

*Prancing Horse, Inc*  
*Center for Therapeutic Horseback Riding*

# Volunteer Manual



Professional Association of Therapeutic  
Horsemanship International

Prancing Horse Therapeutic Riding Center is proud to be the only  
PATH (Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship)  
Premier Accredited Center in the Sandhills area.

# Welcome to Prancing Horse!

Dear Volunteer,

Thank you for your interest in volunteering with Prancing Horse Therapeutic Riding. Volunteers are a vital part of our program! We could not offer these very beneficial services to our riders without you!

Therapeutic riding uses equine-oriented activities for the purpose of contributing positively to the cognitive, physical, emotional and social well being of people with disabilities. The benefits range from improving coordination to bettering self-esteem and confidence. By volunteering, YOU can help our riders gain such benefits!

For those of you not familiar with Prancing Horse, it has been in operation since 1984. Prancing Horse was founded by Ronnie Meltzer who served as Executive Director for many years. In addition to providing therapeutic riding lessons to a number of private riders, we also serve special needs classrooms within the Moore County School System.

Please read through the volunteer manual and feel free to ask any questions. All volunteers must attend an orientation session prior to volunteering at Prancing Horse. The training takes roughly 2 hours. Even if you have been volunteering for years, it's always a good idea to catch a refresher course at our public volunteer orientation, held at least twice a year. If you have any questions, contact us by email: [prancinghorseinfo@yahoo.com](mailto:prancinghorseinfo@yahoo.com), or by phone at 910-246-3202.

Your contributions of time, talent, and treasure are hugely appreciated, and without you the Prancing Horse program could not function.

**THANK YOU!**

Sincerely,

Judy Lewis  
Executive Director

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## Meet the Prancing Horse Team

### Prancing Horse Therapeutic Riding Professionals

Judy Lewis, *Executive Director*; [prancinghorsecenter@yahoo.com](mailto:prancinghorsecenter@yahoo.com)

Lynn Rudnick, *Volunteer Coordinator*; [lfneedy@aol.com](mailto:lfneedy@aol.com)

Susan Price, *PATH Certified Instructor and Equine Specialist*; [info@prancing-horse.org](mailto:info@prancing-horse.org) Claire

Pollard *PATH Certified Instructor*; [prancinghorseinfo@yahoo.com](mailto:prancinghorseinfo@yahoo.com)

### Prancing Horse Therapeutic Riding Board of Directors

Lisa Blythe

Nancy Schoephoester

Chris Nazario

Barabara Saul

Nancy Piscopo

Kathy Johnson

Judy Lewis

Sharon Wilson

### Prancing Horse Therapeutic Riding Auxiliary Board of Directors

Nancy Geddes

Gus Leader

Kelly McCrann

Meredith Clifftin

Lynn Rudnick

### Activity Sites/Locations

(All farm locations require calling Prancing Horse to schedule a visit.)

Administrative Office:

Prancing Horse PO Box 327, Southern Pines, NC 28388 Email:

[info@prancing-horse.com](mailto:info@prancing-horse.com)

Web site: [www.prancing-horse.org](http://www.prancing-horse.org)

Prancing Horse at **Muddy Creek**

Muddy Creek Farm

245 Trails End Road,

Whispering Pines, NC 28327

Prancing Horse at **McLendon Hills**

140 Canyon Road

West End, NC 27376

Prancing Horse at **Seven Lakes**

143 West Shenandoah Lane

West End, NC 27376

## **What is Therapeutic Riding?**

Therapeutic riding uses equine-oriented activities for the purpose of contributing positively to the cognitive, physical, emotional and social well being of people with special needs. Therapeutic riding provides benefits in the areas of therapy, education, sport, and recreation and leisure.

### **Therapy**

Equine activities are used as a form of therapy to achieve physical, psychological, cognitive, and behavioral and communication goals. The therapy is provided by a licensed/credentialed health professional. The use of the horse involves a team approach among licensed/credentialed health professionals, therapeutic riding instructors and clients.

### **Education**

Equine activities are used to achieve psycho-educational goals for people with physical, mental and psychological impairments as well as to provide the individual with skills. (Such as riding, driving, or vaulting). The emphasis is to incorporate cognitive, behavioral, psychological, and physical goals into the program plan while teaching adapted riding. The horse is a strong motivator for accomplishing these goals.

Therapeutic riding instructors, educational specialists and licensed/credentialed health professionals are involved in the design and implementation of the programs. The frequency of consultation with educational specialist and health professionals is determined on an individual basis.

### **Adaptive Riding**

People with physical, mental and psychological impairment can participate in sport activities - adapted as needed – with the horse. Activities are directed toward the acquisition of skills leading to the accomplishment of specific horsemanship goals. By learning skills needed for the sport, therapeutic and recreation goals are also achieved.

Therapeutic riding instructors are primarily responsible for the design and implementation of the program. Licensed/credentialed health professionals, educational specialists, and recreational therapist may assist the instructor in a variety of ways, and they are generally involved on a consultative basis.

### **Wounded Warriors**

Wounded Warriors Project is a national organization that provides therapeutic activities to active and military veterans across the country. PATH intl. teams up with premier accredited therapeutic centers who wish to provide program support and education to these heroes. Prancing Horse in partnership with the WWP provides therapeutic riding for post 9/11 veterans in a special program entitled *Freedom Reins at Prancing Horse*.

### **Air Warrior**

The Air Warrior Emergency Fund in partnership with Prancing Horse provides the opportunity for special needs children of active duty military persons to participate in the classes at no charge to the families.

## What is PATH?

**Prancing Horse Center for Therapeutic Riding is a premier accredited program through the Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl).** All of Prancing Horse Instructors receive an extensive certification through PATH. PATH is a non-profit organization headquartered in Denver, Colorado that exists to promote equine activities for individuals with disabilities.

PATH promotes therapeutic riding primarily through public awareness campaigns and educational events. Above all, PATH is concerned with safety and service to members and riders. Consequently, PATH has developed several programs that are designed to benefit everyone concerned with therapeutic riding. These include center accreditation, instructor certification, insurance, conferences, and workshops.

More information on PATH, including a volunteer training course, can be obtained at their website: [www.PATHintl.org](http://www.PATHintl.org)

## Volunteer Orientation

Volunteer orientations are conducted periodically during each riding session. Attendance is required for new volunteers.

During your two hour volunteer training, you will only begin to learn the skills to perform as a volunteer in our program. **Please do not hesitate to ask questions if at any time you become unsure of something or do not feel comfortable.** Instructors and other staff will provide you with regular feedback to help you improve skills. Those interested in becoming horse leaders will need to attend an additional horse leader training session.

\* \* \* \* \*

Prancing Horse is a premier accredited member of the PATH, Intl. and adheres to over 200 policies directly relating to volunteer safety and continuing education. Because of this, appropriate release forms **must** be signed prior to volunteering. These forms provide for release of liability, confidentiality and permission for use of photos or video. Volunteers, who sign in each week, are covered by the program's accident liability insurance policy.



## **Requirements for Volunteers**

Leaders (volunteers assigned to control the horse) and sidewalkers (volunteers who walk alongside the riders) must be at least 14 years of age and must be capable of walking and jogging alongside a horse for short durations of time. Horse Leaders should have extensive experience with horses and must demonstrate competency in handling horses. Sidewalkers do not need to have previous horse experience, but should be comfortable working around and walking next to them.

Sidewalkers may be asked to maintain a therapeutic hold, which consists of holding an arm up at about shoulder level. Anyone with shoulder pain can ask to work with a rider not requiring this type of hold.

**For a one hour class, expect to be at the farm for 1 ½ - 2 hours to help with horse preparation, arena set-up and after-class clean-up. If possible, volunteers should commit to attending the entire session.**

Please notify our volunteer coordinator, Lynn Rudnick, when you are unable to attend a class for which you had committed. E-mail: [lfneedy@aol.com](mailto:lfneedy@aol.com) or call: 203-554-8048 as soon as possible.

