

# American Hippotherapy Association, Inc.



"Treatment with the Help of the Horse"

**Updated October 21, 2018**

Dear Members of the Media,

Thank you for your interest in publishing or presenting information relative occupational therapy, physical therapy or speech language pathology services that include hippotherapy.

The American Hippotherapy Association is a 501 C 3 Non-profit organization, which provides educational resources and continuing education courses for occupational therapy, physical therapy and speech language pathology professionals who incorporate equines, equine movement and the equine environment in treatment. The AHA Inc. believes that individuals in need of habilitation or rehabilitation are best served by skilled and licensed healthcare professionals. As such, AHA Inc. is unique in that we are the only organization in the United States whose focus is on educating licensed healthcare professionals on therapy services incorporating equines.

To support professional and responsible journalism and to promote the accurate and consistent sharing of information relative to occupational therapy, physical therapy and speech language pathology services that incorporate equines and equine movement (hippotherapy), we have summarized some key points for your review. We encourage you to familiarize yourself with this document if publishing information on topics related to hippotherapy.

**What is hippotherapy?** The term hippotherapy refers to how occupational therapy, physical therapy and speech-language pathology professionals use evidence-based practice and clinical reasoning in the purposeful manipulation of equine movement as a therapy tool to engage sensory, neuromotor and cognitive systems to promote functional outcomes.

Best practice dictates that occupational therapy, physical therapy and speech-language pathology professionals integrate hippotherapy into the patient's plan of care, along with other therapy tools and/or strategies.

Simply put, hippotherapy refers to the use of equine movement (the movement of the horse) as a treatment tool within occupational therapy, physical therapy or speech language pathology treatment.

The term hippotherapy originates from the Greek word, "hippos" meaning horse (or equine), and roughly translates as "treatment with the help of the horse".

When including hippotherapy in treatment, therapists carefully select horses for their clients, based on their temperament, movement and confirmation. The movement of the horse is then carefully and purposefully manipulated to impact the client. In addition, skilled and licensed therapists use various developmental positions to further enhance this movement. Hippotherapy is combined with other standard therapy tools/strategies in an intervention plan designed to address the treatment needs of the client.



## **What qualifies a professional to include hippotherapy in treatment?**

In order to use hippotherapy in treatment, one must be a licensed therapist who has completed continuing education in the inclusion of horses and equine movement (hippotherapy) in treatment. Licensed occupational therapy, physical therapy and speech language pathology professionals may include equines/hippotherapy in treatment when working within their scope of practice. This has long been recognized by the American Occupational Therapy Association, the American Physical Therapy Association and the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association.

Licensed therapy professionals in occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech-language pathology are legally bound to follow the mandates of their state licensure, their codes of ethics, and their practice act. They are required to obtain professional continuing education, such as that offered by the American Hippotherapy Association.

Therapists can seek training in how to safely and effectively include hippotherapy within their practice through continuing education. Therapists may then choose to pursue board certification in the inclusion of hippotherapy in treatment from the American Hippotherapy Certification Board.

The American Hippotherapy Association published Best Practice Statements for therapists who include hippotherapy in treatment in 2015.

## **How does hippotherapy differ from horseback riding and adaptive/therapeutic riding?**

Horseback riding is a recreational activity with the rider controlling the horse. When referring to horseback riding lessons for individuals with special needs, AHA, Inc. recommends the use of the term adaptive riding, in place of therapeutic riding. This term more accurately describes the activity, being consistent with other activities such as adaptive skiing, adaptive basketball, and adaptive swimming. Adaptive riding is a riding lesson adapted for individuals with special needs taught by horseback riding instructors. This activity is recreationally based and goals may address leisure, education, socialization, competition in the sport, and fitness. It is not the goal of the instructor to rehabilitate, but rather to improve riding skills and quality of life through participation in an enjoyable activity.

Therapy with a licensed occupational therapy, physical therapy or speech language pathology professional that incorporates equines/hippotherapy differs greatly from riding lessons for individuals with special needs. Therapy services require medical necessity and are highly regulated. The therapist may choose to include hippotherapy in treatment based on their clinical reasoning/experience, the best available research and client or patient values. The purpose of including hippotherapy in treatment varies depending on the therapist and treatment goals.



## Terms to avoid in your publication:

- Hippotherapist (or related terms such as equine therapist, horse therapist etc.)
- Equine therapy/equine therapist/horse therapy/horse therapist (refer to the type of therapy that is happening instead, based on the therapist's license i.e. physical therapy incorporating hippotherapy).
- Terms that refer to hippotherapy as "magic" (the inclusion of hippotherapy in treatment supported by research and is an evidence-based practice when utilized within occupational therapy, physical therapy and speech therapy)
- Alternative therapy/treatment (Hippotherapy is not an alternative treatment. It is a treatment tool that can be utilized by occupational therapy, physical therapy and speech language pathology professionals).
- Rider (when an individual is receiving therapy on or off a horse, we refer to them as a patient or client. Since hippotherapy is not a riding lesson, and the client is not learning horseback riding skills, the term "rider" is not accurate)

## Other key points:

- ★ Hippotherapy is not a separate type of therapy. Patients are receiving occupational, physical, or speech therapy (depending on the licensed professional who they are seen by). They are working functional therapy goals, not horseback riding skills. The outcome measure for the patient is a change in functional independence across environments.
- ★ Clients who receive occupational therapy, physical therapy or speech language pathology services must demonstrate medical necessity- therapy is not a recreational activity.
- ★ Healthcare services incorporating horses are highly regulated. This differs from therapeutic or adaptive riding lessons, which have little to no oversight or regulation, and are not provided by licensed therapists.
- ★ The use of hippotherapy in occupational therapy, physical therapy or speech language pathology treatment is well supported within the research and falls within evidenced based practice.
- ★ Occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech therapy incorporating hippotherapy is a medical treatment and may be billed to third parties for reimbursement. Therapy is commonly covered within health insurance plans. A small number of private insurers have exclusion policies related to the inclusion of animals or hippotherapy within treatment.
- ★ Horses selected for use in physical, occupational or speech therapy must meet specific selection criteria regarding movement quality, temperament, and training. The health, wellness, soundness and temperament of the horse are a critical component. Skilled handling of the horse is critical.

For your additional references, you may wish to reference the following documents and websites:

- [www.americanhippotherapyassociation.org](http://www.americanhippotherapyassociation.org)
- [www.hippotherapycertification.org](http://www.hippotherapycertification.org)
- Research related to hippotherapy: Bibliography
- Position on the use of hippotherapy in treatment in the U.S.
- Terminology document (includes definitions as well as terms to avoid)

# American Hippotherapy Association, Inc.



*"Treatment with the Help of the Horse"*

- Letter from American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) about hippotherapy
- Letter from American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) about hippotherapy
- Letter from American Speech-language Hearing Association (ASHA) about hippotherapy

Our hope through sharing this information is to improve the accuracy of information shared through media and the press at large. Should you desire to pursue additional information, or to request a statement, please contact the American Hippotherapy Association office. Thank you for your time in reviewing this information. We appreciate you taking the time to feature occupational therapy, physical therapy or speech language pathology services that include hippotherapy in your publication.

Sincerely,

American Hippotherapy Association Inc.