



OPENING GAITS  
THERAPEUTIC RIDING SOCIETY

# *Volunteer Manual*

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## *Welcome to Opening Gaits!*

No therapeutic riding program could exist without the dedication and support of its volunteers, and **Opening Gaits Therapeutic Riding Society (OG)** is no exception. Since our incorporation in December 1998, volunteers have dedicated thousands of volunteer hours to make our program possible, enriching the lives of hundreds of individuals living with physical, emotional, and cognitive challenges.

Volunteering with Opening Gaits is rewarding in many ways. Along with making a meaningful difference in the lives of our riders, our volunteers become part of a welcoming community, get great exercise, and, of course, spend time with our incredible horses.

At Opening Gaits, your contributions extend far beyond the arena. We value your ideas and encourage your feedback on everything from fundraising and program improvements to your observations while working with horses and riders. We also want to hear what inspires you to volunteer and how we can continue to make your experience enjoyable, meaningful, and rewarding.

Our volunteers are at the heart of Opening Gaits. Because you spend so much time working directly with our riders, your insights are invaluable in helping us provide the highest quality program possible. We are deeply grateful for your commitment and could not do this work without you.

Many of our volunteers have previous horse experience, and may notice that some of our practices differ from those used in other equestrian settings. These procedures have been developed to support the unique needs of our riders and to promote a safe, consistent learning environment. If you have questions, suggestions, or concerns, we encourage you to share them—we value open communication and continuous improvement.

This manual has been designed to introduce you to the Opening Gaits program and prepare you for your volunteer role. Please read it carefully, as the information it contains is important for both your safety and the well-being of our riders. Most importantly, enjoy your time with us as we work together to provide an exceptional program for some truly exceptional people.

Welcome to the Opening Gaits team—and remember, if you have a question, just ask. We're here to help.

***On behalf of our volunteer Board of Directors, Instructors, class participants and their caregivers, as well as your fellow volunteers, thank you for your interest in being part of our team!***

*Samantha Lethbridge*  
Executive Director & Equine Manager

## *Contact Information*

**Executive Director & Equine Manager — Samantha Lethbridge**

Email: [openinggaitsociety@gmail.com](mailto:openinggaitsociety@gmail.com) Office Phone/Text: (403) 254-4184

**Volunteer Coordinator & Instructor — Shirley Perry**

Contact Shirley through InstaTeam messaging, by phone (825) 712-5433,  
or email [shirleyperry@gmail.com](mailto:shirleyperry@gmail.com).

**A list of emergency contact numbers is posted on the white board, by the bathroom door.**

## *Barn Facility*

We operate out of a private stable located at:

**4 DeWinton Ridge Road, DeWinton, Alberta.**

Please respect the owners' privacy and do not share this address publicly.

- Speed limit of 20 Km/h (or less!) at all times on their private driveway.
- Be aware that there are dogs and cats on the property. (We have two barn cats — Starsky and Hutch.)
- Do NOT bring your own dog(s).
- Follow the driveway to the left (past the house) and drive toward the barn/arena.
- Park in the designated Volunteer Parking area.
- Parking spots closest to the entrance door are for handicapped parking/client use only.
- There is potable water on site, however, we recommend that you bring your own water and water bottle.
- There is a bathroom in the barn. Note that we are on a septic tank. (Be mindful of what you flush!)
- No smoking on the property.
- Do not enter fields or paddock areas without permission.
- The footing in the arena is sand. Wear comfortable shoes/boots!
- **Be aware of the barn layout and the location of emergency exits, fire extinguishers, water sources, first aid kits, and muster points.**
- There are five exits from the barn/arena — two 'garage doors' and three regular 'man' doors. In the event of a power outage, both horses and humans can use the regular doors.
- A copy of our *Emergency Action Plan* is posted on the wall in the barn and in the arena. A condensed version is below.