## **Attire**

Prancing Horse has volunteer T-shirts available to wear during sessions for a \$10.00 donation.

Foot wear is very important for safety. Horses can step on a volunteer's foot, causing a great deal of pain if the person is wearing soft shoes. Sandals, flip-flops as well as soft-toed shoes such as ballet shoes or Crocs are prohibited. Be aware that hats and sunglasses may be grabbed by some riders, so use caution. Leave dangling jewelry at home, and avoid perfume as it may attract stinging insects and can be irritating to riders with hypersensitivities and allergies.

In cooler months, we recommend that you dress in layers. It is often windier and cooler at the farms than it is in town. Bring hats and gloves if needed and consider leaving an extra sweatshirt in your car!

## Job Description for Horse Leaders

Horse leaders are an integral part of the volunteer team. They are responsible for preparing the horse prior to the start of class, maintaining control of the horse during mounting and riding activities and putting the horse and tack away. Experienced as a horse handler, the leader provides a safe riding experience for Prancing Horse riders and a pleasant experience for the therapy horse. Horse Leaders are responsible for the safety of the team.

### *Responsibilities of Horse Leaders*

- The Horse Leader's primary responsibility is to the horse and the safety of the team. They are **NOT** to interact with the rider or the side walkers except to clarify their instructions.
- Groom and tack horses, following Prancing Horse's procedures of safe tying and gentle handling, especially during tacking.
- Show ability to control a horse's speed at walk and trot in a calm fashion, speeding up or slowing down as instructed, respecting the horse at all times and avoiding undue pulling on lead line.
- Show ability to maintain the horse at a halt for the length of time needed for mounting, dismounting and periods of stopping during class.
- Follow directions provided by the instructor regarding walking on, halting, turning etc. while allowing the rider to participate to full potential. Leader must wait for rider to initiate action whenever possible.
- Demonstrate the ability to maintain safe spacing between horses as well as between the horse and side barriers such as arena wall or fence to allow for safety of the sidewalker throughout class.
- Understand and have the ability to address common horse misbehavior.
- Demonstrate maturity in ability to follow specific directions in an emergency situation.
- Maintain confidentiality of riders' diagnoses and challenges.

**NEVER WRAP THE EXCESS LEAD LINE AROUND YOUR HAND, DRAPE AROUND YOUR NECK, OR TIE AROUND YOUR WAIST.**

**The primary responsibility of the leader is to control the horse. The sidewalker will monitor and insure the rider's safety. The leader should avoid giving verbal directions to the rider, since this will be confusing when the sidewalker is also giving directions.**

## **Job Description for Sidewalkers**

Sidewalkers are an integral part of the volunteer team, being responsible for helping set up the arena, welcoming riders prior to class, maintaining safety of riders during mounting and riding activities and helping riders follow directions provided by riding instructor. Sidewalkers may help with the grooming of horses prior to class. Previous experience with horses is not necessary, but it is helpful to have prior experience working with children or with children or adults with special needs. Sidewalkers are supervised by riding instructors and/or program director.

### ***Job Responsibilities of Sidewalkers***

- Under supervision of the instructor, help with arena set-up, and with grooming and tacking as needed and if knowledgeable in these activities.
- Follow instructor's direction with regards to the amount of physical and verbal assistance provided to the riders during mounting/dismounting and riding activities and provide this with consistency.
- When provided with adequate instruction, show the ability to effectively prompt rider with physical or verbal cues as instructed.
- Maintain attention to rider throughout class to monitor situation for unsafe actions or loss of balance.
- Maintain cheerful but professional attitude with riders, showing patience but not indulgence; once rider is mounted, refrain from conversation unrelated to lesson.
- Maintain position as sidewalker alongside rider during periods at halt, walking and trotting, having the necessary endurance to walk for approximately 45 minutes with short periods of trotting. Show ability to maintain therapeutic hold for up to 45 minutes or ask to switch sides and proceed in a safe manner.
- Maintain confidentiality of riders' diagnoses and challenges.
- Present a cheerful attitude towards horses and riders in our program.

### **Volunteers can expect:**

- A comprehensive orientation, training and opportunities for continued education.
- A safe and supportive environment
- A clear understanding of program expectations
- Assignment to a student or horse with whom they feel comfortable
- Select information about their assigned student or horse to assist in a safe and effective manner
- Recognition and appreciation for their time
- Prompt communication in response to your concerns.

## **Prancing Horse can expect that volunteers will:**

- Arrive on time, properly attired with a cheerful attitude.
- Check email from Lynn Rudnick for possible class cancellations in the event of temperature extremes or severe weather.
- Attend exclusively to the needs of their assigned rider or horse.
- Act in accordance with Prancing Horse and PATH Intl, policy and procedures as outlined in the orientation and volunteer manual.

## **Prancing Horse and Farm Rules**

In order to ensure the safety of those visiting the farm, the following rules are to be followed by all—staff, volunteers, program participants and their guests and visitors.

1. Please stay in Prancing Horse designated areas unless directed by staff. These areas include: the main barn, arenas, and surrounding areas.
2. Never run when approaching the barn, please maintain quiet and calm.
3. Always listen to the Prancing Horse instructors, their decisions are absolute.
4. Return all tack and equipment to their designated places.
5. Arena gates must be closed while riding.
6. Try to keep the barn and arena neat and clean. If your horse makes a mess, clean it up!
7. Children of volunteers or siblings of riders must have an adult who is not volunteering directly supervising them at all times.
8. ASTM-SEI Equestrian riding helmets must be worn by all when riding.
9. Smoking, drinking, firearms and profanity are prohibited.
10. Please do not feed any horses without supervision by a Prancing Horse staff member.
11. Do not lean on or climb on fencing or gates.
12. Wear proper footwear. Hard soled shoes with leather tops are recommended.
13. Pitch in! Please use available recycling and trash containers. If you use toys or other materials, please pick up these items before leaving the area.
14. Horse Treats can be given with prior approval and in designated buckets only.
15. If you turn it on, turn it off.
16. No gum or hard candy allowed while riding. Gum is a choking hazard and is very hard to get out of manes and tails!
17. If you have any questions, please ask and someone will be happy to help.
18. If it neighs, LOVE it!

## Our Riders

Prancing Horse provides therapeutic horseback riding to children and adults with a wide range of special needs. Riders may have physical disabilities of varying degrees. Some may need a wheelchair for mobility, while others have mild muscle weakness or in coordination. Other riders have cognitive impairments and may have difficulty following directions and/or limited speech. Some riders may appear "normal", but they may have less obvious needs including sensory processing issues or learning disabilities.

Sometimes, riders will demonstrate challenging behaviors. The instructor can help you learn some strategies that will be helpful in managing these behaviors. The movement of the horse is often calming, so, for some riders, you may be asked to keep your horse moving as much as possible. Providing choices can often help avoid resistive behaviors. Ignoring non-critical misbehavior is often best. Please seek help from your instructor when you have any concerns regarding behavior issues.

If you have questions about why a rider demonstrates certain physical, cognitive or behavioral challenges, please ask our instructors for information at a time that the rider and his or her family members are not present. We like to focus on the strengths our riders demonstrate while they are riding.

At the end of the volunteer notebook, we include descriptions of some of the impairments our riders may have.

## Confidentiality

Specific diagnoses and information about riders are confidential; medical records and progress reports are available with the supervision of Prancing Horse staff. Frequently, volunteers may acquire more details about riders, either through caregivers or the riders themselves. Due to HIPAA Laws **important to remember that such information should be treated confidentially and not discussed** casually or in public places. **Similarly, photography of horses, riders (or volunteers) is not permitted without written authorization.**

## Before the Class Begins

Before leaving the house, remember to bring your water bottle, or extra clothing in case of inclement weather. You may want to keep your phone and purse locked securely in the car.

