

RIDING

on the

AUTISM SPECTRUM

How Horses Open New Doors for Children with ASD



CLAUDINE
PELLETIER-MILET

One Teacher's Experiences Using EAAT
to Instill Confidence and Promote Independence

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for Children with ASD**

*One Teacher's Experiences Using EAAT to Instill
Confidence and Promote Independence*

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chapter 5

The Five Senses Bring Information

“An autistic baby cuts himself off from the world and has to invent other internal and external stimuli in order to build his own world, one in which he can try to be self-sufficient. In order to do this he has to cut himself off from all sensory perceptions.”

—Catherine Mathelin-Vanier

A child without autism exhibits the ability to combine and integrate a number of sensory modalities. He develops and consolidates his psychic body envelope through his sensory experiences, which in turn produce information about what is going on around him and record it in his brain. Sensory perception is, therefore, at the root of psychic development and leads to emotions and thoughts taking wing.

The sensory flow could be defined as a multitude of signals that are continuously systematized and arranged; the degree to which this succeeds in the educational process depends on the ability to concentrate and the amount of outside stimulation. A child left all day long by himself, perhaps confined to the same space, will receive less information and, therefore, absorb less than a child leading a fuller life exposed to a variety of people, places, and experiences.

An autistic child has too fragile a psychic envelope to allow anything

like this to take place. He adjusts badly to every situation: either he becomes too excited or does not respond at all. He cuts himself off from this continuum, turns in on himself, and creates his own modes of conduct that are not regulated by outside influences. He is too frightened of them and by other people to allow them entry.

In the end he is so occupied with putting his defenses in place, he is starved of the sensory experiences that in normal circumstances produce continual growth. The building blocks of emotions, perceptions, and relationships with other people are missing. He does not adjust to different situations and very often his behavior is inappropriate to the circumstances at that moment. He may show signs of overstimulation, or he may be like a light turned off without any connection to what is happening.

In her book, *Thinking in Pictures and Other Reports from My Life with Autism*, Temple Grandin, a Professor at Colorado State University and best-selling author who has high-functioning autism, talks about the vital importance of physical stimulation, such as strong pressures applied to various parts of the body, as well as different textures, when trying to persuade the damaged nervous system to repair itself and to build connections. She explains that an autistic child has a preference for sensations that originate close to home. The sense of touch, taste, and smell are at first the only ones he allows. Sight and hearing are delayed for later; hence, the almost magical effect of riding.

Once in the saddle the process of absorbing and handling information begins as an automatic and nonstop concomitant of what he is doing. Touch is there from the moment he is in the saddle, and he is soon aware of the associated warm horsey smells. Then he might become conscious of the sounds of the riding arena, and because it is a confined space, he notices the same objects and people as we circulate. This familiarity breeds confidence and removes anxiety: essential elements at all stages of progress.

I am there to put the child's thoughts into words and say what is attracting his attention, and this reinforces the learning process. As I described earlier, I also use gestures—they could be described as mime—to reinforce actions and ideas. It is worth pointing out that all my introductory riding

work with children and adults takes place at a walk. Only later do we go on to trot and canter, as I've mentioned, but never so soon that there could be any risk of causing anxiety. Total confidence is an absolute prerequisite; the child will make it clear to me, even if not by word of mouth, when he wants to move on to the next stage.

Hector

Hector came to me at two-and-a-half. He had severe ocular motor apraxia, a condition in which children often use head thrusts to move their eyes from left to right, producing muscular problems, showing particular difficulty with maintaining his equilibrium. For the first ten minutes in the saddle, he wobbled about without altogether losing his balance. Then he learned to regulate his movement with that of the pony and thereafter held himself up like any other child.

As with all the other children the pleasure Hector derived from riding was quite evident. These children often show a real sense of desire to advance, and these two elements are very much a part of developing new connections and circuits in the brain.

I am not saying that Hector is cured—there was, and still is, a malformation of the brain—but he went a long way to reequilibrate his balance and began to walk much better. When he came to me for the first time he couldn't even stand up. He was receiving other therapy outside my pony club and only rode, although he came regularly, during the holidays—so it is difficult to establish what made the greatest change. However, he must have ridden ten times and made swift progress—progress that had not disappeared when he came back the following spring.

Temple Grandin has said that since adults are still capable of producing new circuits, the experiences we have with children offers hope for them, as well. However, it is with children that progress is most noticeable, so as I discussed before, early diagnosis and identification of problems are vitally important.