# *Emergency Action Plan Evacuation/Fire Procedure*

**We are located at: 4 DeWinton Ridge Road**

- There is NO landline or WiFi in the barn.
- Instructors and the Executive Director all carry cell phones in case of emergency.
- Volunteers may also use personal cell phones to call for help in an emergency.
- Immediately inform Instructors/and equine manager of any injuries.
- The muster point is in the southwest corner of the large paddock, outside the barn or the outdoor arena, whichever is the easiest to access.

**Horse First Aid Kit:** Located in the feed room.

**Human First Aid Kit:** Located in the first stall on your right, as you enter the barn, plus a small kit is in the arena.

**Fire Extinguishers:** Located at all exit points and mid barn.

**In the event of an emergency that requires evacuation, the Instructor will call 911 and delegate the evacuation procedures that are to be taken. Follow their instructions immediately. Do not try to be a 'hero!'**

**During a class:**

- Emergency dismount all riders and escort them and their caregivers from the building to the nearest Muster Point.
- Remove horses from the building to one of the *small paddocks*. (Remove tack if possible.)
- Secure the paddock gate(s) to keep the horses safe and confined in the paddock.
- The Executive Director/Instructor is to establish that all people and animals are removed from the barn/arena and shut all doors if evacuating.
- Do not re-enter the building.

## *Incident Report Forms*

- An incident report form must be completed for all incidents (no matter how small), even if the person does not seem to be hurt at the time. Please speak to an Instructor or the Executive Director if injured.
- The Instructor must review and sign the form after it has been completed and will submit it to the Executive Director.
- Forms are located in the file cabinet in the barn aisle or can be requested from the Instructor.

# *Communicating Class/Program Updates & Scheduling Volunteers*



<https://www.instateam.net/>

We utilize an easy-to-use online APP called 'InstaTeam' as our main form of communication for volunteers.

**Please download this app from the app store (phone or desktop).**

**Look for our group name: LETGGN**

**You will have to ask to join the OG team and one of the admin will accept you.**

**Please use your full name and a photo of yourself on your profile, not a cartoon character. :)**

When you log in, you will see events created, from which you will select the event, click on "sign up" items and indicate that you will be attending. If you have difficulty using the app, please ask our Executive Director or Volunteer Coordinator for help.

We check InstaTeam daily to ensure that we have enough volunteers for our classes. We may put an urgent call out for volunteers so please check if you have any notifications.

**Signed up for a class but then discover you can't make it?** No problem! We understand that things can happen and, sometimes, there's a change of plans. Please be sure to update your status on InstaTeam as soon as you become aware that you will not be able to attend a class. We depend on you!

**Class cancellations due to weather:** If we cancel a class due to weather it will be changed on InstaTeam and you will get a notification. If in doubt, please text our Executive Director or Volunteer Coordinator or check the InstaTeam app.

**Car Pooling:** If you find you live near someone else that is volunteering, consider car pooling to the barn to help save on gas costs.

**Food for all?:** Fancy bringing out a special treat to share with your fellow volunteers? You are welcome to do so! There is a place on the InstaTeam app to let us know you are bringing food to share.

**Food for yourself:** Bring your own lunch and snacks.

## *General Information*

**Vulnerable Sector Check:** All volunteers are required to undergo a RCMP vulnerable sector Criminal Records Check (CRC). The application form is with the volunteer paperwork.

- Print the CRC application and submit the completed form to your local RCMP office before coming to volunteer. There is normally no fee for this service.
- Provide a copy of your verified CRC to the Volunteer Coordinator or Executive Director.

**Cell phone use:** All cell phones must be turned to vibrate/silent and kept in your pocket during classes. If you need to take a call please advise the Instructor.

**Photographs/Videos:** Always ask your Instructor if you are permitted to take photographs/videos.

## *Dress Code*

Therapy horses are special horses. They are selected for their calm temperaments and high tolerance to noise, movements and distractions. However, no horse is totally “bomb-proof.” Please be aware of the unpredictable nature of the horses you are working around.