Upon arrival, proceed to the volunteer table, turn off your cell phone, and sign in on your attendance sheet your name. Remember to pick up a nametag, check the volunteer board for any messages and then check in with the class instructor.

**Don't forget to sign out after your volunteer session!**

## Preparing for Class

### Arena Set-up

Volunteers not assisting in horse preparation can help set up the arena for class. This generally involves setting up our mounting area barrier, ground poles and other class props.

### Student Arrival

Volunteers can assist the rider in finding a helmet and talking with them while they wait for class to start.

### Helmet fitting

We have several types of helmets. Some have a dial to adjust at the back of the helmet. Others are adjusted by two Velcro straps on each side of the helmet. If necessary, loosen the dial or the side straps before placing the helmet on the rider's head. Some helmets are sized just by XS, S, M or L.



Picture courtesy of PATH Intl.



All helmets should sit level on the rider's head, with the front edge no more than 1 ½ inches above or 2 fingers width above the rider's eyebrows. When adjusted, there should be no front to back or side to side rocking possible. Fasten the chin strap carefully so as not to pinch any skin. The chin strap should rest under the rider's jaw, close to the neck, with room for two fingers to fit between the strap and jaw. Adjust this strap as needed.

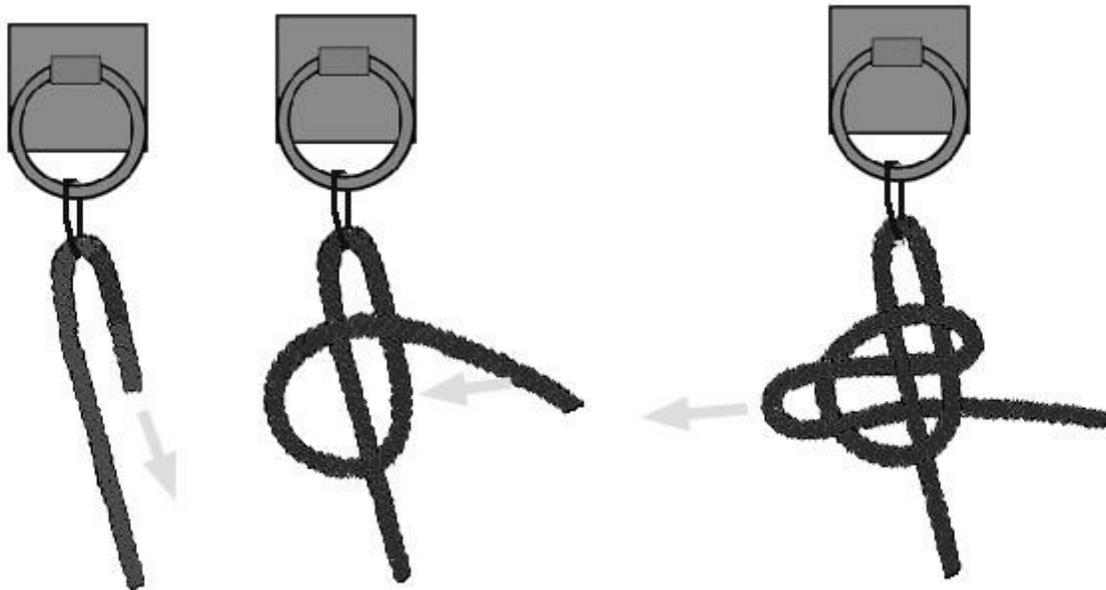
Instructors will be in charge of helmet fit. If you see an ill-fitting helmet, tell an instructor!

## Arena Procedures

Prancing Horse utilizes an outdoor arena and a wheelchair ramp in addition to a mounting block. The instructor will determine where each rider will mount and is responsible for the actual mounting procedure.

Horse leaders can help prepare the horses as long as they are supervised by a certified instructor. We generally tie or cross tie horses for grooming. Make sure you use a quick release knot when tying and that the lead rope is short enough to prevent the horse from getting tied up in the rope.

## Quick Release Knot



Loop the free end of the lead rope through the tie ring. Pinch both parts of the lead rope together in one hand. With your other hand, make a loop with the free end of the rope around the other part of the rope, which connects to the horse. Finally, fold the free end of the rope and slip this through the loop you just created, passing under the part of the rope leading to the horse before heading through the loop. Pull tight so that the knot area slides up to the tie ring and the knot tightens. You should be able to quickly untie this knot by pulling on the loose end of the rope.

## Tacking the Horse

The tack should be gathered and brought to the horse by the barn manager or horse owner. The type of saddle pad and an additional therapeutic pad will be set aside for each horse by the barn manager or instructor at the barn. Halters are typically used rather than bridles, except for intermediate riders. Reins are attached to the halter.

***It is very important to only loosely tighten the girth before leading the horse out to the arena.*** This will help eliminate the horses developing negative behaviors when cinching the girth or

saddling. As you tighten the girth, gently tighten one hole at a time. Remember horses have ribs, which can also be bruised when cinching too tightly.

Some of our riders assist with the grooming and tacking procedures. The class instructor will let you know if this is the case, and what your responsibility will be during this preparation time. Any rider assisting in ground activities such as grooming or tacking must wear a riding helmet.

## **Warming -Up Program Horses**

Prior to mounting the student, you will lead your horse into the arena. Once you and your horse enter the arena it is time to check in with your horse, also known as C.C.R. (Calm, Connected and Responsive). This time is set aside for you to 'join up' with your horse and also to check the horse for lameness. If your horse seems to be agitated, lethargic or lame please let your instructor know immediately. If all systems are a go you and your horse will be ready for the class.

When leading a horse, lead from the left side. The lead line is attached to the bottom ring of the halter. Always hold excess lead line in your left hand in a folded or serpentine fashion (**NEVER wrapped around your hand**) to prevent injury if the horse should suddenly jerk away from you.

Hold the lead rope 6-12 inches from the snap to allow for the natural motion of the horse's head. **DO NOT hold on to the snap or halter as this is highly dangerous.** The proper position for leading is just back of the horse's head. If your horse is feeling a bit spirited, slow your walking and calm your body language. If necessary, use short tugs on the lead rope rather than steady pulling to adjust the speed of the horse's walk. Add some halts and small circles during the warm-up period to get your horse more focused on you. If your horse is feeling a bit sluggish, increase your energy level and the spring in your walk. Talk to your horse as well to either calm him or wake him up a bit. *It is not important what words you use, but rather how you say it.* Slow, calming sounds will soothe the horse. Slow, gentle stroking on the horse's neck will also help to calm him/her. Please refrain from stroking the horse's face during classes as this distracts the horse from being engaged in their job.



## Mounting Techniques

When a rider and his or her team are ready for mounting, the instructor will call for a leader to bring that rider's designated horse into the mounting area.

The instructor will *gently* tighten the girth before bring the horse to the block or ramp, and pull down English stirrups at the block or ramp.

Next, the instructor will ask the horse to come forward to the mounting block or ramp. It is important that the horse stop very close to the ramp or block for safety in mounting. To do this most efficiently, the leader will walk the horse *slowly* forwards with the horse positioned just to the right of the block or ramp. About 5 feet before the block or ramp, the leader will stop the horse and move in front to face the horse, and then slowly walks backwards as the horse slowly steps into position next to the block or ramp. The leader then continues to stand in front of the horse during the mount.



One sidewalker will be positioned on the off side of the horse (opposite of the side the rider is using).

When the rider is mounting from the block, the sidewalker assisting with mounting will be on the ground. In either case, this sidewalker will steady the offside stirrup to prevent the saddle from slipping during mounting, and gently assist the rider as needed. A second sidewalker, if present, should wait a safe distance from the mounting area.

