

AUTISM CONNECT 2026

April 7th

Thank You!



TO ALL OF OUR PLATINUM SPONSORS!

"We're glad you're here"

Equine-Assisted Service & Learning

Welcome to AutismConnect

Sun Horse Ranch & Greenville Bilingual Therapy
AutismConnect Convention • April 7, 2026





Why We're Here Today

To explore how equine-assisted service and learning supports **regulation, communication and connection** when integrated with Occupational and Speech Therapy.

Today is about collaboration, curiosity, and connection.





What is Equine-Assisted Service & Learning?

Equine-assisted service and learning uses the horse as a supportive partner to promote **regulation, communication, and social-emotional growth** through structured, goal-oriented activities.

Sessions are facilitated by PATH-certified professionals with therapeutic and educational goals.





Clinical Application: OT & Speech in Action

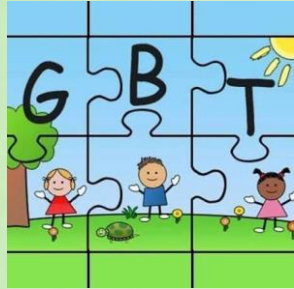
Within equine-assisted service & learning, Occupational Therapists and Speech-Language Pathologists work side by side to address individualized therapeutic goals in a regulated, motivating environment.

Movement, rhythm, and interaction with the horse naturally support:

- postural control and sensory regulation
- attention, motor planning, and sequencing
- expressive and receptive communication
- social engagement and joint attention

Therapy goals are embedded in meaningful experiences, allowing skills to emerge naturally and generalize beyond the sessions.





Interdisciplinary Team Approach

Successful **equine-assisted programs** depend on **collaboration**.

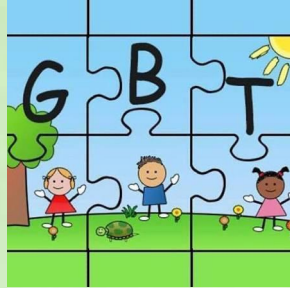
Speech-Language Pathologists address communication goals.

Occupational Therapists support sensory processing, motor coordination, and functional skills.

PATH International—certified equine professionals manage the horse and ensure safe, appropriate movement and interaction.

Working together allows the team to provide **effective support for children with diverse developmental needs**.





Equine-Assisted Service & Learning

Supporting Speech & Occupational Therapy

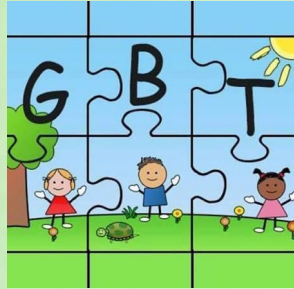
- A **collaborative approach** where therapists integrate therapeutic goals within structured equine-assisted activities.

Through guided interaction with horses, children can develop:

- **Communication and language skills**
- **Sensory regulation and emotional control**
- **Motor coordination and balance**
- **Social engagement and confidence**

These activities provide a **natural, motivating environment that supports therapy goals** for children with diverse developmental needs.

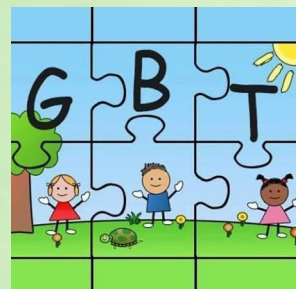




Integrating Speech Therapy Interventions

- Once attention improves through **equine movement and interaction**, traditional **speech-language therapy strategies** can be incorporated.
- Activities may include **language tasks, articulation practice, phonological intervention, literacy activities, and following multi-step directions.**
- **Equine-assisted activities create a motivating environment while allowing therapists to target the same communication goals used in clinical settings.**

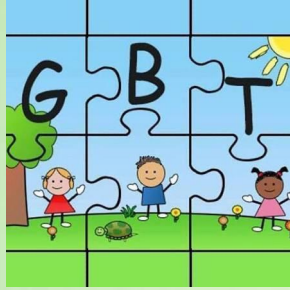




Speech, Language & Executive Function Foundation

- Speech production requires coordination of **breath support, posture, trunk stability, and oral- motor movement.**
- **Sensory processing and motor development** play an important role in language learning.
- Children often begin speaking as their **sensory and motor systems organize during crawling and walking**, supporting coordination between movement, breathing, and vocalization.
- **Movement-based experiences, including interaction with horses, can support these foundational systems for communication.**
- **Executive function skills**—such as attention, planning, sequencing, and self-regulation—are addressed in speech and occupational therapy and strengthened through structured movement-based experiences with horses.