- **Clothing:** Wear long pants and fitted shirts/jackets that can be buttoned or zipped up, so they will not flap or present a tripping hazard.
- If you have OG clothing please wear it in classes, to help identify you as a valued volunteer.
- **Dress in layers:** The barn and arena are heated but may still be chilly in winter months. We may also take lessons outside, weather permitting, so please dress accordingly.
- **Gloves:** Are recommended for those leading horses.
- **Footwear:** Sturdy closed-toed, closed-healed shoes/boots are required. (No slip-ons, flip-flops, Crocs, sandals, etc.) Riding or hiking boots are ideal. The footing in the arena is sand.
- **Jewelry:** Leave your jewelry at home as it may get caught on tack or potentially grabbed by a rider.
- **Long hair?** Tie it back or wear a hat. Some clients will love to pull your hair and it is safer if it is tied back when working around horses.

## *Horse & Handler Safety*

For the safety and well-being of the horses, riders, and volunteers in our program, we have developed standard procedures, specifically related to therapeutic riding programs.

Be sure you are familiar with these procedures and check with staff or an Instructor for clarification on any point you are unsure of.

Some volunteers bring a wealth of knowledge to our program, while others may be relative newcomers to the equine world. All are equally valued, but please recognise that the Instructor is in charge of the class and that their decision is final and deviation from the lesson plan is prohibited.

If you are an experienced equestrian, there are certain actions and shortcuts that you may be comfortable with and can perform safely, but that can potentially be hazardous to our students and less experienced volunteers.

Please understand that we all have to adapt to what works for a particular rider/horse to make the program run smoothly. And, always remember that you will have students (and other volunteers) observing you. Be sure to always act with caution, for your actions may be imitated.

### **Moving Around a Horse**

- Be aware of horses' blind spots: under the neck, directly behind, under the belly, and about a foot directly in front of the face.
- Always approach a horse from the side, where they can see you clearly.
- Speak to them in a calm, low voice before touching him.
- Do not cross under a horse's neck or under/over the lead rope when they are tied.
- Cross behind a tied horse close to his hindquarters, with your hand on them the entire time, so they are aware of your movement.
- If a horse is not tied, you may cross in front.
- Do not kneel down when grooming a horse.
- Be aware of your surroundings and always leave yourself an "out."

### **Catching/Leading a Horse**

- NEVER GO ALONE when turning out or bringing in horses.
- Always use a halter and lead rope when moving horses from paddocks to the barn, etc.
- Keep reins and lead ropes off the ground
- Never wrap lead ropes or reins around your hands/body, or in loops that could be pulled tight should the horse back up.
- Approach horses from their left side, not from behind, and speak to them before touching them.
- Lead horses from their left side, your right hand approximately 6-to-12 inches from the clip. Your left hand should hold the end of the lead rope, in a figure eight loop.
- Ensure that the slack between your hands is not below your knees (a tripping hazard).
- Walk beside a horse when leading, not in front of his head or behind his shoulder.
- If a horse pulls, DO NOT pull against them (which may frighten the horse). Speak in a calm voice to encourage the horse to stop backing. Do not engage in a "tug of war" with a horse.
- Be assertive, but not forceful or frightening. If a horse is reluctant to walk forward, ask them to step to the side (turn) and then resume your forward walk once they start moving.

### **Tying a Horse**

- Tie only by the halter with a lead rope, never by reins or anything attached to a bit/bridle.
- Tie only in designated places in the barn alley/breezeway. (Never the arena).
- Tie all horses 'head to head', never head to tail. They should all be facing the same direction, with their bums towards the tack room stall.
- The grooming area in the barn has short straps with quick release buckles, affixed to the steel stall bars with twine. These should be used when the horse is standing for grooming and tacking up. (One stall has a water pipe. Never tie to this!)
- If necessary, you may also tie with the lead rope, using a quick release knot.
- Be aware that tying too short may cause a horse to panic and pull. Tying too long could cause a horse to step through the loop and injure themselves.
- Don't leave tied horses unattended unless secure, and never leave reins dangling.