If a crest mount or lift transfer is used from the mounting ramp, a volunteer may be trained to assist the instructor with this mount. Once the rider is positioned, the left leg is supported by the instructor to avoid having this leg pushed into the ramp by accident. It is therefore important that as the horse is asked to move forward, the leader keeps the horse next to the ramp until the instructor can easily step to the ground. The volunteer on the off side of the horse will need to use a therapeutic hold until the left leg is properly positioned over the saddle flap.

Finally, a last minute check of girth and stirrup length will be performed by the instructor before the team begins the lesson. This is where a second sidewalker will move into position next to the rider.

*Some of our riders can be difficult to mount. It is therefore essential that everyone involved in the*

*mounting procedure maintain full attention to their individual responsibilities. The leader needs to be especially alert but calm so that the horse remains standing quietly at the mounting area. Please ask your instructor if you are unsure of your responsibility at any stage of the mounting procedure.*

## Leading During a Lesson

When a horse is halted for equipment adjustments, during instructions prior to class or games, or during warm-up exercises at the halt, the leader should stand in front of the horse at an angle, face to face, to discourage any forward movement. (Be prepared to move suddenly if necessary.)

To avoid horse misbehavior, **remember to keep at least two horse's length between horses.** If there are sidewalkers with your rider, keep your horse at least 4 feet away from the fence or arena wall, so that the sidewalker has a comfortable space in which to walk.

Pay close attention to the instructor's directions to your rider. Wait for the rider to initiate a turn, halt, or trot before prompting your horse. You are there to assist the rider, not give a "pony ride". Whenever possible, the rider should give signals to the horse, by voice, reins or legs.

During periods of trotting, keep the horse in a slow jog rather than a brisk trot unless notified otherwise by the instructor. Be ready to return to a walk or halt immediately if necessary.

With riders  
can steer



who

independently, you may be asked by the instructor to tie the lead line around the horse's neck. You need to stay in position and be alert, able to quickly reach the lead line if needed.

**The primary responsibility of the leader is to control the horse. The sidewalker will monitor and insure the rider's safety. The leader should avoid giving verbal directions to the rider, since this will be confusing when the sidewalker is also giving directions.**

## **Horse Behavior**

Prancing Horse's horses are selected primarily for their quiet temperaments. However, they are not perfect! Throughout the lesson, be aware of potential obstacles or occurrences that may spook your horse and talk calmly to him if you feel he is getting a bit nervous. Even the gentlest horse may be frightened under unknown circumstances. Watch the horse's expression and ear placement, and be aware of any miscommunication he could be getting from you or the rider. Ask the instructor for help if you are concerned about your horse's behavior.

## **Understanding Your Horse**

1. Horses are creatures whose primary means of defense is flight.
2. Horses are animals that have evolved with eyes on the sides of their heads to see predators at great distance. They have blind spots immediately in front, and behind them. They have a cone of blindness about six feet in front and behind. Stay out of this area when possible.
3. Horses are not dogs. They will run over you when they are frightened, and no amount of talking and reasoning will convince them otherwise. We work very hard to accustom our horses to lots of stimuli so that they will not be easily frightened, but always be prepared for the unexpected!

## **Handling your Horse**

The first chance of injury is when you meet the horse. This is usually when you get him from the stall or pasture. At the stall, make sure the horse is aware of your intentions. As you open the stall door, talk to him, get his attention. Usually he will turn his head toward you or walk to you. Approach him from the left front side if possible. Talk to him, pat him on the shoulder, put the halter on and attach the lead. If he already has the halter on, approach him as above and attach the lead. Stay on the front left side, next to his shoulder and lead him out to the cross ties or work area. If he is in the pasture the approach is the same but be aware of the other horses around him and the gate. Again talk to him. Usually he will recognize you and walk toward you, or turn to you. Pat him on the shoulder and let him know your intentions

When you approach the horse to put on the halter or lead, he can bite you, strike you or kick at you. That is when you must communicate your intentions. Always let him know where you are. When leading stay at the front left shoulder, not in front where he can walk over you, or in back of the shoulder where he can kick you. Most important of all, never wrap the lead rope around your hand or wrist. That is a serious mistake. If the horse spooks or shies and runs you could be dragged and severely injured.

Let him know your intentions and keep his focus. Your chance for an accident or injury will be reduced. Pat him and let him know you are there. When you pick up a front foot, pat him on the shoulder and work your way down the leg so when you do pick it up he knows it is you and not a fly. Watch his feet and your feet. Make sure they don't find each other.

On the hind end, pat him on the butt and work your way down his leg as you reach for his foot. Don't startle him. Keep a hand on his flank so that if he moves toward you, he will push you away. When you change sides, stay close to his hind end. Pat and talk to him. Let him know where you are.

Some people will not cross immediately behind a horse. If you do, stay very close. The shorter his stroke, the less it will hurt should he kick. Some prefer to walk far enough behind so that they can't be kicked, or to move around his front end.

When you put the horse back, it is much the same as when you caught him. Pay attention and don't give him the chance to step on your feet, bite, or kick you. Lead him at the front left shoulder. The next thing is important. When you release the horse turn him to you and unhook the halter. That way he will not run past you and kick you.

## Equine Senses

When developing relationships and working with horses, communication is the key. It is critical to provide a safe environment in a therapeutic riding setting. Beginning a process of understanding the horse senses, instincts, and implications is a step in predicting behaviors, managing risks, and increasing positive relationships.

### *Smell:*

The horse's sense of smell is thought to be very acute and it allows him to recognize other horses and people. Smell also enables the horse to evaluate situations.

### Implications:

- Allow horses the opportunity to become familiar with new objects and their environment by smelling.
- It is recommended that treats are not carried in your pocket since horses may desire to go after them.
- Volunteers should not eat or have food in the arena.

### *Hearing:*

The horse's sense of hearing is also thought to be very acute. The horse may also combine their sense of hearing and sight to become more familiar with new or alerting sounds. "Hearing and not seeing" is often the cause of the fright/flight response. Note the position of the horse's ears. Forward ears communicate attentiveness and interest. Ears that are laid back often communicate that they are upset and/or showing aggression towards another horse or person

### Implications:

- Horses are wary when they hear something but do not see it. If your horse is acting nervous, try to remain outwardly calm. If you do not appear upset, the horse will follow your example.
- Avoid shouting or using a loud voice. This can be frightening to a horse.
- Watch your horse's ears for increased communication. Stiffly pricked ears indicate interest. Drooping ears indicate relaxation, inattentiveness (easily startled), exhaustion or illness. Flattened ears indicate anger, threat, or fear. Ears flicking back and forth indicate attentiveness or interest.

### *Sight:*

The horse's eyes are set on either side of the head; there is good peripheral (lateral) vision, but poorer frontal vision. A horse focuses on objects by raising and lowering its head. The horse's visual memory is very accurate. Horses are thought to see quite well in the dark, due to the large size of their eyes. There is still controversy as to whether or not horses see in color.

Implications:

- The horse may notice if something in the arena or out on a trail is different. Allow the horse an opportunity to look at new objects. Introduce new props that the horse may be unfamiliar with.
- The horse has better peripheral vision; consider a slightly looser rein, enabling him to move his head when taking a look at objects.
- Although the horse has good peripheral vision, consider two blind spots: directly in front and directly behind. The best way to approach a horse is to his shoulder. It may startle him if you approach from behind or directly in front. The horse may be unable to see around the mouth area, which is a safety consideration when hand feeding.

### *Touch:*

Touch is used as a communication between horses and between horses and people. Horses are sensitive to soft or rough touch with a person's hands or legs.

Implications:

- Handlers should treat the horses gently but firmly.
- Each horse has sensitive areas, and it is important to be familiar with them (i.e. flank and belly areas).
- Watch rider leg position. Riders may need appropriate assistance to reduce a "clothes pin" effect with their legs. Ask the instructor/therapist what is the best handling technique.
- Horses will often touch or paw at unfamiliar objects. For example, a horse may paw at a bridge or ground pole before crossing over it.

