

Jack's Story - the beginning . . .

Jack's Story - week 1

Jack, who is 31/2 years old, came to RDA at Raymond Terrace this week with his mum Elisa for his first ride here. He had only ridden a horse once before.

Jack was excited and even began talking about 'Dora horse' before they got to the RDA gates. This was the result of a visit a few weeks earlier to see how suited he would be to riding a horse.

When they arrived it was a case of check in, get weighed (1), find a hard hat to fit and mount his horse.



Jack found Dora, she is just the right height and gave Jack a really fun time with his windmill and helpers. You can see he rides on a sheepskin with a roller to hold onto. For extra support he has two side walkers and a horse leader. (2)



During the session he was so excited that he was loud, engaged and fully present (3). When he was riding Dora, it was with pure, 100%, joy and he was so proud of his achievement. He displayed 'joint attention' he wanted his mum to see him and acknowledge his accomplishment, he was on the back of a horse and in that moment, for both Jack and Elisa, life was truly perfect.

During the week, since his session, Elisa is overjoyed to share with us that Jack has continued to give eye contact 90% of the time and is talking in lots of short sentences, which is not usual for him. He's played and shared on at least one occasion each day since and has been happy. Truly, happy.

In interview Elisa was quite candid about Jack and the following details give you an idea of what it is like for someone supporting a lovely child who has (classic) Autism, a Global Developmental Delay, an Over Growth Syndrome and Juvenile Arthritis. Jack also has some related medical issues like hypertension and is low verbal (severe language delay), he can label items and people but sentences are hard for him.

What has changed in Jack's behaviour? Last Tuesday he began riding with RDA he was engaged, present, happy and extremely proud. This one experience has impacted his whole week, talking in 5+ word sentences, being aware of others, eye contact, sharing with others (which is hard for any 3 year old let alone a 3 year old with a disability), he's been happy and has displayed imaginary and appropriate play skills. He has mentioned "Dora" his pony, a number of times and got out his toy horses and had his toys 'riding' them.

His outlook has changed and I am so excited for him for his next ride.

Jack's Story - week 2

Elisa had to wake Jack to take him to RDA this week, as he was extremely tired. Once they arrived at RDA the process of helmet on, find horse, mount horse was a bit too much for this young man. He wanted to ride Dora immediately, however as we know that doesn't happen until the other parts of the process are complete and we had a big cry and a few tears.

Once he was mounted Jack immediately became silent and calm as he had done the first week. As a result of his tiredness he was very relaxed and he began to fall asleep riding Dora whilst hanging onto his toy horse that he brought with him; it looks very similar to Dora so it had a ride too.



Jack loved every moment of his second ride and was very proud of what he was doing. There is a mirror along one side of the indoor arena and he discovered his reflection in it and was rather impressed with what he saw.

Due to Jack being so tired his ride finished 15 minutes early. We do this as a precaution as we don't want a rider to fall off and injure themselves or their assistants. Also it leaves them with a good experience which hopefully means they will want to come riding again.

On the way home, Jack again, spoke of "Dora Horse" and has kept up the eye contact and joint attention that was sparked by the original session and continued this week.

Jack's Story - week 3

Week three was a bit different for Jack as mum couldn't come with him to RDA, she was poorly with a nasty bug; however Aunty Dee was able to bring him instead so he didn't miss out.

When they arrived he wasn't too impressed with the length of time it took to get changed and was getting quite frustrated at how long it takes to put a helmet on. All he wanted to do was ride Dora and he was very keen to get to her. Once there he petted her and when he eventually got on board he was quite verbal and was obviously enjoying this new friendship he has made with 'his horse'.

During the session Jack put a ball through a hoop (1); he didn't want to move on from it and he actually didn't miss that often. Jack went over some jumps (2) and said the colour of each one AND LOVED IT! He also had a go at holding Dora's mane and from a sensory angle he loved that too! (3) He smiled and giggled.



Afterwards they went for a ride outside and he was talking the volunteer's ears off the whole way. He noticed people watching him on the way back and gave a big smile and said "hi Aunty Dee". He was so happy and calm this week and there was no fighting when it was time to end, he even tried to take his helmet off himself.



Jack's Story - week 4

This is our last week of following Jack so we are cutting straight to the action:-

Jack undertook a number of different activities which all help in some way to develop his gross and fine motor skills. Gross motor skills are developed by, amongst other things, the act of sitting up tall on his horse and leaning forward to reach something and then sitting back upright; this helps strengthen his core muscles. Examples of activities that help develop fine motor skills are picking up small items using his fingers and placing the items in specified places.

During the session the horse leader and side walkers incorporated language opportunities for identifying objects, colours and shapes whilst riding around the arena. One opportunity was collecting wooden horses from the top of one 45 gallon drum which was set up to look like a paddock and each time it was Jack's turn he collected a horse from one paddock and took it to another one set up nearby. As you can see from the pictures he was really enjoying this activity.



He also threw balls and shot hoops again as it was something Jack had enjoyed the previous week. Jack was a bit hit and miss on the day, however, he still loved it and everyone was so encouraging.

As part of his verbal communication skills Jack is being taught commands such as "walk on" and "whoa" and to pet his "Dora horse" as a thank you at the end of the session.

Towards the end of the session Jack was given an Easter basket to collect foam eggs from around the arena. He was then encouraged to count up how many he had collected and was then allowed to trade them for chocolate ones. His excitement was barely containable.

We shall return to see how much more Jack has improved in a year's time. Thanks to Jack and Elisa for allowing us to follow them for these four weeks, hopefully it gives you a good insight into what we do here at Riding for the Disabled Association, Raymond Terrace and Lower Hunter and you will agree that RDA proves Riding Develops Abilities.

The following quote from Elisa may be true for a lot of people with special children. "If only he could complete his schooling years on the back of a horse!" Wouldn't that be wonderful.