## Turning Out Horses

- Lead horses from the barn/arena using a halter and lead rope.
- ASK your Instructor when and where the horse should be turned out.
- Lead the horse to ensure it has fully exited the building by at least two horse lengths. Then, stop and turn them around to face the barn. It is now safe to take off the halter.

## Grooming Horses

- Each horse has their own individual grooming kit, stored in the white cupboard near the bathroom.
- Always put the grooming kit and any tack BEHIND the horse, never in front.
- Ensure that each horse is properly tied in the breezeway before you start grooming.
- If you are not familiar with the tools in the grooming kit — ASK!
- If you are not familiar with, or comfortably, picking up the horse's hooves to clean them. — ASK.
- Always pick hooves downwards and away from you and the horse's frog.
- Special note about our Warmblood, Party Man. He does not have his back feet picked due to shivers.

## Tacking Up Horses

- **When tacking up, the first thing you should do is check the whiteboard in the tack room for which tack is required for each rider/horse combo.**
- **Halters and lead ropes** — labeled by horse's name — are hung on a rack, by name, in the aisle leading to the arena. Please do up the halter and hang it from the crown and wrap the rope twice to keep off the floor.
- **Bridles** — labeled by horse's name — hang on the right-hand side of the tack room, as you enter the stall. Hang up bridles by the crown. Note that most riders do not use traditional bridles and reins.
- **Nylon webbing reins** are used by most of our riders. They are to be clipped to the top 'O' ring on the halter. Red is right. The left is blue.
- **Girths (cinches)** and also hang on the right-hand side of the tack room wall. They are labeled and organized by length. They hang on the right-hand side of the tack room, as you enter the stall. In *most cases*, girths are to be removed from saddles after use. Put cinches back in size order.
- **Western saddle pads** are on the back wall of the tack room, and labeled by horse's name.
- **Western and special therapy saddles** are on the left side of the tack room and (most) are identified as 'W-1, W-2, etc.
- **English saddles, girths and pads** are in the big cupboard just inside the feed room.
- Ensure that saddle pads are 'tented' at the withers, to prevent rubbing, and that cinches/girths are done up SLOWLY and rechecked upon entry to the arena and before mounting.
- If you are using a bridle with a bit, please be careful not to knock the horse's teeth putting on and taking off. If a bit has been used please wash the bit before hanging up the bridle. Remember to never tie a horse up with the bridle.

## Blanketing Horses

- Some of our horses wear rainsheets, fly sheets or winter blankets (rugs), depending on the weather and each individual horse's needs.
- If you are not familiar with how to blanket a horse. **ASK! Watch and learn before you try it.**
- Lift and slip the blanket over the horse's withers area. Do not throw.
- Adjust the blanket front to back and side to side.

- Start with the buckles on the chest area, then belly bands, then back leg straps.
- The leg straps go around the same leg on the same side but intertwine in the middle, they are never to cross over to the opposite side.
- When removing blankets, work in reverse. Unclip back leg straps first, then belly bands, then chest and neck buckles. Remove the blanket from front to back.
- Fold and drape/hang the blanket as instructed. If it is wet ,let staff know so we can hang it to dry and swap out to a dry rug.
- If you notice anything rubbing or needing repairs please let staff know.

## **Warming Up Our Horses**

More experienced volunteers may be invited to mount up and help warm up horses before lessons start. If you are offered this privilege, be aware that you are riding at your own risk at all times. Make sure you have a current, signed waiver before handling or mounting a horse.

### **Always:**

- Double check your girth/cinch before you mount.
- Wear a riding helmet.
- Use a mounting block or the ramp. No mounting from the ground. (Just because 'you can' doesn't mean you should.)