### *Taste:*

Taste is closely linked with the sense of smell and helps the horse to distinguish palatable foods and other objects.

Implications:

- Taste is closely linked with smell and touch; therefore, a horse may lick or nibble while becoming familiar with objects and people. Be careful, as this could lead to possible biting.

### *Sixth sense:*

Horses do have a "sixth sense" when evaluating the disposition of those around him. Horses can be hypersensitive in detecting the moods of their handler and riders. A good therapy horse is chosen for their sensitive response to the rider. At times, there may exist a personality conflict between handlers and horses. It is important to let the instructor/therapist know if you're having a difficult time relating or getting along with a particular horse.

### *Flight as a Natural Instinct:*

Horses would rather turn and run away from danger than face and fight it.

Implications:

- At a sudden movement or noise, the horse might try to flee. Stay calm if this happens.
- A frightened horse that is tied up or being held tightly might try to escape by pulling back. Relax your hold or untie him quickly and usually he will relax. Be sure not to stand directly behind the horse.
- If flight is not possible, the horse could either turn to kick out or face the problem and rear, especially in a tight area like the stall. A halter with a lead rope may assist with maintaining control while working around the horse in a stall.
- If a horse appears to be frightened or fearful (note the position of the horse's ears in following pictures), it may be helpful to allow a more experienced horse person to lead.
- Most horses chosen to work in a therapeutic riding setting have less of an instinct to flee. The horse may look to you for reassurance. It is helpful if the volunteer remains calm and talks to the horse in a soothing voice.

### *Herd Animal*

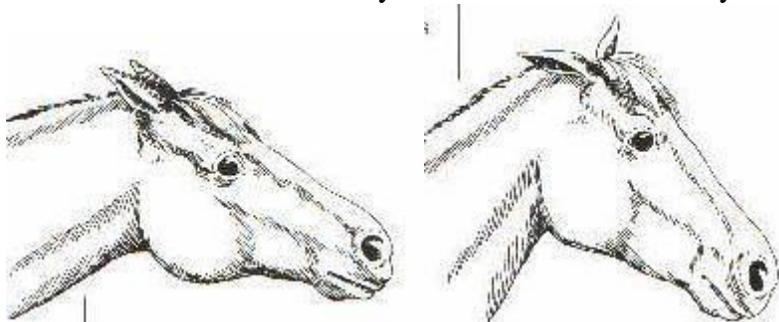
Horses like to stay together in a herd or group with one or two horses' dominant, with a pecking order amongst the rest.

Implications:

- Be aware that a horse may not like being alone. This is a consideration when horses are leaving the arena or a horse loses sight of the others while on a trail ride.
- Be aware that if the horse in front of a line is trotting or cantering, the horse that is following may also attempt to trot or canter.
- If one horse spooks at something, the surrounding horses may also be affected.
- For safety, it is recommended to keep at least one horse's length between horses when riding within a group to respect the horse's space and pecking order.

### **Reading the Horses' Ears**

Most people believe that when a horse puts her ears back she is expressing anger or aggression. This is true only some of the time. Other times it may indicate threat she's listening behind her, that she's afraid, or even that she is a little sleepy. When a horse puts her ears back *flat* to her neck and shows the white of her eyes, she really means it! You will often see horses in groups use this expression with one another. It is a threat, and the threat may be followed up with a bite or sometimes a kick. You may receive a mild version if you tighten the girth too rapidly.



(left) An angry horse will frequently put her ears back and show the whites of her eyes. If you see this type of expression, be careful!

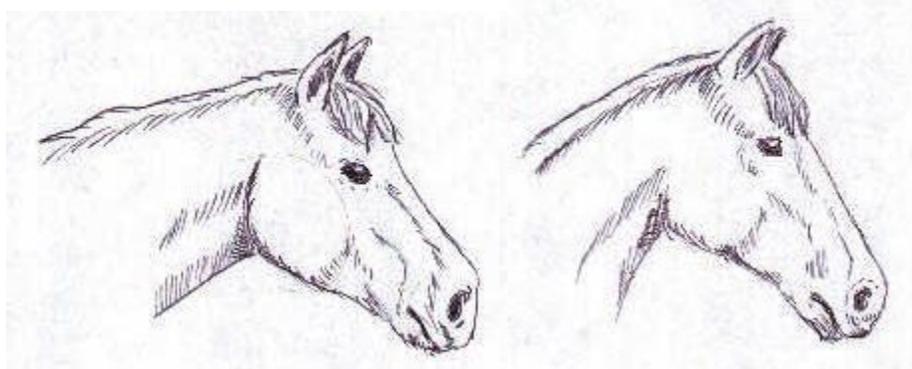
(right) An attentive horse will often tip one or both ears back to listen for your commands.

With observation you'll be able to tell the difference easily, just as you can when a human is smiling or sneering.



Ears tipped back and out are a sign of boredom.

People usually interpret ears pointed forward as an expression of friendliness and good cheer, a safe expression



(left) Upright or forward ears generally indicate an alert horse.

(right) Stiff and tilted ears are a first sign of fear.

#### Other Things to Watch

- Tucking the tail down tightly
  - Danger to the rear
  - Horse may bolt, buck, or kick
  - Watch out if ears are flattened too!
- Switching the tail
  - Annoyance and irritation at biting flies, stinging insects, or bothersome actions of rider or sidewalkers!
- Droopy ears and resting one hind leg on toe
  - Calm and resting; horse may be dozing
  - Don't wake him up by startling him!
- Wrinkling up the face and swinging the head
  - Threatening gesture of an angry or bossy horse
  - Watch out for biting or kicking

## Sidewalking During a Lesson

### *Position and Holds*

For certain riders with impaired balance, sidewalkers may need to physically assist the rider to maintain balance. The instructor will inform you as to the amount of assistance required and which holds will be most effective. During orientation, you will learn about the different ways to support a rider. A common hold which provides significant stability for the rider is known as the “***Arm over thigh hold***”. In this hold, the sidewalker grips the front edge of the saddle while pressing his or her arm against the rider’s thigh. This hold is frequently used during trotting. Adjacent is a picture of a therapeutic hold.

For many riders, the sidewalker's primary role is to reinforce the directions given by the instructor. This can be done verbally or with a physical prompt.



### **In General:**

- Support the rider as directed by the instructor and with as gentle a hand as possible under the circumstances. Your job is not to “hold up” the rider. Some riders do not need any physical assistance at all.
- Use a broad hand (the flat of your hand rather than a grip) to support the rider whenever possible.
- You may need to keep the rider's lower leg from swinging forward or backward by supporting the lower leg. Keep the lower leg positioned in line with the hip.
- Pay attention to the position of your rider.
- Allow the rider to correct an off-balance seat by himself if at all possible. If the rider begins to slide off, push him back into the saddle or block further slippage and call for the instructor. Falls are very rare, but can happen unexpectedly.

- For riders who are posting, support only at the ankle and knee; the upper leg will be moving as the rider rises.
- If rider does not require a hold, stay in position by the rider's knee. Keeping a light touch on the saddle or pad will help you to stay in position.
- You may stop and trade sides, one at a time, if you tire. The horse should be stopped and the leader and instructor should know you are changing sides.
- Do NOT bend down or leave rider to pick up toys or objects should the rider drop them. The instructor will do so.