The pony works its magic

From Day One the child finds himself absorbing sensory perceptions from his contact with the pony. At the same time I am allowed into their world. The pony stimulates them into adopting a good seat and good posture that, in turn, allows movement and observation to come into play. Hyperactivity visibly reduces and a sense of pleasure and a desire to make headway drives the learning curve. The pony and I are the vectors that allow the transmission of sensory perceptions. My aim, of course, is to establish permanent change, to put in place the building blocks that the child will have pleasure in arranging into his new self, a structure that is part of the surrounding world and not separated from it.

It need hardly be said that it is an exhausting business working with the children. At each day's end I feel I have given my all. It cannot be otherwise since the children are unable on their own to find the calm and security they need in order to receive sensory perceptions and integrate each new one in the fabric of their being—in other words, to put the building blocks together.

Whereas a normal child bonds with his mother and responds to basic needs like food and sleep, followed by a need to touch and be touched, parents of autistic children tell me that physical contact provokes tears, screams, or indifference. At the same time they appear to have a need to have their mother present. Steven for instance would burst into tears as soon as his mother left the room. Not being able to differentiate properly between his mother and himself, it was as if a part of his self left the room whenever she did. This demonstrates how sensitive he was but also that he had not at that point been able to integrate outside sensations in any meaningful way, let alone emotions, with his physical self. After his contact with the ponies, he dropped his defenses, allowing entry to new sensations and learning to put them in place.

My work with babies has been an enormous help. The autistic children, although older when they come to me, are still at a “baby stage” mentally, even when they are actually five or six years old; my familiarity and knowledge of babies and their problems has been an important part of my education.

SIGHT

Whenever we stop at some place we are inundated with information that is registered by our senses. We organize this information in the way that accords with our emotional state and our preoccupations at that time. We establish a relationship with the area, the objects that fill it, and the people that inhabit it. We store away information that will help us to relate to all this and enable us to decide what to do when something happens.

What we sense engages our physical and psychological makeup. Some situations will provoke panic and fear as well as physical reactions, such as sweating and trembling. On occasion, we feel we cannot cope or face up to these anxieties, and this reaction has some similarity to autism: we shut ourselves off, close down the hatches, and even burst into tears if the tension is more than we can bear.

Entering a new space

Temple Grandin describes how, when a “prey” animal comes into a new space, it looks all around. An autistic child also does this but with a strange characteristic: he does not move his head smoothly around, watching the surroundings appear and move slowly past, but instead his head jerks—almost imperceptibly—as he goes through the 360 degrees. Added to this, his head is usually turned upward (perhaps because mentally he is still very much a child and children have to look up at most things surrounding them).

These children have an incredible memory for the details of what they see and are disturbed by changes. Knowing this and also understanding how fearful they are, I point out any changes to them. Later on I will deliberately make changes and join in the experience of meeting them—though the children are always in a state of being comforted by the pony. Just consider the difference between a step in their learning process, such as I have described, and that of going to a doctor’s office—often a terrifying event, full of unfamiliar sights, sounds, smells, and people who look at them and ask questions. They become more and more anxious until they explode.

Autistic children are closer to the animal world

Temple Grandin's comparison with a prey animal is also interesting in that autistic children are, I am certain, closer to the animal world than we are. One theory even suggests that a child's first sight of a face—usually his mother's—is taken to be the face of an aggressor. However that may be, an autistic child remains entangled in this early primitive, archaic state, and for this reason, feels much more comfortable with animals than with people.

Being only too aware of how they perceive their new surroundings, I always encourage my riders to take them in by observing, listening, touching, and smelling.

A baby born without autism establishes landmarks at a very early stage by looking. He meets his mother's eyes, often as early as three months old, becomes aware of familiar faces, and takes in his surroundings. This does not take place with autistic children, and when they first come to me, they rarely focus on any particular thing. They tend to stare at what is taking place around them with the object of avoiding any intrusion into their private world. But whereas they cannot focus on a person's eyes, they have no problem in engaging the pony's eyes. The pony is not classed as part of the surrounding threat; it makes no demands, nor does it speak, and it produces an instant feeling of comfort and security by its gently rocking motion.

