"The aim of the riding is for him to strengthen the muscles that have been damaged from the stroke," Dr. Schofield said.

He has made notable improvements since the first weekly lesson July 22.

"I see him making more of an effort to try to speak," she said. "I have even seen him using his left arm more. He seems to use it more readily than he had previously."

His five-lesson course will end Aug. 26. Dr. Schofield said that once she gets his schedule settled for the fall, they'll try to work in another set of lessons, because she believes they are important to Robert and his development.

"I'm convinced that if he were on this program regularly, every week, for a long period of time, that we'd see a huge



**RIDING HIGH** - Robert Hernandez looks in control of the situation atop his horse. Assisting him, are therapeutic riding instructor Elizabeth Reese, volunteers Gabrielle Donati and Deborah Reedy.

improvement," she said.

Robert arrives at the academy at 5 p.m. every Thursday, dons his helmet and mounts the horse.

A physical therapist leads the horse around the ring while two volunteers stand on either side of Robert. Robert smiles as he rides the horse. He even adjusts his helmet or gives an occasional wave to the spectators on the side.

Dr. Schofield said that by sitting up on the horse, Robert is using the muscles in his back to keep himself upright.

Sometimes the leader breaks the horse into a slow trot which really gets Robert excited.

The horse is also stopped at certain points, for another part of Robert's therapy. He's asked to grip a rubber ball with his left hand and then bring it across his body and switch it to his right. This helps him improve coordination while stretching and strengthening his muscles. It also helps minimize muscular deterioration.

Other therapeutic exercises include holding his arms straight out while the horse is standing still.

Possibly the most important effect of the riding for kids in the program is the

tremendous boost it gives their self-esteem.

"It's very empowering for them," said Richard Brodie, director of the program. "Very often, in their non-horse world, they don't have that much control over their environment because of their disability."

That all changes when they hop on a horse, he said.

"All of a sudden, you're on a horse and you're in control of this big animal," he said. "That's what makes it such a wonderful thing and inspires us to work with a program like this."

Brodie said the program will continue throughout the year. "We look to expand our work with children with disabilities based on the success of the summer program," he said.

Similar programs have existed for some time, but most are located in rural areas or the suburbs. He started this one to meet the demand of the "huge population of disabled people here in the city."

"This is a group of people who can't readily go off to these programs out in the suburbs," he said. "They don't have the time, they don't have the financial resources. That was the real incentive for creating this program."