### *Interactions*

Socializing with the rider is appropriate before class, while waiting to mount or for class to begin, and after class. During class, *talking should be minimal*. It is helpful for one sidewalker to be the designated "spokesperson" when verbal interaction is necessary. The sidewalker(s) should:

- Focus the rider's attention on the instructor.
- Be alert to the requests and commands of the instructor, and be familiar with the basic commands and school movements the instructor uses.
- Reinforce the instructor's directions after giving the rider time to process them. For example, if the instructor says, "Pull on the right rein towards me," and the student seems confused, gently tap the right hand and say, "Pull with this rein."
- Give the rider 10-15 seconds of response time before repeating the instructor.
- Provide some feedback to the rider; many times the instructor does not see everything the rider does.
- Encourage the rider to improve his or her posture/seat independently, if possible, BUT...
- Avoid overwhelming the rider with details about riding position unless he or she is working on these activities.
- Minimize casual conversations between rider and volunteers during the lesson; answer direct questions but then redirect the rider's attention to the instructor.

### *Rein Cues*

After giving the rider a moment to process a command from the instructor to turn or halt, it is often necessary to reinforce this with some sort of cue or prompt. Different riders will require different levels of assistance. More subtle cues include verbally reinforcing the command, or gently tapping the hand or arm that should be active. If this approach is ineffective, use hand over hand guidance to help the rider move the rein. **Do not pull on the reins themselves, as this is confusing to riders.** These same types of cues can be used for leg aids as well.

Riders will have more success with steering and halting when the reins are the proper length (no slack but not so short that they pull excessively). Sidewalkers can assist the rider in adjusting the reins, especially prior to anticipated steering or halting exercises. If you see your rider pulling harshly on the reins, either for turning or halting, remind them to be gentle. Make sure the instructor is aware of the situation.

## Dismounting

The instructor will assist the students in dismounting. However, volunteers should be prepared for the rider who decides to dismount suddenly. For most of our riders, the dismount sequence is:

- Take both feet out of stirrups.
- Lean forwards, placing hands on the horse's neck.
- Position head and shoulders to the right side of the horse's neck while the right leg swings up and over the rump of the horse. (This step is reversed if rider is dismounting from the right side.)
- Rider lies across saddle to balance, then slides to ground landing on his/her feet.

Some riders may need help from their sidewalkers during dismounting. For example, they may need help bringing their leg over the back of the horse. Other riders may need help to prevent them from coming off the horse head and shoulders ahead of the rest of them!

If a rider has tight hips or tight thigh muscles, he or she may need to dismount using what is termed a crest dismount. In this dismount, the rider's legs are brought up to the front, above the horse's neck and then the rider is pivoted to lie across the saddle. Sidewalkers will be taught how to assist with this more difficult dismount.

Once the rider has dismounted, a sidewalker can help him or her to run up the stirrups if he or she is able. The rider should be reminded to go around the front of the horse to reach the other side.

***One sidewalker should always accompany the rider out of the arena and into the care of a guardian.***



**As a sidewalker, your primary responsibility and concern is the rider's safety. The leader will control and monitor the horse. One, or both, sidewalkers must remain with the rider at all times. If an accident happens and the rider falls, the sidewalkers remain with the rider, gently keeping the rider still while aid is summoned.**

**NEVER LEAVE YOUR RIDER.**

## **Emergency Situations**

At any time during class, if a leader or sidewalker feels the situation is unsafe, he or she should say "STOP" loudly. All other leaders should stop as well. The instructor will then assess the situation and provide instructions.

If the horse becomes overexcited, but the rider seems able to handle the situation, the sidewalkers should each place an arm across the rider's thigh and grip the front of the saddle securely. Then the sidewalkers will be in the best position for their own security, for keeping up with the horse, and for the rider's safety even though the horse may be moving erratically. The leader should gently soothe the excited horse. Stay calm yourself; remembering to breathe (!); speak softly and soothingly to the horse and gently stroke his neck. The instructor may prefer to ask for a safety dismount if the situation escalates (see section on Emergency Dismount).

Falls are very rare, but can and do happen. If your rider falls, remember that the leader's sole responsibility is to the horse, which should be moved calmly from the scene. If another rider falls or another horse becomes agitated, stop immediately. The leader should stand in front of the horse and hold him quietly. Most importantly, do not panic!

In any emergency situation, await instruction from the instructor, who has been trained to handle such situations. The instructor will decide if it is safer for riders to stay mounted or be dismounted, or to remain in the ring or leave the area, depending on the situation.

If at any time you feel a situation is potentially dangerous, perhaps from a horse's cues or a rider's behavior, do not hesitate alert the instructor. In this way you may avoid a possibly adverse event.

## **Emergency Dismount**

The instructor may request a safety dismount if it is determined that the rider would be safer on the ground than on the horse. Examples might include a spooked horse that is very agitated or a sudden lightning storm. In such a situation, the sidewalker on the left side of the horse (if possible) will tell the rider that he or she is going to take him off the horse. If there is time, the volunteer on the left removes the left foot from the stirrup and asks the volunteer on the right to do the same. The sidewalker on the left then wraps his or her arms around the rider's waist and pulls the rider off the horse, and if possible, moves the rider away from the horse. The leader should make every effort to hold the horse during the dismount, and then should move the horse quickly away once the rider has been dismounted. If only one rider is being dismounted, other horses in the class should be halted by their leaders until the instructor advises them to continue with the class.

***Volunteers will be trained in how to perform an emergency dismount.***

## Riding Skills

Prancing Horse's riders vary in their ability to perform riding skills, but we encourage them to participate to their fullest capacity.

### ***Riding Position:***

The instructor will inform you regarding expectations for each rider. *When possible physically and cognitively*, the following aspects of proper riding position should be encouraged:

The rider should be centered in the saddle and with as close to correct postural alignment as possible; that is, you should be able to draw an imaginary straight line through the rider's ear, shoulder, hip and heel. Heels should be down and toes pointing forwards.

The rider should be looking straight ahead between the horse's ears in the direction of travel.

## Proper Riding Position

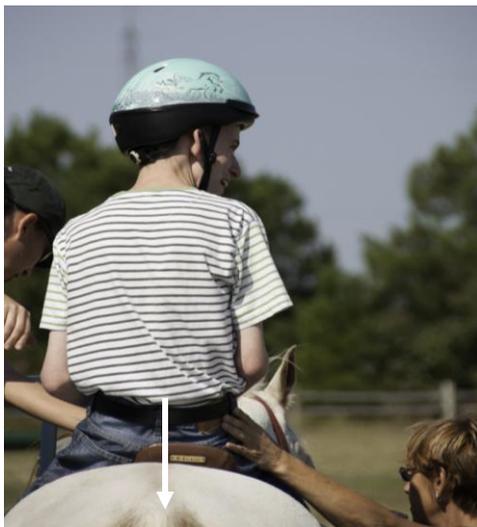
Often a rider will sit with his or her pelvis tilted excessively forwards (sway back) or backwards (slouch). This is often easily corrected if the rider is encouraged to sit tall. Other riders may tend to sit with their legs bent excessively, gripping tightly with their legs and pointing toes down, or with their knees straightened and their feet in front of the saddle. Working to relax the rider, or riding without stirrups can often be helpful in these instances. It is also common for riders to have a poor sense of body posture and they may sit off to one side without being aware of this. The instructor will give you guidance about how much, and how to, correct any of these positions.



**Pelvis tilted forward, legs back**



**Pelvis tilted backward, legs forward**



**Rider sitting off to one side**

### ***Reins***

If the rider is using the English style of riding, he or she will hold a rein in each hand; the hands should be positioned as if holding ice cream cones, with the thumbs on top of the reins. The reins should be short enough that a gentle pull on the rein will affect the horse, but there should not be excess tension from pulling back. The rider's hands should be positioned several inches apart, just in front of the saddle. In the Western style, the rider may hold the reins together in one hand. *Note that some of our riders have behaviors which make consistent holding of the reins difficult. Your instructor will direct you as to how much to encourage your rider to hold the reins. Monitor your rider closely for inappropriate pulling on the reins and if this happens, ask them to be gentle and alert the instructor to the situation.*

### ***Walking***

When able, riders are taught to give both verbal and physical cues to their horse. The rider says "walk on" and at the same time, squeezes the horse's barrel with his/her legs or kicks gently; a rider who cannot give leg aids can often "scoot" with his/her seat. The rider's hands and upper body should be as still as possible.