The horse is not seen as making demands: it neither speaks, looks, nor asks—it rocks and comforts

Didier Houzel shares the case of Anne: the first signs of a breakdown in communication with Anne were noticed at the age of only four months when she refused any eye contact, something that normally begins to take place at this age. Babies start meeting the eye at three or four months old, sometimes earlier, but autistic children do not take this step, rarely focusing on a particular object or person close by. They favor their peripheral vision and seem to take in everything that is taking place around them but at a distance.

Arnaud

Every morning, Arnaud followed the same procedure. He carefully studied his surroundings. Sometimes his interest was held by something that we might not even have noticed, and then he waved his arms. It took several years for him to communicate with the teachers and be willing to explore.

This year the association "Reeducation by Equitation" held its jamboree (games on ponies) at my riding facility. There were eighty-three participants, but if you include the officials and relatives, there were many more.

Arnaud sat silently in his nice riding outfit, tirelessly turning over his collection of security objects, head lowered but occasionally snatching furtive looks at what was going on around him. After taking it all in, piece by piece, until he had covered the whole area (but returning regularly to move his objects), he came to where we were saddling up the participants and repeated the same careful process: working from right to left, and taking everything in, frame by frame.

I deduce from this that Arnaud is not capable of taking in a new situation in its entirety. He has to do it in a defensive way, little by little, and only then is he confident enough to participate. And participate he did! After a shaky start during which he observed everything as through a stockade, he went on to have a wonderful day: he succeeded in participating, he mingled with other people, he proudly accepted his medal and his prize.

Give the child enough time

When I take an autistic child under my wing, I observe his way of registering his surroundings. If at first he can only do this while apparently withdrawing, I do not interfere. If he just wants to sit in the sand pit and trickle the sand through his fingers, so be it. My little riders show a preference for things that run like sand, revolve like big balls, and turn like wheels.

My approach takes this into account: large, colorful balloon balls are suspended around the arena in various places and at different heights. This

encourages the children to look, not only straight ahead, but upward and downward, and in front and behind them. It helps them to locate themselves in a space and to satisfy their desire to touch things by learning to move the pony where they can do this.

The importance of familiar and safe surroundings

The majority of the children seem hardly to notice either other people or items about them, but I can see their snatched glances as though they are trying to establish the boundaries and landmarks of their surroundings. Sometimes I think they appear not to be seeing enough, at other times too much, but whatever is happening, it is not long before they drop their defenses.

At my pony club the enclosed environment is very reassuring: everything has its place and function, and it does not spring surprises. This is so evident to observers that they often remark on the fact that it is not easy to tell the children with autism from those without. Autistic children have a natural riding ability with poise and balance, and a riding seat that is often better than that of my other riding students.

During a child's early development, it is thought that there are two forces at work: the first and most primitive is the visual awareness of surroundings before the child has actually focused on an object or person. This is thought to be important in that it helps the formation of physical reactions including alertness and body orientation. The second force, which comes into play a little later, appears to concern the visual cortex and explains the way a child of less than three months takes in his surroundings in snapshot form, moving from one to another. At about three months, these two forces integrate in such a way that the visual ability allows the child to place himself in his surroundings.

An autistic child has problems at this juncture: he has difficulty concentrating on a "snapshot," or for example, the eyes of another person, long enough to convert the experience into a building block—one that helps to integrate the information around him—and combine it with his own individual needs, responses, and reactions.

A child is usually able to respond to the outside world and the way in which he relates to his own being, but an autistic child cannot do this. His

reactions seem to have no connection with anything apparent; they are filled with anxiety, often surprising and sometimes violent. On his own he cannot reassure himself, so he requires the presence of an understanding adult who will take the child's dilemma seriously and try to deal with it.

Luigi

One of my little riders is Luigi, a three-year-old diagnosed with depression associated with having had a wet nurse. His parents live in Paris and were able to bring him to my riding school during summer vacation. As a result of his progress, he is now brought to me every week.

Luigi's main problem seemed to be concerned with food, and he had a particular horror of tomatoes. By chance my neighbor, who has a small farm, had given me some young tomato plants that I had planted next to the arena. After each session, I took Luigi to see the tomatoes that by this time were large, red, and delicious looking. I picked one and handed it to Luigi; although he took it in his hand he began to tremble all over. He really was frightened so I took the tomato back and handed it to his mother.

The next day we went back to see the tomatoes, and I invited Luigi to pick one and give it to his mother. He got as far as picking it before dropping it like a hot potato. The next day we repeated our visit to the tomatoes, and his fear had evaporated.