## **Working with a Rider Around a Horse**

- All riders must wear a helmet and safety belt around the horses. Some individual riders are excused from wearing a safety belt because they do not have side walkers. This is at the discretion of the Instructor.
- Most riders have their own helmets. Extra helmets are located in bins in the riders' lounge.
- Safety belts are hung in the alley to the arena, next to the halters.
- Provide direct supervision (one on one, within arm's reach) to riders while grooming, tacking, mounting, riding or dismounting.
- Ensure that riders are following safety protocols, especially while on the ground around horses.
- Be mindful that children, in particular, are likely to go in a horse's blind spots, such as under the neck.

# *Horse Leaders*

(Age 16+ only)

- The Instructor will assign our more experienced volunteers to be horse leaders. Please respect their assignment.
- The horse leader's main duty is to ensure the horse is under control at all times.
- The degree of assistance will depend on the rider and on the horse.
- We encourage the rider to be in control to the best of their ability and the horse leader assists when required.
- As the rider progresses, the assistance of the horse leader will decrease.
- The leader keeps talking to a minimum to concentrate on the horse.

## **General Leading Guidelines:**

- Lead the horse from the left side (unless requested to change sides), positioning yourself between the horse's eye and shoulder
- Keep both hands on the lead rope at all times. (*See Leading a Horse, above.*)
- Do not let the slack from the lead rope drop below your knees.
- Do not wrap the lead rope around your hand or body or in a loop that may pull tight.
- Do not put your fingers through rings in the halter.
- Do not hand-feed treats in the arena.
- Do not have any horse treats in your pockets.
- Stay in the centre of the arena until advised by the instructor to move into position for mounting.

## **Mounting Riders:**

- Wait to bring a horse into the mounting area (wheelchair ramp or mounting block) until the Instructor has requested it.
- Bring the horse as close as possible to the mounting ramp/block and ask the horse to stop square. Do not allow the horse to walk off until the Instructor gives the command.
- While halted, stand by the horse's head at a 45-degree angle facing his shoulder.
- Beware that holding a horse's halter tightly may cause him to become anxious and move and some horses require a longer lead line to settle.
- Once the rider is mounted you **MUST** keep the horse as close to the ramp as possible so the Instructor can be with the rider when leaving the ramp. **Do not turn away from the ramp!**
- Once you are about a metre past the ramp/door, stop the horse so that stirrup length and the cinch can be checked by the Instructor.

## **Lesson Time:**

- Be attentive to the Instructor's and sidewalkers' directions.
- Limit discussion with side walkers to what pertains to the lesson.
- At the halt, stand facing the horse's shoulder at a 45-degree angle. Do not stand directly in front of the horse.
- Lead at an even pace with gradual wide turns to avoid throwing a rider off balance.
- Plan your turns to allow room for side walkers to stay beside the rider and leave enough room for them at the wall and near obstacles.

- Communicate in advance changes in direction or pace to side walkers and the rider.
- Maintain a two-horse length distance from other horses at all times. Be aware of the other horses in the arena.
- Give riders time to process commands. Aid as little as necessary to maintain safety and continue with the flow of the lesson.

**Use verbal commands, with the horse's name, to initiate movement** if the horse has not responded to the rider's attempts. Examples:

**To walk:** "Walk on, Nigel."

- Give the horse the opportunity to make the first step, then walk forward yourself.
- Look forward in the direction you are going, not at the horse.
- Once a horse walks, maintain a neutral position between shoulder and eye with some slack in the lead rope.
- Do not drag a slower horse around the arena.
- Ask the Instructor for suggestions on how to achieve an active walk.

**To halt:** "Whoa, Nigel"

- Stop yourself, facing forward.
- Follow up by pulling the lead rope gently back toward the horse's chest.
- Relax tension as soon as the horse halts.

**To trot:** "Trot, Nigel" — ONLY TROT WHEN REQUESTED BY THE INSTRUCTOR.

- When changing pace, ensure your side walkers are prepared and have had time to give appropriate support holds if necessary. If you are not comfortable running beside the horse let your instructor know so she can temporarily swap you out.
- Give the horse the opportunity to transition, then jog beside him.
- If the horse is reluctant, command again, move forward and give light steady forward pressure.
- Release pressure as soon as the horse trots.
- You may slow an eager horse's trot by commanding in a low voice, "Easy, Nigel."
- Jog more slowly and pull back gently toward the horse's chest if they do not respond to a verbal cue.
- The same method is used to transition back to the walk, with the verbal command, "Walk, Nigel."

