

The objective of this study is to illustrate the autistic child's process of perception towards the horse and his coming closer to it, his relationships with the team, his overcoming of fears and acquisition of confidence and how, through this coming closer, we were able to obtain gains on the therapeutic level.

This work is characterized as a case study of clinical validation with a qualitative approach whose subject was a 3 years old boy with autism disorders, classified according to the DSMIV (2003). The psychotherapy treatment recurred to a mini-pony. Ponies present features that help the getting closer work, such as: its height, which makes it less threatening. To register the sessions we used the PATH pattern of daily records, continuous register, tables of the autistic's behavior, photographs and interviews with familiars.

Treatment took place at the European Equestrian Concepts which runs according to XII INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF THERAPEUTIC RIDING. Treatment was administered by two university students, trainees at the Psychology course, and a Psychologist. The 30 minute sessions took place weekly for duration of three months and the data were collected through observation, continuous register and photos. Treatment aimed at having the patient accept the horse, using the existing space at EEC, thus allowing his adaptation to the members of the caring team and the exploration of the place where nature is abundant and offers footpaths in the woods, various kinds of surfaces (sand, weeds, water) and an open-air riding school. Reported below are some session fragments:

During the first sessions, C. did not accept any contact with the team, and only stayed with his mother. The team members initially sought to establish contact with the child by using the natural resources existing in the place (trees, birdsongs, textures of materials found in the nature), and always tried to awaken his interest and attention. After this period, the subject could stay alone with the therapists.

After this initial contact (approximately three weeks), the horse entered this relationship, and the games always took place in the presence of the pony. C. ignored it and all attempts to have him get closer were refused with tears and shouts. He usually fled running although he stopped quickly a few times to look behind, as if he were asking us to follow him far from the animal. The choice of a mini pony was dictated by its small height and its docility, which facilitates its handling and company during the treatment and help reduce the child's fear, since he deals with a smaller animal in this initial phase.

We began to realize that C. sometimes stopped to observe some of the horse reactions. From then on, we have such reports of his talks as: "Hi Peanut" (the pony's name). As sessions went by, we perceived that C. was becoming increasingly curious about the animal and explored the environment that called the Pony's attention. When the horse was grazing, he would pull grass out on its side, give it to the therapist, hold his hand and signal that he gave it to the horse.

When he walked in the 'sensory trail' on the side of "Peanut", he felt the alert reactions of the animal, stopped walking and looked around showing he perceived the environment. During the work, he began to explore the pony; he stopped in front of the horse and touched its face with one of his hands. He then stopped on its side and did the same to the horses shoulder. For the first time, he said goodbye to the team and went away. While with "Peanut", he sang. From then on, when C. arrived to the sessions, he often ran to see the horses that were tied. By the end of the second month of work, C. already accepted bigger horses and began to show signs of relaxation, explored the animal parts and called the attention of the team through "small blows" and laughter. C.'s mother told us that he was verbalizing more and observing more situations and objects.

Our conclusions demonstrate that the contact with the caring team and the horse generated gains even when riding did not actually occur. The horse became appealing for the autistic, stimulated his eye contact and body expression, once again playing the role of a facilitator in the social relationship of these children. When working with Autistics, the team has to understand which moment of their relationship to the horse the patients are experiencing, so that they may get closer, since perceiving and accepting the animal presupposes curiosity and contact with the reality experienced at that moment. Using a Pony allowed us to realize that getting closer to the animal is less threatening because of its small height. The child may easily touch it, explore its parts and interact with it, closely feeling its reactions. The discovery work also became safer, since the therapist was given more freedom to care for the child. With both the higher horse and the pony, the perception of the moment the child was experiencing was crucial in the attempts to bring him closer to the animal. During the three months when we tried to have him get closer, all his familiars confirmed our conclusions during the work, since out of the therapy environment, he began to observe the world around him, made more gestures intended to communicate and his behavior allowed his getting closer to and having contact with people.

We conclude that the pony also facilitated our patient's getting closer through his play aspect, which allowed that this "game" be later transferred to the higher horse. The results confirm the theory that says children presented perception of the other, social game, mimics, body posture or gestures to establish or modulate interaction, perception of the external world, perception, exploration and relationship with the animal. This study does not seek generalizations but it demonstrates that the work involving animals is extremely important and that its results are valid when applied to Autistic children. In our case, it improved the cognitive, social-and affective aspects.