I have no idea why Luigi had this fear: perhaps it was that the color red reminded him of fire? (On the other hand, I have noticed that autistic children are usually attracted to red: they prefer a red carpet to any other; they prefer a red helmet, and they choose red balls to play with, whereas my other students will usually choose a softer color like yellow.) Whatever the reason, Luigi now happily eats tomatoes. He trusted me and followed me. No doubt there are other circumstances and objects that terrify him whereas we would find them of no importance.

Because an autistic child believes that the world is full of frightening events and people, he refuses to look at anything directly. It has been sug-

gested by some psychologists that these children are at the mercy of a primitive and elemental force that has not been modified by experience.

Lucien

Lucien provided me with an example of this characteristic: when he was five, we were about to set off for an excursion in the woods, and he grabbed one of the toy sponge lances that the children use for their pretend tournaments on horseback. In his confused language he mumbled, "Dinosaurs." Even though it was not easy for him to ride and hold it at the same time, I let him keep the lance because I understood that he had a deep psychological need of it.

Just as when my baby riders say they are frightened of wolves, I spoke to him in a calm, encouraging voice, telling him that we are not going to see any dinosaurs and that dinosaurs are frightened of ponies, anyway. If we did meet one, I told him, he would be much stronger, mounted on his pony. The dinosaurs were conquered and subsequently we had the same success with a dragon. I am convinced that our adventures in the woods together were an important element in eliminating these anxieties.

The pony gives the child a feeling of strength

My little riders are soon able to look at their surroundings without panic. On horseback, they can be persuaded to feel stronger than the supposed terror. They are conscious of the pony's strength and soon they take the step of understanding that these fears come from inside themselves and are not real. During this process they are constantly supported and reassured by me. On horseback, they feel the strength of the pony, and this becomes a greater reality than the imagined fears from the outside.

Steven

Steven has a love of nature: he always grasps my hand when I point at something for us to look at, whether the soaring trees or a little ants' nest at the base of a tree.

All activities at my riding club center around the animals. The children rub shoulders with a reassuring world that seems to connect with their needs. They can at last separate themselves from their security objects. Before they met the ponies, they gave so much weight to their primitive world that they could not take the vital step of integrating with the new experiences of everyday life. The animals provide the stepping stone.

Leon

When he first arrived, Leon would sit on a sofa and endlessly turn over his collection of objects. Then he began to take an interest in what was going on. He has good powers of observation, and soon he was leaving his objects and wandering about, only returning occasionally to check on them. After the session, he appeared distinctly calmer.

The importance of facial expressions

At four months old, most babies are meeting an adult's eyes. I am used to exchanging long looks with the babies in my program, and I have learned the importance at this stage of their development to avoid making expressions that might alarm them.

Babies also stare at objects and into the eyes of the pony, but autistic children do not make this vital leap without help. I sometimes use a mirror as an intermediary stage: once they have learned to accept the sight of themselves on horseback, they can begin looking at objects and other people more easily.

It is often a long process and you cannot rush this stage. If you do, you risk creating panic attacks in which the information "from outside" becomes jumbled. The child finds suddenly that he cannot relate the information either to himself or to other sources. They become merely alarm signals, and his only way of coping is to shut down the hatches or have a hysterical outburst.

If I am worried about moving too fast, I accompany my little charges, walking alongside the pony and, from time to time, exchanging glances. This will often lead to bursts of laughter, and occasionally I use mimicry to

encourage the jollity, as well as pretending to hide my facial expressions. The child soon gets the idea and copies me. This little game has an important lesson to teach, that of permanence. People and objects still exist even when they are hidden from view. If they are stationary they will reappear in the same position; if moving, with reasonable provisos, they will be in the position they would have held if eyes had remained open.

Once again I must emphasize that things must not be rushed. The environment and the activities must essentially remain stable without too many changes too quickly; you must not disturb the child's habits abruptly. For several months the child must be left with the same familiar boundaries and then, you can slowly extend them. He has to be kept in the realms of the "possible," otherwise you risk seeing them retreat and furious outbursts will probably result.

Just as autistic children notice details that we hardly think important, so things we feel relevant wash over them without remark. For this reason each step we take must be logical and absolutely clear, and when repeated, in the same clear, logical way. This idea of clarity and consequence needs to be instilled in them: they need what we would call "good sense," but not in a Pavlovian way of conditioned response. We have to help them live in the real world.

