

## Horse therapy with the mounted police

"Stefano can not speak, but he can recognize those who work fondly for his well-being - this is what the father of an autistic child wrote us and is our greatest reward", says Violante, a cop of the Trastevere-based mounted police squad in Rome. Together with her colleagues she has been working as "horse therapy assistants" in collaboration with specialized therapists since 2000.

"It's a team effort by the therapist, the instructor, the horse and the patient, - adds Nanda, a mounted officer of the Polizia di Stato - the main objective is to take small steps, helping the patient reach small goals. Thanks to the horse we can establish a relationship with the children and our task is facilitated by the uniform we wear."

Equine-assisted rehabilitation therapy is based on using the horse as a therapeutic instrument. The horse gait helps patients recover their muscle tone and recalls human pace, with great benefit to those who are unable to walk. It also helps speed up reaction times. The riders' desire to make the horse move means they are willing to perform specific actions set by the rehabilitation therapist.

The goal is to make sure that the riders transfers what they learn out of the riding stables so to improve their self confidence, stimulating their desire to learn and establish social relations.

The police officers participate in the project on voluntary basis, after attending ad hoc specialization courses, but more importantly, they are particularly sensitive to the difficult situations they come across, demonstrating they have those values for which their institution has decided to award the "St. Michael the Archangel Prize".

The award, instituted during the celebrations of the patron saint of the Italian National Police, has been warmly supported by the Police chief Antonio Manganelli, as a recognition to the noble values expressed by the police officers, which are also reflected in society.

"It is something that comes from the heart and you have to do it with so much love and commitment" says Nunzio, who joined his colleagues of the mounted police as "horse therapy assistant" five years ago.

Children's parents are the first to become aware of the effects of this kind of rehabilitation, as confirmed by Elena, another "police therapist": "We not only see happiness in the children's eyes but also in those of their parents."

"It is a gateway to learning: it awakes interest in things and in life; with this therapy my child becomes more aware of himself", tells the mother of Stanislao, a boy of 22, who has attended the police riding stables for ten years.

"The effects were miraculous on Riccardo, who suffers from autism - says his mother with a smile, he became more self confident, even at school and in everyday life. We have found a great family which welcomed us heartily into their house".

Italian version

05/10/2011