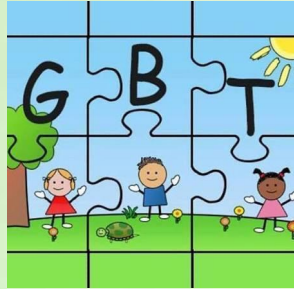




How Equine Movement Supports Development

- The movement of a horse can provide **rhythmic, repetitive sensory input** that influences posture, balance and body awareness.
- These movement experiences can **engage sensory, neuromotor, and cognitive systems that support communication, regulation and motor development.**
- In collaborative settings, therapists may integrate **equine-assisted activities** to support therapeutic goals.
- These activities are **distinct from traditional riding lessons** and focus on structured interaction, movement, and engagement.

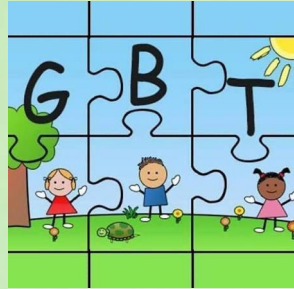




How Equine Movement Supports Attention

- Many **children with communication differences** experience challenges with sensory regulation and sustained attention.
- Children with **ADHD or autism** may have difficulty maintaining focus during traditional clinic-based therapy settings.
- The rhythmic movement of a horse can provide **approximately 2,500 - 3,500 neuromotor inputs during a session.**
- These inputs can help **organize sensory systems and support improved attention and engagement in therapeutic activities.**



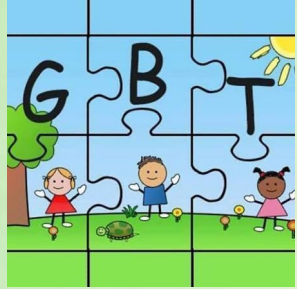


Equine-Assisted Activities and Sensory Processing

The horse's movement provides sensory input that supports regulation, attention, and learning

- The horse's movement provides **vestibular (balance) input**
- Supports **proprioception (body awareness)**
- Provides **tactile and visual sensory information**
- Rhythmic movement helps **calm overactive sensory systems**
- Improves **attention, coordination, and regulation**





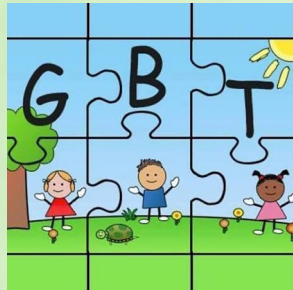
Sensory and Neuromotor Benefits

- The horse's walk produces **rhythmic, repetitive, and three-dimensional movement.**
- Movement occurs **up/down, forward/back, left/right, and through space**, providing continuous sensory input.
- **Children receive vestibular, proprioceptive, tactile, auditory, visual, and olfactory input simultaneously.**
- This sensory activation can support **improved focus, posture, trunk stability, and breath support for speech and communication.**





Occupational Therapy and Equine-Assisted Therapeutic Activities



Why Occupational Therapy Matters in Equine-Assisted Sessions

Occupational Therapy helps children develop skills needed to participate in everyday life.

During equine-assisted activities, Ots support development:

- **Sensory regulation -**

the horse's rhythmic movement organize the nervous system

- **Postural control & balance -**

interacting with the horse activates core muscles

- **Motor planning & coordination -**

leading, grooming, and obstacle activities build body awareness

- **Communication & engagement -**

shared focus encourages interaction

- **Emotional regulation -**

the horse provides immediate, non-judgmental feedback

The horse becomes a partner in therapy—supporting regulation, movement, and connection.



Why Horses Help Us Understand Autistic Regulation

Shared nervous system responses to safety and stress

Horses and humans share a nervous system designed for safety and survival. When that system perceives threat, both **respond instinctively—not by choice.**

- Horses are prey animals and highly sensitive to changes in their environment
- Autistic children often experience the world with **similar heightened sensory awareness**
- In both, behaviors reflect nervous system states, not intent or defiance

What looks like "**behavior**" is often **the nervous system doing its job too well.** By understanding how horses respond to stress, uncertainty, and regulation, we gain a deeper, non-judgmental understanding of how autistic children experience the world—and **how safety, predictability, and connection allow skills to emerge.**

"Autistic meltdowns and horse spooks are the same nervous system doing its job too well. Our role is not to stop it, but to guide it back to safety."