Lucien

Lucien was at first fascinated by plastic objects, and I have a whole basket of these for the babies to play with. Lucien fished them out and turned them around in his hands until I decided to remove the basket in order to capture his attention. It was no good: he was furious and even refused to get on the pony, so I put the basket back in its usual place and my little rider returned.

I realized that this basket represented some primitive need that reassured the child so I would have to separate Lucien from these desired objects before we could make progress—and this is exactly what subsequently happened. He no longer needs the basket.

Lucas

When Lucas arrived for the first time he paid no attention to me at all but dived into the tack room, where he went about touching and sniffing the walls, the saddles, and harness.

It is a common enough characteristic among people with autism—both children and adults—that sight has to be associated with touch and even smell.

SMELL

Of all the senses the means by which we smell is closest to the brain. A curious characteristic of this sense is that it goes straight into long-term memory, and it is thought that this is to do with being a primitive form of communication. My pony club is not only a haven of different smells but autistic people rely on this sense more intensely than other people. As we have seen, they often smell objects and indeed people and places, in the process of recognition. It is well known that when people are anxious they give off a special odor. This odor might not be picked up by most of us but is more likely to be by an autistic person; it may transmit a feeling of fear, thereby reinforcing his wish to retreat or shut himself in. It is the same with animals who often rely on smell to differentiate between other animals.

Smell is not the best researched or understood sense. Only fairly recently was it discovered that babies a few days old can distinguish between the smell given off by material belonging to their mother's clothes and those of another woman. It is even thought that a fetus is aware of smells after six months' gestation. Premature babies born at this point have olfactory systems sufficiently developed to recognize the smell of mint and, in the case of full-term newborn babies, different smells can affect the breathing and heart rhythm. Most mothers will find that their baby is calmed by their smell, and this can be an aid to getting the child to go to sleep. I have observed that some autistic adults need to smell their horses before mounting.

Luigi

When I first held a small fir branch to Luigi's nose he pushed it away, but then he put his face so close to mine that our noses touched. I repeated this action a few times, and the next time Luigi and I met, he was holding a small fir branch. He had also acquired a small grooming brush that he obviously enjoyed sniffing, and at the end of the session he took it home.

The pony's smell, transmitted by means of the brush, forms an important link between the rider, the horse, and the pony club's surroundings. It need hardly be said that the club is a paradise of smells: hay, straw, the feed, the horses themselves, their droppings and their urine, the leather of the saddles and other tack, the saddle soap, and hoof oil for treating horses' feet. We have seen that autistic people are more conscious of smells than other people, so we can appreciate what an important role the smells play in giving them a sense of security and familiarity, and establishing markers. They are for me as well: the other day my apprentice chose to wash down one of the ponies with an apple-scented soap. I was appalled by this because it did not agree with my idea of how this pony should smell! Nature provides a battery of smells and I try to make use of this in my work.

Steven

During my rambles through the woods with Steven, we routinely passed under a pine tree that hung over the path. One day I picked a small branch from the pine, raised it to my nose, inhaled and gave it to him. He copied my action: it was as though he had newly discovered what he could achieve with his sense of smell. For the rest of the day he kept hold of the little branch and from time to time gave it back to me to smell. I noticed that he frequently had an appreciative sniff himself, and from that moment he has found pleasure in discovering lots of different smells that he can distinguish. His family has joined in the fun by pointing out lots of new smells and scents in the garden and around the house. This has opened a new sensory world for Steven; now on our walks he points excitedly toward a tree whose scent he knows.

This incident has a interesting parallel in the advice given by Françoise Dolto, "If you want to bring life to a baby who appears even to ignore a smile, wave a large leaf or that of any simple household plant, in front of his eyes, and you will see his features transformed with a smile and his lungs expanding with deep breaths. There will be a reaction, an exchange, that you may not have witnessed until now."

I encourage my autistic children to expand their repertoire of smells with those of plants, the ponies, and their surroundings. I use the sense of smell to create markers in order to give them a feeling of security and to become more aware of the differences that exist in the world. They also learn that the smell of the pine tree is "up there." And the smell of the grooming brush is waiting for him "over there" when he returns to the club; it is also the instrument with which he takes care of another living being.

It is recognized that a human being's smell presents a threat to an autistic person. An autistic child creates a protective shell that he can be said to share with the pony, that is also very sensitive to smells. One could even suppose the smell of horses and all the contents of the pony club help to conceal human smells: they create an olfactory environment that gives a feeling of security.