**In an emergency:**

- Bring all the horses to a halt immediately.
- If a rider is dismounted (falls off), move the horse a safe distance away and halt.
- Wait for the Instructor's directions. Other riders may also be asked to dismount.
- Allow the Instructor and side walkers to attend to the rider.
- Complete an incident report. The Executive Director will follow up the next day.

## *Side Walkers*

- Side walkers are an integral part of our overall program. We couldn't do this without them!
- There may be one or two sidewalkers, depending on the rider's ability.
- The side walker's primary responsibility is to ensure the safety of the rider.
- The degree of assistance will depend on the balance and ability of the rider.
- Side walkers also assist the Instructor by keeping the rider focused on tasks, explaining instructions, physically assisting the rider in doing a task (e.g., "hand over hand"), encouraging, socializing, correcting balance and body position and much more. Even singing!

### **Let's Get This Lesson Started!**

- Depending on their mobility, riders and their caregivers are expected to sit in the Riders' Lounge or the bench area in the arena until called forward to mount.
- Riders may not enter the arena unaccompanied.
- Ensure the rider is properly attired — boot with a small heel, long pants, jackets done up, helmet, and transfer belt (if required).
- Remain within arm's reach of a rider at all times.
- Riders may not mount until directed by the Instructor.
- Be sure to check the girth or cinch before mounting.
- During mounting, provide full support (pelvic or thigh hold) from the time the rider gets on the horse, walking adjacent to the ramp and until you halt to check stirrups etc. and then move to the middle of the arena to await the start of class. Always stop facing the exit/ramp so your horse can see what is happening and will not be surprised.
- The Instructor will direct what support is needed for each rider after this point.
- The Instructor will also adjust tack (stirrup length, girth) at this time.
- If you notice changes need to be made during the lesson, inform the Instructor immediately.
- Walk at the rider's knee. Avoid leaning on the horse and keep hands free, not in your pockets. Inform the Instructor if you need to stop for any reason (switch sides, tie a shoe, etc.). Do not leave your rider's side until someone has taken your place.
- Remember to be patient and give your rider time to process instructions. Break a task down into smaller steps or ask the Instructor for suggestions.

When correcting balance and positioning, let the rider try to correct it themselves first. If assistance is necessary, begin with legs, move up to hips, torso, and then shoulders. Be gentle and smooth, as some riders have very stiff joints.

If a rider removes their helmet, immediately ask the horse leader to halt the horse and inform the Instructor.

### **In an emergency: the side walker's responsibility is to stay with the rider.**

- Unless the Instructor directs riders to be dismounted, keep your rider mounted.

- Immediately provide full support with a pelvic or thigh hold. (See photos below.)
- If directed to dismount a rider, do so as quickly and safely as possible.
- Remove dismounted riders (unless injured) from the arena immediately and stay with them\ or hand off to the caregiver.
- Sidewalkers may be dismissed from a rider by the Instructor to call 911.

## *Different Types of 'Holds' for Our Clients/Riders*

Remember to keep your thumb tucked for all holds, except heel holds.

**PELVIC/THIGH HOLD**  
(maximum)



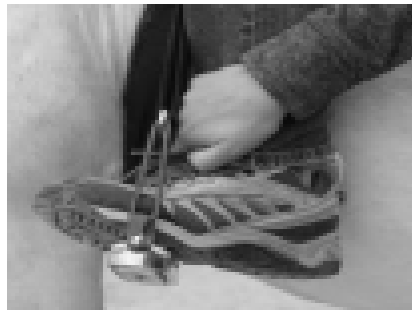
**KNEE HOLD**  
(medium)



**HEEL HOLD** (Minimum)



**ANKLE HOLD** (Minimum)



**TOE HOLD** (Minimum)



## *Points to Remember*

### **Be patient**

- Progress with some riders is measured in months and years. The degree of progress is not a reflection on the team of volunteers or Instructors; it is a function of the disability and may depend on the motivation of the rider.
- Most riders need to try a task multiple times before succeeding, and some tasks must be broken down into much smaller skills in order to be mastered.

