



# DISABILITY FACT SHEET

## AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

### What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?

- Autism is a complex developmental disability.
- There is a delay or abnormal functioning in:
  - Social interaction
  - Language used in social communication
  - Symbolic or imaginative play
- People with Autism may demonstrate unusual responses to people or objects and show resistance to changes in their routine.
- Individuals may experience sensitivities to sights, sounds, touch, smells and tastes and may:
  - Block ears
  - Smell everything
  - Self-injure through biting or hurting themselves
  - Demonstrate repetitive body movements such as rocking or hand flapping

### Benefits from working with RDA

- **Abnormal Sensory Responses**
  - Riding stimulates the tactile senses both through touch and environmental stimuli. The many sounds of the outdoor farm situation help to involve the auditory system  
The rider learns to differentiate significant from less significant stimuli in the environment. An improvement in this area occurs as the rider learns to attend to their horse and those things that may influence the horse rather than attending to the environment in general.
- **Concentration**
  - Programs include educational concepts, learning numbers, colours, shapes, patterns and sequencing. Memory and concentration can be improved through playing games.
- **Social Isolation**
  - Group lessons provide riders with the opportunity to join in with their peers and understand concepts of teamwork and participation in social rituals such as appropriate greetings and thanking volunteers
- **Psychological Benefits**
  - Adaptive equipment assists riders to participate in a sport to the best of their ability. This includes competition opportunities. Learning to control the horse and other skills provides riders with a sense of achievement.
- **Resistance to Change; obsessed with maintaining routine in their world**
  - New horses, volunteers and activities are introduced one at a time where possible. New experiences teach riders to cope with changing environments.
- **Abnormal ways of relating to people, objects and events**
  - Through regular routines and game playing, riders learn about appropriate behaviours, saying please and thank you, team work and care for animals.
- **Speech and language difficulties**
  - The excitement of riding encourages riders to speak and communicate about their activities.

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### Connor's Story



Connor has Autism which makes it difficult for him to concentrate and to communicate. New experiences are very challenging for Connor. When Connor first started riding at Jennibrook Farm RDA he cried and wouldn't pat or sit on his horse. Now he enjoys every visit. He laughs, responds to instructions and concentrates on the games we play. He tells his horse to go and stop and kisses Token goodbye after every lesson.

Anecdotal evidence supports the positive benefits of horse riding and the successes that RDA has seen in riders like Connor occur every day. Riders with Autism, particularly boys under 8 years like Connor, now make up the largest percentage of RDA riders in Australia.

In 2013, Connor became the face of RDA Australia! This engaging photo (left) of Connor playing games at his RDA Centre, was selected for the 2013 RDA Awareness Week campaign. Posters of Connor and his horse Token were sent out to every RDA Centre in Australia and displayed at local businesses, saddlery stores and shopping centres.

### Autism in RDA

- Riders with Autism make up 23% of all riders in RDA.
- Of the 1404 RDA clients with Autism
  - Male: 867 (62%)
  - Female: 537 (38%)
- Autism is most predominant in the 11-20 age bracket
  - Male: 456
  - Female: 295
- In RDA, males are more highly represented than females in every age bracket