TASTE

Taste is not the sense that is directly engaged in the healing process; it could be considered the sense that is least thought about. Nevertheless, it can be seen to have a role. Autistic children often experience difficulty in eating certain foods and tend to stick to quite a narrow selection. However, by watching the pony eat I have found that they become more willing to expand the choice of foods they are willing to try.

Taste is closely allied to smell. After each excursion we stop near my vegetable garden and when the season permits, the children feed the ponies carrots while at the same time having a nibble themselves. In summer I encourage them to eat the strawberries and raspberries, which they adore. I am in the process of expanding my garden so that the children can increase the number of tastes they can experience.

TOUCH

“Tactile stimulation and tender caresses can help to encourage normal development in an autistic child. Children can be taught little by little to accept the comforting effect of touch. All children need this and especially autistic children,” says Temple Grandin. She considered man’s relationship with the horse to be a privilege.

Touch is our most primitive sense and exists over the entire surface of the body. It can detect heat and cold, shape and texture. It is the principal vehicle of the sensations we receive and of our contact with others.

The pony enables the child to learn to accept touching

A newborn foal seeks security and learns to communicate by touching its mother. The foal adores caresses and is therefore the perfect instrument for teaching the autistic child to accept the pleasures of touch. However, this does not happen right away. The softness and warmth of the pony’s flesh feels foreign and uncomfortable to the touch. The best solution to kick-starting the physical bond between the child and the pony is to lift the child into the saddle and to set off at a walk. Once in the saddle the child’s seat is “anchored” to the pony but through the thickness of the saddle, which allows it to be tolerated.

As I have already mentioned, I use Western saddles on my ponies and horses to provide extra support and security. Both my baby riders and autistic students seem to find a hard surface more agreeable because it establishes the limits of their body, at least in one direction. This contact is increased both by the horse’s and the rider’s movement. It is a transitional state to accepting the softness of direct contact with the pony.

The importance of hands

Françoise Dolto often emphasizes the importance of hands: they are the means of contact; they manipulate objects; they introduce the concept of communication through the help of objects; they develop the use of gestures and control over the immediate environment. The number of markers defining a child’s field of action increases, especially when these are

accompanied by words describing their action.

Babies' hands start by grasping whatever is close enough in order to put it into their mouth (hoping, perhaps, that everything in life is edible). Soon hands become the means of gathering objects, throwing them away, gathering them again. In fact, they take over as the main means of controlling the childrens' environment.

When the autistic child first begins to use his hands to explore, he uses only the tips of his fingers: his gestures are minimal, lacking in amplitude, and merely brush the surface of an object. Often they are stereotypical, repeated gestures with no apparent control.

Arriving at the point of caressing the pony marks an important stage in a child's progress. He has dared to experience something that is soft, warm, and alive. As I've mentioned, autistic children seem to have a penchant for hard plastic objects, particularly plastic play balls. On the one hand these objects are what they use for their repetitive stereotypical actions, and on the other, they help to define the limits of their body. It could be said that the repetitive actions are constantly repeating this definition and therefore bring some sense of security.

In his book *L'Énigme des Enfants Autistes* (The enigma of autistic children), Denys Ribas gives us the example of Lili to illustrate this preoccupation with hard surfaces, "When Lili takes part in a riding session she has no hesitation in entering the pony's stall and saddling it," he writes. "She is fascinated by the ponies and explores their body with her hands. She rather worries my colleagues by her fixation on the pony's hooves, its gums and teeth, all of which she feels repeatedly with the tips of her fingers."

When I have a new child at my club I observe him very carefully to see which objects or tactile sensations bring comfort: some children may respond more to hard objects, some to firm pressure. When I have established this I seek to enlarge the field and introduce soft pressure. I might stroke the palm of their hands or place their hand on the pony's soft coat while they are moving along, because the motion in itself has a calming effect. This stage is a kind of desensitizing that leads to rubbing and grooming. We know that repetitive action brings comfort, and the pony's regular movement provides this par excellence.

One day a seven-year-old was screaming and flailing about until we put him in the saddle. The wild behavior stopped abruptly, and when we started trotting, he gave me a long concentrated look. It might be worth saying at this juncture that the look of an autistic child when he accepts eye-to-eye contact is almost unnerving; it can be so penetrating as to completely unsettle you.

