

Ohio Speech and Hearing Professionals Board

Central Ohio SLPs Make Huge Impact With Equine-Oriented Summer Camp

The Board is featuring this story as part of our human-interest series. If you know a licensee who is making a positive impact for Ohioans, please let us know.

As the Executive Director of the licensure board, I have opportunities to get out from behind a desk, in an office located in downtown Columbus, and see first-hand the powerful work all of our licensees provide to Ohioans of all ages. And so began a journey that involved horses, a horse farm, some incredibly skilled and dedicated SLPs, and the Stars of the show – some amazing kiddos, who spent a full week receiving speech therapy for various communication disorders.



I spent the entire afternoon at the Benson Oaks Farm located in Blacklick, Ohio to witness an innovative pilot program in partnership with The Ohio State University Speech-Language-Hearing Clinic. This unique summer camp offered children a dynamic approach to speech and language therapy, integrating nature and equine interaction as powerful therapeutic tools.

During this 20-hour summer experience, children received collaboratively-designed speech-language pathology (SLP) services that supplemented their current therapeutic goals. Licensed and certified Speech-Language Pathologists, supported by OSU graduate students, delivered specially designed interventions in an engaging equine environment.

Just how engaging is the equine environment, you may be wondering? Well, pretty incredibly engaging as the photos appearing in this article will attest.



Speech-Language Pathologist Karen Carver came up with the idea for this program after experiencing her own injury. In March of 2020, she sustained a TBI that resulted in neural hypersensitivities to crowd and loud noises, artificial lights, and chemical odors - navigating and manipulating her environment to avoid triggers became a full-time job. Between the injury and her recovery, she discovered that there was nothing in a barn that bothered her. And thus, began her journey to develop an evidence-based speech and language delivery model incorporating horses, which included completion of the American Hippotherapy Association (AHA) coursework and seeking strategic equine and a university partnerships with The Ohio State University Speech-Language Hearing Clinic.

Ms. Carver stated, “We are so grateful for the exposure the pilot 'horse camp' has received, and I want to thank you for your enthusiasm for our vision. We are beyond pleased that we are able support SLPs out in the field by offering supplemental services based upon the goals and objectives already established, as well as supporting the training of our future SLPs in such a unique clinical placement site. Conducting therapy in a controlled setting is quite different than the unpredictable environment of a barn, which is so good for developing clinical muscles!

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Incredible Strides



The children who attended the camp made incredible strides in a matter of days. Ms. Carver stated, "We experienced nothing short of a miracle for one little boy who has significant behavioral challenges, which are addressed in his IEP. He did not do well on Monday and unfortunately, due to unsafe behaviors exhibited, we had to ask Mom to take him home. His mother, who is an SLP, and I agreed that he could try again the next day but only if he could follow the rules. Mom reported that he saw himself on TV the next morning, and that was that! Not only did he come back, he successfully followed instructions, waited, cooperatively participated in group activities, and made transitions easily for four hours without any acting-out behaviors. He was a different kid! When I asked him if we would see him the next day, he said "You bet 'cha!" For the remainder of the week, he needed no more re-direction than his peers. His Mom cried, I cried, we all cried."



Indeed, I could not help but be moved as I witnessed the remarkable interaction between the children and their speech-language pathologists during their story-time.

Each child received both individualized and group therapy from licensed SLPs and graduate students under the supervision of Nadine Whiteman, Clinical Instructor in the Department of Speech and Hearing Sciences at OSU.



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Incredible Strides

Group therapy activities in nature



Why Horses Can Make an Impact



It's hard to think of a better motivator for a child than a horse. According to Ms. Carver, there isn't anything better for calming the autonomic system to prepare the body and mind for instruction than nature. Neural connections are being made in 3-D. You combine these ingredients, along with the expertise of SLPs who consistently practice at the top of their licensure, and you have a recipe for astonishing learner outcomes.



Future Goals of the Equine Therapy Program

Ms. Carver stated that using equine movement as a therapy tool is relatively new to the SLP scope of practice; therefore, as we expand our partnership with the Department of Speech and Hearing Sciences at The Ohio State University, we hope to conduct efficacious research on the effects of equine movement on motor speech disorders, such as stuttering and CAS. And this innovative therapy program falls within the SLP scope of practice in the state of Ohio.

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Future Goals of the Equine Therapy Program



I had an amazing experience at the camp. It was such an honor and a pleasure to see our profession in action and making a positive impact on children and their families. Thank you for having me out. I most definitely look forward to returning for a visit next year.



Meet the Team from left to right: Jackie Soler, M.A., CCC-SLP, Karen Carver, M.A., CCC-SLP, Christina Mneimne, M.A., CCC-SLP, OSU grad students, and Nadine Whiteman, M.A., CCC-SLP. Horses Jack and Lee.



Here is the link to the story a local NBC4 affiliate station did on the camp. <https://www.nbc4i.com/news/local-news/columbus/how-horses-are-helping-children-overcome-speech-language-disorders/>



Note: All information and photos appearing in this story were taken with permission and releases.