

Dyspraxia: A guide for riding instructors



Dyspraxia, also known as Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD) affects movement and coordination in children and adults. It is surprisingly common, affecting around 5% of school-aged children with difficulties continuing into adulthood in most cases. Whilst Dyspraxia doesn't affect intelligence it can affect speech and non-motor skills such as organisation, planning, memory and attention. Together these difficulties make it hard for dyspraxic people to carry out everyday activities that others manage easily.

The health and wellbeing benefits of physical activity are well known, but negative experiences of PE, games and sports can have a long-lasting impact on dyspraxic people's confidence to take part. This is worrying as inactivity is linked to problems with fitness, weight, physical health and well-being. It is important to find ways to encourage and support dyspraxic people to take part in and enjoy physical activities throughout their lives.

Horse riding is good for dyspraxic people as it helps with balance, posture, strength and body awareness as well as confidence, self-esteem and social skills. Team sports are challenging for dyspraxic people as they require the individual to constantly adjust their body in response to changes in the environment, whereas horse riding can be done individually or in small groups. Some dyspraxic people have a special affinity for animals, while caring for a horse builds confidence and independence.

You may observe the following:

- Difficulty maintaining a good posture due to poor core stability and weakness in the pelvic and shoulder girdles
- Tires quickly
- Leaning to one side or falling forward due to poor balance
- Difficulty attending to instructions and a delay in responding, especially in a busy/noisy environment
- Takes longer to master new skills – this can cause problems with others in a group pick things up more quickly
- Difficulty following directional instructions due to poor spatial awareness
- Difficulty organising movements to get onto the horse, shorten the reins and so on

How you can help

- Choose a calm horse with a 'smooth' action, one that is unlikely to make any unpredictable movements
- Encourage the individual to spend time with the horse before even thinking about getting on to ride. This will really help with confidence.
- Use clear, concise language and give instructions in small chunks. Repeat, if necessary using the same words (this is especially important for people who struggle to process language)
- Over-learning is essential for people who have problems with their short-term memory. That is, they need to continue practicing newly acquired skills to ensure they are maintained and eventually, become automatic.
- Provide positive, precise and constructive feedback. Explain what should be done, rather than saying what was done incorrectly
- Avoiding telling the individual to 'try harder' – they are already working twice as hard as anyone else because of their movement difficulties
- Find out if the individual has any specific limitations or needs, for example tight hamstrings or very flexible joints. Discuss and identify necessary adjustments to ensure success
- In the early days, find somewhere with minimal distractions so the individual can really focus on developing their skills and confidence
- If individual lessons aren't an option, working with one other person or small groups is preferable. Some dyspraxic people struggle with spatial awareness and may have difficulty judging how close to get to another rider.
- Use of mirrors can help the individual monitor their sitting posture
- Provide side walkers as well as someone leading the reins until balance and confidence has improved
- Ensure each movement or movement sequence is mastered before adding another. Dyspraxic people often progress at a slower pace and need more practice than their peers
- Use visual cues to indicate 'left' and 'right', for example marking walls/fences with different colours/pictures, or encouraging the rider to wear a wrist band on their right wrist.
- Encourage use of body protectors to reduce the risk of injury
- Don't expect perfection – dyspraxic people may hold their hands and feet in positions that aren't quite right. Try to strike a balance that you as the instructor and the individual are comfortable with
- Recognise that a dyspraxic person may need more time to tack up. Give extra prompts and use picture reminders if necessary. Tacking up is good for manual dexterity so encourage perseverance.
- Encourage individuals to help with grooming and general horse care as this will help their motor skills as well as their confidence
- Encourage participation and reward effort -certificates, rosettes and badges can really boost self-esteem

See also:

[Dyspraxia and Horse Riding – Natalie Williams – The Blog With \(More Than\) One Post \(wordpress.com\)](#)

Useful links

[Riding for the Disabled Association \(RDA\) - Enriching lives through horses](#)

Further information available from:

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