It is of course not uncommon for uncontrolled behavior to begin again as soon as the pony stops. It is the gentle rhythmic repeated motion that is the most powerful doctor. At first the act of stopping seems to give the children the feeling that they have been destroyed or lost their bearings.

In my experience there has been only one autistic individual—an adult—who absolutely refused to come into any contact with a horse, contact that would have allowed him to accept awareness of the “other,” the world around him. All that can be said is that we were at least able to bring the horse quite close to him when we were trying to get him into the saddle.

The incident reminded me of Donna Williams in her book *Nobody Nowhere: the Remarkable Autobiography of an Autistic Girl*, where she says, “Any physical contact produced a crushing sensation as if I were falling into a black hole with an irresistible magnetic force, in which I was losing my identity, being swallowed, eaten alive, or swept away by a huge wave.”

As you have seen in this chapter, the sensation of touch helps to forge an awareness of whatever surrounds the person. It could be said to “create” the surroundings because before the process begins, the autistic child hardly acknowledges them: he refuses to accept the existence of what is around him. Contact with the horse leads to an improvement in posture, followed by the beginnings of emotional awareness. Objects become a reality that can be mastered. The children learn to pick up a broom and to use it to sweep out the pony's stall, and to push the wheelbarrow and use it for its purpose, taking away the horse droppings from the stall, for instance, or transporting bags of grain or hay bales.

Naturally, all five standard senses are vitally important, but if one of them or more is lacking, or cannot be developed, there are the sixth and even seventh senses that we are aware of, which can come to the res-

cue: an awareness of self and a sense of balance. Some neuroscientists consider these two senses the *anchor of identity*. The awareness of self brings together the unconscious mechanisms that keep the body balanced, thanks to the combined workings of vision and muscular activity. Autistic children can have this anchor provided the environment and their activities favor the building up of their sense of identity.

HEARING

Of all the senses, this is possibly the one that produces the most acute reactions. An autistic child is hypersensitive to particular noises, and seems to be unaware of others. Volume has nothing to do with which noise gets through to him and which does not. Of the ones he notices he has to pinpoint their position and fit them into the other markers that describe a familiar environment—just as very young children do.

Autistic children usually shy away from noises that are directly in front of them, so the riding teacher's voice should come from either side or behind, only rarely from in front. Daniel Tammet said in *Born on a Blue Day*, "I used to find it very difficult taking in noises around me, and I would regularly put my hands over my ears in order to blot them out and concentrate." All people filter the information and noises that surround them,

The sound envelope

Just as we talk about a "psychic body envelope" (see p. 12), so we also use the expression "sound envelope." We all hear sounds in complicated ways. Sometimes we filter out those we don't want to hear or concentrate on those we do. We hear some sounds combined with vibrations—who has not heard a car pass by with loud music accompanied by the throb of bass? And, we hear sounds that result from something we are doing, such as dragging our fingernails across a pane of glass, knocking something over, slamming a door, pushing a wheelbarrow across gravel, or walking on creaky floorboards.

so it is hardly surprising that those with autism do the same, but in their own special way.

Julie

Julie, sixteen months old, stares into the woods. She has heard the distant barking of dogs pursuing a wild boar. On the other hand, she pays no attention to the loud noise of a machine that is clearing the brush from only yards away.

I always try to get my young riders to listen to the sounds in the woods: when the church bells ring out nearby, they talk about bird songs. Before the age of two to three years old, church bells are not part of their repertoire. However, the background noise of the pony club, including the teachers' voices as they speak to the children or the horses, is a constant that gives them the feeling of stability they need. Over this familiar hum they can pick out all the individual sounds of human voices, the neighing of the horses, bird songs, shouts, the sound of someone crying, but mostly the sound of laughter, music, footsteps, and the natural sounds of wind, rain, and thunder. Just occasionally they might be aware of moments of quietness.

My belief is that whereas sight and hearing are the most useful senses for most people, here at the pony club it is touch, smell, and sight that reign supreme. For this reason I am very careful about my bearing, about how I show emotion and affection, about the tone of my voice and my choice of words. I behave exactly as I do with very small children: I do not rely on the artifices of normal modes of communication; I feel I get back to a more primitive, but a purer mode.

You should try it! I am always calm and I use simple words that describe objects and a situation in the most direct way possible. Before I am accepted into the private world of my little riders, I never look at them directly but speak to one side. Right at the start, I often do not speak at all; I just walk quietly beside them and wait for them to make the first move.