### ***Turning***

In English riding, where the rider is holding one rein in each hand, the rider gently pulls one rein back and towards his or her hip, without dropping or pulling on the other rein, until the turn is completed. Most of the slack must be out of the reins prior to turning or the rider will not be effective.

### ***Whoa***

Riders are instructed to say "whoa" (if they can speak) while pulling evenly and *gently* straight back on the reins until the horse comes to a complete stop. The rider then must relax the pressure without dropping the reins. Encourage the rider to stay erect while pulling on the reins; the "pulling back" action should come from the arms, not from a change in body position.

### *Sitting Trot*

The rider's position is the same as during the walk. Depending on the rider's skill level and balance, he or she may need to hold the hand hold instead of the reins during trotting.

The rider says "trot" while squeezing his or her legs against the horse's barrel. Sidewalkers should encourage both voice and leg aids. The leader should keep the horse at a slow trot if possible, in order to keep the trotting motion smooth to minimize bouncing by the rider.

Riders should be discouraged from "bracing" against the handhold, leaning excessively backwards rather than remaining in a balanced position. If the rider is not using the handhold, the hands should be very still and not pulling on the reins.

**NOTE:** Sidewalkers may need to increase their level of support during the trot, such as moving to a therapeutic hold (arm across the rider's thigh). The instructor will inform sidewalkers of these changes, according to the rider's ability.

### *Posting Trot*

The trot is a 2 beat gait in which the diagonal pairs of legs of the horse work in unison (that is one front leg and opposite hind leg). A rider may rise up out of the saddle and sit back down in rhythm with the 2 beat trots. This is called posting, or rising trot. Once a rider can coordinate posting, this can be much more comfortable for the rider than sitting to the trot.

Advanced riders are taught to post to a certain "diagonal", rising out of the saddle as the outside front leg moves forward. ("Outside" refers to the side of the horse closest to the outside of the ring; "inside" is the side closest to the center of the ring.)

The rider's hands are held in the same position as the sitting trot. It is very important that the riders legs stay in position with the feet directly under the rider's seat to facilitate rising. Often riders will brace their feet forwards, which makes it much harder to rise out of the saddle and sit back down gently.



### ***Jump Position (Two Point)***

Jump position is used both as a balance activity and as a strengthening activity for the rider's legs. It is generally used while the horse is stepping over ground poles or very low cross rails. The rider places his or her hands on the horse's neck, about 6 inches in front of the saddle. The rider then leans forwards and lifts his or her seat out of the saddle, keeping the hips and knees bent for balance. (Often riders will stand fully out of the saddle with the knees straight—this is incorrect.) The rider's leg position is critical in this exercise. The feet must stay in position directly under the rider's seat with the stirrups positioned on the balls of the feet, so that the rider's weight can drop into the heels with the ankles flexed. Sidewalkers may need to help with this leg position. They should also be alert for the rider's loss of balance forwards onto the horse's neck. It is important that the rider keep his or her seat directly over the saddle. Keeping hands free of support can be encouraged for the more advanced riders. Encouraging the rider to look straight ahead, rather than looking at the ground will help a rider keep his or her balance and maintain the correct position.

## **Prancing Horse Therapeutic Riding Emergency Procedures**

A tour of the facility accurately identifies all key locations listed below:

Fire extinguishers	Rest rooms
Telephones	Parking
Human first aid supplies	Off Limit Areas
Equine first aid supplies	

Please make sure that you know where all safety equipment is located.

## **EMERGENCY EVACUATION OF THE ARENA**

In the event of a sudden thunderstorm, tornado, fire, loose horse or personal injury an evacuation of the arena or facility may be necessary. Below are recommended ***generic*** guidelines to be applied (as necessary) in the event of an emergency.

### **Instructor**

- if required, identify specific staff/volunteer to dial 911
- notify the class of the evacuation
- dismount riders in place, or instruct leaders to move to closest arena exit first
- direct sidewalker to exit arena with the rider
- direct riders, parents, and volunteers where to exit and location to report.
- direct leaders where to take horses

### **Sidewalker**

- tell rider that a dismount is required
- perform emergency dismount (if needed) by securing the rider by the waist, ensuring feet are out of the stirrups and pulling rider off and away from the horse

- **recommended procedure:** if there are two sidewalkers, the sidewalker on the left should handle the dismount unless physically unable
- accompany rider to parent or caregiver, at exit designated by instructor

### **Leader**

- halt the horse and secure the mount by standing in front of him
- if the horse is calm, remain at the halt until riders are cleared from the arena
- if horse is moving erratically, once the rider has dismounted, move the horse away from the rider's path to exit the arena.
- remove horse to location specified by the instructor (barn or pasture)

## **INSTRUCTIONS RELATED TO SPECIFIC EMERGENCIES**

\*These guidelines are to be followed when there is **adequate time** to perform them safely\*

### **Major Weather (ie: Tornado, Extremely High Wind)**

- above dismount procedures are performed
- leader takes horse to closest pasture gate
- untacks horse quickly and lets horse loose in the pasture
- leave tack at the fence line, outside of the pasture
- sidewalkers usher riders and riders' family members to the barn.
- instructor stays with the leaders until horses are out, then leaders and instructor follow.

### **Medium Weather (ie: High Wind, Hail, Thunderstorms, etc)**

- above dismount procedures are performed
- leaders remove horses to the barn and place in stalls—untack if horse is calm.
- sidewalkers usher riders and riders' family members to barn
- instructor oversees group

### **Advance Storm Notice (ie: Hurricanes)**

- Classes cancelled

### **Fire**

- above dismount procedures are performed
- leaders remove horses and sidewalkers help usher riders as far from the fire as possible
- if small, instructor designates volunteer to get fire extinguisher
- if large, instructor designates volunteer to call 911/fire department

### **Personal Injury**

- Instructor leads, and follows First Aid protocol

## **Other Volunteer Opportunities**

Prancing Horse staff and board of directors are always seeking enthusiastic and qualified individuals to join our team. Numerous other volunteer opportunities exist within the program, and there is always room for special skills or talents. The volunteer coordinator can help to find a niche for anyone who is interested in helping our program.

Other ways to help include:

- Join the Prancing Horse Special Events Committee!
- Find out if your company offers matches funds for volunteer hours!
- Have a free day? Help with office projects or barn projects!
- Schedule Prancing Horse for a presentation at your favorite organization!
- Recruiting others to become Prancing Horse volunteers!
- Donate office supply or farm store gift cards!

## **Dismissal Policy for Volunteers**

Prancing Horse values the contributions of our volunteers; we could not exist without you! However, we do reserve the right to dismiss a volunteer if his or her behavior jeopardizes the safety of our riders or our horses. The following may result in the dismissal of a volunteer:

- Inappropriate and/or abusive behavior towards humans
- Inappropriate and/or abusive behavior towards horses
- Failure to follow farm rules
- Failure to follow established safety procedures
- Use of profanity, drugs, alcohol or tobacco
- Consistently late or absent from designated class with no notification.

## **Glossary of Impairments**

The following is designed to be used as a guide for the lay person otherwise unfamiliar with common physical and mental impairments. The information contains some generalizations that may not be true in every case. This is definitely not a complete list of impairments that may be encountered in our program.

### **Cerebral Palsy**

A neurological impairment primarily involving control of movement, resulting from brain damage occurring around the time of birth from either bleeding into the brain or from lack of oxygen; also includes traumatic brain injury sustained by children under 2 years of age.