### **Be positive**

- Have a great attitude and use lots of positive words and praise for small tasks completed.
- Remember that failure is OK — we all do things incorrectly when learning a new skill — and should be met with encouragement and “Try again!”
- Refrain from any critical or negative comments about riders, horses, Instructors or volunteers, especially in the presence of riders.
- Bring concerns directly to Instructors or the Executive Director.

### **Be attentive**

- Use safe practices at all times. Inattention and overconfidence cause accidents to happen.
- A relaxed, attentive, and confident volunteer helps a rider be relaxed, attentive and confident, too.

### **Be respectful**

- Treat each rider, regardless of ability, in a friendly and respectful manner and expect appropriate behavior in return.
- Address questions and conversation to the riders if it concerns them. First give the rider the opportunity to speak and make decisions. Caregivers, parents, and/or Instructors will provide additional information where necessary.

### **Be inquisitive**

- Read and understand safety and emergency procedures.
- Ask questions if there is any aspect of the program you do not understand.
- No question is foolish or insignificant.
- If you would like to pursue therapeutic riding further, training is available.

### **Be honest.**

- If you're not happy with your volunteer assignment, or are having difficulty, please tell us. We'd like you to derive satisfaction from your work. We value your time, dedication and enthusiasm and understand if this is not for you!

**Have fun!!** We want this to be a positive experience for everyone!

# *Benefits of Therapeutic Riding*

## **Body Localization and Abstraction**

- The rhythmic side-to-side, forward and backward movement of the horse mimics the human gait, moving a rider's pelvis and torso in the same motion as walking. This stimulation gently relaxes taut muscles and improves core strength, balance, and coordination. Learning new routines assists individuals who otherwise may experience difficulty with these tasks.
- Interacting with volunteers, other riders, Instructors and the horses improves social skills.
- Being able to participate in an activity like other able-bodied friends and family increases confidence. Lastly, the real success of therapeutic riding comes from most riders being highly motivated to learn new skills, simply because they genuinely enjoy riding!

## **Muscular Strength and Coordination**

- By performing physical tasks of increasing difficulty astride a walking horse, riders with decreased muscle tone gain strength while riders with spastic muscles experience a normalization of muscle tone. Both aid in creating better coordination.

## **Balance and Rhythm**

- A rider is continuously involved in interpreting and reacting to the horse's movements, helping to improve muscle control, gross and fine motor skills and overall balance.

## **Directionality and Laterality**

- Riders develop the ability to know and respond to right, left, up, down, forward and backward. Activities focusing on directing the horse toward a specific location are used to aid the student in developing spatial relationships.

## **Visual Acuity**

- Activities that require the student to direct and move their horse around or through objects develop the ability to see objects in the rider's field of vision and differentiate them meaningfully and accurately.

## **Anticipatory Response and Impulse Control**

- A rider develops the ability to anticipate the probable outcome of their behavior with the horse, both positively and negatively. This aids them in predicting the consequences of their own impulsive behavior, as thoughtful intentional actions are met with positive reinforcement (ex. calmly saying "Walk on" causes the horse to walk forward) while impulsive behavior is met with consequences (ex. removing a helmet stops the ride).
- Concentration, problem solving and decision making skills, insight, motivation, self-esteem, confidence, learning/practicing concepts e.g. letters, numbers, colours, distances, shapes etc. Therapeutic Riding has shown significant improvements in students' overall emotional well-being, and their sense of independence.

*Thank you for volunteering with Opening Gaits!*