

# In a world first scientific study, straight from the horse's mouth, we explore the benefits of horse riding for children with cerebral palsy.



Narrated by Sigrid Thornton

**More Than Horseplay**, a half hour television documentary, follows a world first study into the therapeutic benefits of horseback riding for children with cerebral palsy. To ensure the innovative study is statistically significant the Riding for the Disabled Association (RDA) recruits more than ninety children with cerebral palsy and their families, as well as more than sixty volunteers and twenty five horses. Volunteers begin with specialist training to cope with the unique circumstances, as the children have never ridden before. Starting with a detailed physical assessment at the Royal Children's Hospital Gait Laboratory and completing a 'quality of life' questionnaire, the children commit to ride the ten-week program.

Was Winston Churchill right in saying "there something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of man".

**More Than Horseplay** focuses on three children; Lachlan aged eleven, Georgia five and Angus who is just four years old. As we meet the children and their families we understand their hopes and expectation. We explore the scientific research methods and hypotheses. Will riding really improve the quality of life for children with disabilities?

The research team is lead by Professor Kerr Graham, internationally renowned Orthopaedic Surgeon at Melbourne's Royal Children's Hospital. Under the guidance of "hippotherapist" (horse physiotherapist) Barbara Heine, together with researchers from Deakin University School of Physiotherapy and Riding for the Disabled, the scientific study measures the physical and emotional benefits of horse riding for children with various levels of cerebral palsy.

Barbara Heine qualified as a physiotherapist before combining her work with her passion for horses, and her unique combination of skills has made her internationally renowned in her field. Barbara explains that the horses' gait mimics the human gait for children who are unable to walk independently and this assists them to improve balance and strength, but will this study prove that they are all backing the right horse?

Disaster strikes in the middle of the study placing the whole research project in jeopardy. Overnight an outbreak of equine influenza forces a nation wide ban on all horse movement. The tenacity of the team sees the program continue but with strict quarantine measures in place.

By the end the children are visibly riding with confidence. We witness the sheer joy they experience through the closeness and warmth provided by the horses as they ride. Overall the experience has a profound impact enriching lives, for some the transformation is physical and for others poignantly emotional but all share a common dream, to continue horse riding in the future. Proving that a "man on horse is spiritually as well as physically bigger than man on foot" – John Steinbeck.

This is a film with a wonderful combination of ground breaking world first science, and the visible delight of children learning to ride a horse. This touching subject is filled with energy and vitality and will thrill the audience when simple movement becomes a reality.



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