

**T**eachers Don't Always Have Two Legs...

## Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy

By Samantha J. Loy, C.G.S.  
Christian Children's Home of Ohio

**Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) is a cognitive, behavioral approach to therapy, and is being proven to work more effectively than many other forms of rehabilitation. In EAP the horse is employed as the therapy assistant. The client is on horseback only for specific exercises and is always supervised. Each session is unique due to individual horse and human characteristics. EAP is dynamically effective in working with "at-risk" youth and their families, as well as with the physically and/or mentally disabled, the chronically ill, and other groups or individuals who have undergone trauma.**



At the Christian Children's Home of Ohio (CCHO), we provide services for poverty-stricken youth and children who have been severely neglected and abused physically, emotionally, and sexually. Some of our children have physical or mental illnesses, and have been abandoned and undergone debilitating trauma.

"Reins for Life" is a treatment program we offer to the children in our residential center and to the community. "Reins for Life" is an animal-assisted therapeutic approach to helping individuals to process their feelings and behaviors through the utilization of horses. Our objective is to help our clients deal with the issues from their past and help equip them for their future. The setting provided for the therapy is less threatening than a face-to-face session with a therapist in an office.

With the mission of *bringing healing to hurting children and families in His name*, CCHO began with vision and faith in 1969 when local Christians saw a need for a home to serve needy children in a family-style setting. They organized the ministry and purchased a 175-acre farm just north of Wooster, Ohio. Over the years, cottages and programs have been added.

Now CCHO is a campus that has five large cottages for "at risk" children; a spacious Worship & Retreat Center that also hosts leadership conferences and retreats; an out-patient counseling center; foster care and adoption offices, a restored nineteenth-century barn that is the base for "Reins for Life", a NEW indoor riding arena; and Poplar Ridge Adventures— a "state-of-the-art" ropes confidence course with a 50-foot climbing tower.

We provide the support to allow children to work on issues and problems while living in a loving and functional family system. Our residential center provides a structured environment to meet the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual needs of each child. Our direct care staff along with licensed therapists gives the physical and emotional support necessary for a child to heal. CCHO prepares the child and family for reunification or alternative placement through our foster care and adoption network.

The children we serve need to find a non-destructive outlet to their anger and frustration. They need to learn how to trust again, and how to build communicative and loving relationships. I was walking into one of our cottages last year, when a teenaged girl was sitting outside on the porch. She was smiling from ear to ear, and she looked at me proudly and said she was waiting on her mom who was coming to visit her! Three hours later I walked by and she was still sitting there, still waiting on her mom who never came. Only this time she wasn't smiling. She never even looked up.

This girl, with whom I eventually became friends and since mentored, now spends every night in the barn feeding 'her' horse, Charlie Girl. Charlie Girl also lost her daughter (filly) this past year. The vet couldn't save her although he tried for hours. Together girl and horse forged a bond that helped them both heal.

The unconditional love horses give enhances the learning of skills such as communication, responsibility, compassion and self-discipline. Horses experience a variety of emotions, and deliver immediate feedback that is observable to the client. They are sensitive to nonverbal stimulus and provide valuable and visible lessons in nonverbal communication and body language. As social beings, horses are able to deliver insight into group roles and dynamics.

At the Christian Children's Home of Ohio, we take horses that are unwanted, too. I think that helps some of the children to initially feel like they have something in common with the animal. After introducing Jacks, a horse with one brown eye and one blue eye, a girl new to CCHO reached up to touch his mane and said, "It's okay Jacks, nobody wants me either".

"Reins for Life" is designed to address the needs of its clients in a challenging, accepting, supportive and Christian environment, and is deliberate to stop the cycle of abuse by assisting youth, their families, and other groups in facing difficult issues and in forming trusting relationships now and in the future.

We had a boy that spent 12 years in a wheelchair, being laughed at and ridiculed because he was different, making him angry and bitter. When he came to CCHO, he finally found a friend... a horse named Annie that eventually became his BEST friend. The first time he got up on Annie was a miracle. With her help - he didn't need his wheelchair. With her help, he said he felt like *he* was walking. Annie gave him a reason to go on... she gave him hope.

We *can* make a difference, whether it's helping a child to feel accepted, helping them heal, or working with a client on their motor skills and helping them to develop what they *are* capable of doing. We can make a difference just by helping them learn to trust again and Love – even if that's a word that they've never heard before.

**Please help us sustain "Reins for Life".** We're working for child and animal abuse prevention. If you believe in Horses Helping Humans you believe in "Reins for Life". Please view our webpage and consider making a donation online at [www.ccho.org](http://www.ccho.org).