Safety Comes Before Skills

Regulation begins with predictable and safe environments

A regulated nervous system does not happen by chance.

It is created through **environment, safety, leadership, and consistency.**

Horses require safety to remain regulated—and so do autistic children.

What Safety Looks Like (shared needs)

Safety is created through predictable routines, clear and calm communication, and attuned leadership.

When these elements are present, both horses and children can remain engaged, curious, and available for learning.





Why Regulation Comes First

Regulation is the foundation for connection and communication

Regulation is the foundation for **learning, communication, and social engagement**—without it, higher-level skills cannot be sustained.

The horse's presence, rhythmic movement, and responsiveness help the nervous system find balance **before** higher-level skills are introduced.

When the body feels safe and organized, the brain is more available for learning and interaction.





The Role of Leadership in Sessions

Adults provide the regulation anchor for both child and horse

In equine-assisted learning, adults serve as regulation anchors for both the child and the horse.

Leadership in equine-assisted sessions means actively holding safety by setting the emotional tone, maintaining calm structure without force, offering guidance instead of correction, and responding to signs of stress.

Safety is not passive—it is actively held

Why this Matters

When horses feel safe, they stay responsive and connected.

When children feel safe, **skills emerge naturally**—without pressure or coercion.

Regulation is not taught. Regulation is experienced.





Connection Builds Trust and Relationship

Trust emerges through safety, consistency, and shared experience

When a child **feels regulated** and understood, connection naturally emerges.

Through shared experiences with the horse, **trust is built**, relationships deepen, and meaningful interaction becomes possible.

Trust grows through consistency, atonement, and feeling safe in relationship.





Regulation Supports Communication

Communication becomes possible when the nervous system is regulated

When the nervous system is regulated, **attention, joint engagement, and intention** naturally increase.

The horse provides a shared, motivating focus that supports expressive language, receptive understanding, and nonverbal communication.

When communication becomes possible, the relationships that matter most—especially with parents—can begin to strengthen.

Communication grows when the body feels safe, engaged, and ready to connect.



Parents as Co-Regulators in the Learning Process

Parents learn practical co-regulation strategies during sessions

In equine-assisted service and learning, parents are not spectators— they are **active partners in regulation and connection**. When parents participate in sessions, **they learn how safety, consistency, and calm leadership support their child's nervous system in real time**.

By observing and practicing co-regulation alongside their child, parents gain **practical, transferable tools** they can carry into daily life— helping skills transfer beyond the session and into **home, school, community settings**.

When parents feel confident and supported, children feel safer—and learning happens.



Seeing Regulation in Action

Observing nervous system cues during equine interaction

This short video offers a glimpse into an equine-assisted service and learning session. Notice how environment, leadership, routine, and relationship create the conditions for:

- Regulation
- Engagement
- Learning

Safety and regulation are established first—
through predictability, calm guidance, and attuned support—
Before any skills is expected.

Watch for

Focus less on the activity itself and more on the nervous system cues:

Pace • Body posture • Connection • Response of the pony





Seeing Regulation in Action

- The pace and rhythm of the interaction
- The role of the parents as co-regulators
- The child's interaction and engagement
- The pony's real-time feedback to calm guidance

**Learning Together.
One Hoofbeat at Time.**





Skills Emerge when the Nervous System Feels Safe



Child, therapist, and pony engaged in a calm equine-assisted learning activity.

EAL collaboration with OT, and PATH-certified mental health specialist.



Guiding Engagement Through Pressure, Release, and Reinforcement

A natural learning process shared by horses and humans

Engagement emerges when guidance is clear, **pressure** is appropriate, and relief is offered at the right moment. In equine-assisted sessions, we use gentle pressure to invite participation, **release** to signal safety, and **reinforcement** to build confidence—allowing children to stay regulated while learning to stay regulated while learning through experience rather than compliance.





Learning Without Overload or Force

Horses respond instantly to pressure and relief, **providing honest feedback that helps children understand cause and effect** without verbal demand. This predictable pattern reduces anxiety, supports autonomy, and keeps the nervous system regulated—making engagement sustainable and meaningful.

