



## Horse Riding Therapy Centre

*The Horse Riding Therapy Centre is located on Intact Special School (ISS) campus. The children at ISS are provided with horse riding therapy, which is excellent physical therapy for children with disabilities. Many of the children come out of their shell when they are with the horses and for some it is the only time that they speak and laugh.*



The Horse riding therapy unit is part of ISS where children in the age group of 5–14 years with different types of intellectual disabilities and associated problems receive training and education. In January 2010, Intact EQ a unit of the Swedish organisation Intacts Vänner introduced hippo therapy to the school. During 2013, 14 children benefited from hippo therapy.

### A Child's Story

Danapal is from Kaliampatti, a village 50 km north west of Tiruchirapalli. He is diagnosed with autism most likely due to a consanguineous marriage. Danapal was brought to Intact Special School at the age 5 by his parents. He was found to have severe autism with behavioural problems such as howling, drooling, irresponsive to verbal calls, attention deficit, hyperactivity, lack of social interaction skills, reduced fine motor skills, just to mention a few. In 2012 he was referred to horse riding therapy and the training has brought about great progress with his posture, balance and behaviour. He is now happier, responsive and on a path of progress



### The Horses

There are two ponies in the centre: Koko trained in therapy riding who has been with the horse riding therapy centre for 5 years and Jerry, a new addition that is being broken in.

### Hippo therapy

Hippo therapy is a form of physiotherapy where the horse is used as a tool and includes treatment seated on horseback, training on the horse and the environment around the horse. The characteristic movement of a horse provides carefully graded motor and sensory input to the child and has shown to improve neurological functions and sensory processing considerably.

### Beneficiaries

The children who are selected for therapy have diagnoses such as Cerebral Palsy, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and autism. With children who have ADHD, for example, keeping them active calms them and reduces their frustration and anger. Hippo therapy has shown to create calmness and order and they respond very positively to the therapy.

### Hippo therapy sessions:

Sessions are conducted 4 days a week. Fridays are used for evaluation and documentation. A hippo therapy session consists of several different elements. Every child receives 30 minutes of therapy at least twice a week.

During a day, 6 students go together with a volunteer, physiotherapist and a special educator to the stable. While one child is in a session, the other children either sit alongside or groom the other horse together with a teacher while waiting for their turn.

The session begins with fitting and putting on the riding helmet. Safety procedures are carefully followed throughout the session. The child starts by brushing the



horse and combing its mane and tail. The physiotherapist guides the movements when necessary, but the idea is that the child works independently. Children with attention problems count while brushing to maintain structure. After brushing it's time to clean the horse's hooves. The child selects the hoof, lifts it and cleans under it with the help of a hoof pick to remove the dirt. It requires high coordination and precision and the position is balance-intensive.

The next activity is to lead the horse during a shorter walk. Usually 2 laps around a smaller area and across the paddock, approximately 300 metres. More difficult training is given by using cones to go zig-zag. Some of the children sit on the horse when it is stationary, using a saddle pad (a piece of cloth) strapped around the horse's stomach with handles to hold on to, instead of a saddle. Exercises carried out on horseback are, to let go of one or both hands, clapping on both sides of the horse's neck, leaning forward and backward, raising their arms and lifting their arms out from the body and reaching for balls or rings.

All treatment is individual and determined based on the child's capability and needs. Usually the horse is handled by one person and the other person supports and supervises the child. The whole riding part is conducted while walking, the slowest horse gait which transfers multi-dimensional movement as input to the rider. It is a very specific motion treatment. With the

help of this, the child gets training in postural and master control, torso rotation, abduction and extension of the legs (which has a positive impact on the usual spasticity of the abductor muscles in children with CP), equilibrium reactions, balance etc. Children also train their concentration, coordination and social contact skills.

## Results

Children have positive experiences. The children learn to care for horses, remember names and distinguish between them. They get better at fine motor skills and several children experience improved balance and walking ability. Muscular strength improves. Stiffness gets better, resulting in better movements of limbs and joints. Students with CP get better coordination, particularly when caring for the horses since fine motor skills are trained. Children get improved dexterity to write, since their ability to grip, grab and hold a pencil with proper composure improves. They show improvements in postural control, both seated and standing. The students have a more upright stance and they tend to shed some of their excess weight through hippo therapy sessions. Children get improved ability to shape sounds, words and to raise their voice. Several children have conversations with the horses during hippo therapy.

Hippo therapy is used as motivation amplifier which is used to enhance the performance of students. If a student has low motivation to perform a task, the teacher is able to lure the child with hippo therapy, which has shown to be very effective in motivating the students.

## About Intact

Intact, a non-profit, charity organisation, was established in 1992 by Thomas Ebenezer who, by helping those in need of food, shelter and a sense of security, is living his dream.

Intact works to empower marginalised individuals in society, with focus on people with physical and intellectual disabilities, mountain tribes and poor women, by creating opportunities for independent living.

We want to achieve a society where everyone, regardless of caste, ethnicity, gender, religion, colour and ability is accepted and given equal opportunities to develop to their full potential – without discrimination.