*Frequent Characteristics* Increased muscle tone resulting in tightness of muscles, especially in the inner thighs and calves; impaired balance, often with exaggerated startle reflex, often resulting in difficulty maintaining an erect sitting posture; impaired coordination. Symptoms vary greatly among children. Neurological involvement may affect just legs, just arm and leg on one side of the body, or all four extremities. Often esthetics (leg braces) are worn, and crutches, walkers or wheelchairs may be needed for mobility. There may be communication and mental impairment as well.

*Physical Benefits* Rhythmic movement of the horse, as well as position astride the horse, relaxes muscles and challenges balance. Movement of the horse results in pelvic movement which mimics the pelvic movement in normal walking. Coordination is challenged in rein use and a variety of games on horseback.

*Emotional and Cognitive Benefits* Partnership with a large animal as well as learning the skills involved in a new sport offer significant challenges and benefits to social interaction, self-esteem and cognitive skills, including focusing attention. Motivation is generally inherent, due to the nature of horseback riding. For persons without the ability to walk, or with significant difficulty in walking, horseback riding offers the experience of freedom of movement.

### **Traumatic Brain Injury**

A neurological impairment resulting from injury to a previously normal brain during trauma, such as an automobile accident. Often there is a period of coma immediately after the injury. Severity of the impairment varies depending on the degree of permanent damage as well as the location of the damage.

*Frequent Characteristics* Usually one side of the body is more involved than the other; tight muscles with decreased control over movement, poor balance, impaired speech and reasoning skills; may have personality change, including decreased inhibition and mood swings.

*Physical Benefits* See Cerebral Palsy

*Emotional and Cognitive Benefits* See Cerebral Palsy. Also can provide opportunity to problem solve and sequence as well as stimulate memory, such as when learning a riding pattern.

## **Autism**

Impairment in social interaction and communication of unknown cause, frequently with self-stimulating behavior, aversion to certain sensory stimuli, especially touch and sound. Different people with autism can have very different symptoms. The current classification, called the autism spectrum, ranges from mild to severe. Hansberger's syndrome is part of this spectrum, at the milder range.

*Frequent Characteristics* Persons with autism generally have limited eye contact, limited speech and difficulty with changes in routines; emotional outbursts are common. Intelligence can be normal or diminished. Physical impairment may or may not be present, but if present are usually mild, more commonly affecting more complex skills. These individuals can be very challenging to work with due to a combination of limited communication, rigid behavior and emotional outbursts. Wearing a helmet or being touched, especially lightly, by a sidewalker can be aversive. Long periods of waiting are generally poorly tolerated.

*Physical Benefits* Persons with autism often find movement a pleasurable sensory experience, whereas light touch and sound can be aversive. The rhythmical movement of the horse generally has a calming influence on their nervous systems.

*Emotional and Cognitive Benefits* Social interaction can be facilitated using emotional connection to the horse. Language and cognitive skills are challenged during riding and participation in games. Length of attention can be extended.

## **Down Syndrome**

This is a genetic disorder caused by an extra chromosome that results in a combination of physical signs and mental impairment.

*Frequent Characteristics* Individuals with Down syndrome are generally shorter than average, particularly with shorter arms and legs. Muscle tone is low and ligaments are generally lax, typically resulting in more “floppy” postures and muscle weakness. There are typical physical signs, including facial and hand abnormalities. Language is generally diminished and the degree of accompanying mental impairment varies greatly. A small percentage of individuals with Down syndrome have a neck condition known as Atlanto-Axial Insufficiency (AAI) in which lax ligaments permit subluxation of the neck vertebral bones, putting the individual at risk for paralysis. Individuals with AAI cannot participate in horseback riding. All riders with Down syndrome must have had an x-ray which is negative for Atlanto-Axial Insufficiency.

*Physical Benefits* Movement of the horse can help increase muscle tone. Riding helps strengthen many muscles of the body, including abdominal and back muscles as well as leg and arm muscles.

*Emotional and Cognitive Benefits:* Same as above.

**Note:** Many other syndromes result in mental impairment, ranging from mild to profound. Therapeutic riding can be beneficial to most persons with mental impairment.

## **Attention Deficit Disorders and Learning Disabilities**

Children with attention deficits, often with a component of hyperactivity, have limited ability to focus their attention and therefore have difficulty in school. They are typically easily distracted, both by sights and sounds. They frequently have accompanying learning disabilities, such as dyslexia. Not all persons with learning disabilities have attention deficit disorders. Mild motor incoordination can also be present.

*Physical Benefits* Movement of the horse can be calming and help focus attention. Skills of horseback riding help develop body image, bilateral coordination and stability, often diminished in persons with attention deficit disorder.

*Emotional and Cognitive Benefits* Self-esteem and social interaction can be developed. With the horse helping focus attention, a variety of cognitive skills can be addressed.

### **Sensory Integration Dysfunction**

A neurological disorder causing difficulties with processing information from the five classic senses (vision, auditory, touch, olfaction, and taste), the sense of movement (vestibular system), and/or the positional sense (proprioception). For those with SID, sensory information is perceived abnormally. Unlike blindness or deafness, sensory information is received by people with SID; the difference is that information is processed by the brain in an unusual way that may cause distress or confusion.

Sensory integration disorders vary between individuals in their characteristics and intensity. Children can be born hypersensitive or hyposensitive to varying degrees and may have trouble in one sensory modality, a few, or all of them. Hypersensitivity is also known as sensory defensiveness. Examples of hypersensitivity include feeling pain from clothing rubbing against skin, an inability to tolerate normal lighting in a room, a dislike of being touched (especially light touch) and discomfort when one looks directly into the eyes of another person.

Hyposensitivity is characterized by an unusually high tolerance for environmental stimuli. A child with hyposensitivity might appear restless and seek sensory stimulation.

In treating sensory dysfunctions, a "just right" challenge is used: giving the child just the right amount of challenge to motivate him and stimulate changes in the way the system processes sensory information but not so much as to make him shut down or go into sensory overload.

*Physical Benefits* See Attention Deficit Disorders

*Emotional and Cognitive Benefits* See Attention Deficit Disorders

### **Spina Bifida**

A condition caused by a defect occurring before birth in which the spine and spinal cord are defective, allowing a protrusion of the spinal cord out of its protective covering. This generally requires surgical repair in the newborn period.

*Frequent Characteristics* There is resultant loss of muscle control and sensation below the level of damage. This can range from total paralysis of the legs and trunk muscles, to only paralysis of muscles in the feet; the areas with loss of sensation are also dependent on the level of damage.

Typically there is loss of control of bowel and bladder. Hydrocephalus, a condition in which excess cerebral spinal fluid collects in the cavities of the brain (“water on the brain”) is also frequently present with spina bifida. Placement of a shunt to drain excess fluid prevents further brain damage. Mental impairment can be present. Use of orthotics (braces) is common. Crutches, walkers or wheelchairs may be used for mobility.

***Special Consideration*** Since sensation may be poor; a rider may need a fleece pad over the saddle to protect the skin.

*Physical Benefits* Stimulates balance and helps strengthen muscles above the area of paralysis. For persons without the ability to walk, or with difficulty walking, horseback riding offers freedom of movement.

*Emotional and Cognitive Benefits* See above.

**Note:** Persons with spinal cord injury, such as paraplegia, have similar characteristics to those of spina bifida. However, their injury occurs after a period of normal development.

### **Seizure Disorder**

A seizure is a disruption of brain function that is manifested by loss of consciousness, abnormal motor activity or sensory disturbances. Seizures may be extremely mild and barely noticeable, moderate, or severe with convulsions and complete loss of control (grand mal seizure). Individuals with cerebral palsy and traumatic brain injury may also experience seizures. Uncontrolled, grand mal seizures are a contraindication for riding. If a rider experiences a grand mal seizure, he or she should be removed from the horse and placed on the ground away from objects.

**Thank you for your interest in volunteering with the Prancing Horse Therapeutic Riding Center. Remember, we expect you to ask questions. We look forward to getting to know you!**