Reinforcement is not a reward—it is felt safety.





Equine-Assisted Service & Learning as a Collaborative Model

Therapists and equine professionals working together

Therapeutic goals are met through movement, interaction, and shared experience.

The horse becomes a **dynamic partner**—supporting sensory regulation, postural engagement, attention, and motivation—while therapists guide clinical objectives within a real-world meaningful context.

Collaboration allows therapy to unfold organically, while preserving clinical structures, goals, and professional roles.



From Clinic to Context: A Partnership Opportunity

Extending therapy into real-world environment

When therapy moves beyond clinic walls, skills generalize more naturally.

Sun Horse Ranch partners with hospitals and therapy groups by offering **a purpose-built equine-assisted service & learning environment** where Occupational Therapy and Speech services continue under **standard insurance models.**

How it works:

In this partnership model, therapists remain the primary clinical providers, sessions occur in a regulated, sensory-rich environment, therapy is billed independently, and children engage in meaningful, real world experiences that support generalization.

This model expands access without altering clinical responsibility or insurance structures.



Equine-Assisted Service & Learning: Key Clinical Takeaways

Regulation comes first

Skills emerge when the nervous system feels safe, supported, and regulated.

Connection drives engagement

The horse provides a naturally motivating partner that supports trust, attention, and participation.

Context supports generalization

Real-world, sensory-rich environments allow skills to transfer beyond clinic walls.

Collaboration expands access

Purpose-built equine-assisted service and learning settings support clinical therapy without altering clinical responsibility or billing structures.

Equine-assisted service and learning is not a replacement for therapy— it is a context that strengthens how therapy is experienced.



Matching Equine Interaction to Developmental Readiness

Ages 3-13:

We primarily use dismounted equine-assisted activities to support regulation, control, and intentional engagement.

Why ponies matter:

For young children, pony size and height often increase comfort, safety, and confidence compared to large horses.

Mounted activities (introduced selectively):

For children who demonstrate emotional regulation, instruction-following, and safety awareness.

Structured support:

Mounted sessions include **obstacle-course problem solving**, supported by a **horse handler**, **PATH-certified instructor**, and **OT and/or Speech Therapist** present.

Why real horses:

Horses and ponies provide **immediate, non-verbal feedback** that supports cause-and-effect learning and confidence.

Equine interaction is always matched to the child's developmental readiness and nervous system needs.



An Invitation to Collaborate

Equine-assisted service and learning offers context— not a replacement for therapy

At Sun Horse Ranch, licensed Occupational Therapists and Speech-Language Pathologists remain the primary clinical providers, delivering insurance-based care while working within a regulated, sensory-rich environment.

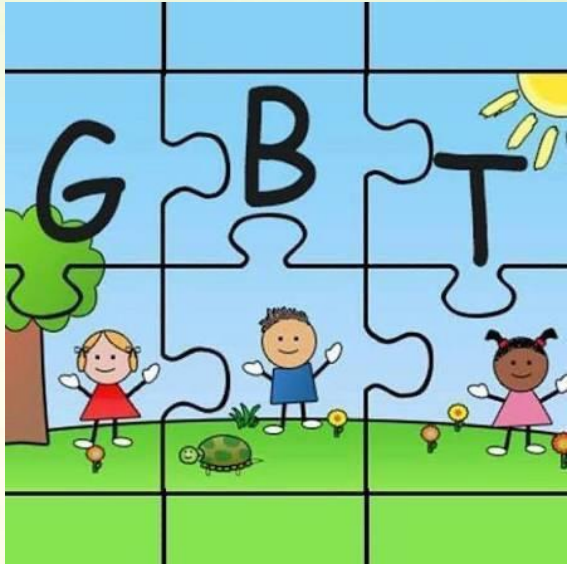
This model **supports regulation, engagement, and real world skill generalization—** while preserving clinical responsibility, ethical boundaries, and professional scope of practice.

Our goal is not to sell a program, but to expand how and where therapeutic skills can be supported

Models and examples shared are for educational purposes.



Safety First. Connection Follows. Learning Emerges.



Equine-Assisted Service & Learning

— SUN HORSE RANCH —

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AutismConnect • April 7, 2026

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Session Survey



Hall of Fame 1:30-2:30