

PAWS'n'Hooves

Gentle Connection, Meaningful Moments

PAWS'n'Hooves is a PAWS Pet Therapy program that brings the calming presence and companionship of carefully selected horses and ponies to people who may benefit from meaningful animal interaction.

Like PAWS therapy dog visits, the program focuses on connection, comfort and wellbeing. Participants may spend time observing, patting, grooming or quietly interacting with a suitable horse or pony under the close supervision of a trained PAWS volunteer.

PAWS'n'Hooves is generally a ground-based program and does not involve riding.

Who Can Benefit?

PAWS'n'Hooves may be suitable for children, young people, older people, people living with disability, people experiencing mental health challenges, and those affected by social isolation, grief, trauma or difficult personal circumstances.

Visits may be offered through schools, aged-care services, disability and community programs, mental health services, wellbeing events and other approved settings.

Every participant is different. Activities should always be adapted to the person's age, abilities, confidence, communication needs and previous experience with horses.

Benefits of PAWS'n'Hooves

Horses and ponies can offer a gentle, non-judgmental presence that encourages people to slow down and engage with the moment. Positive interaction may help participants:

- Feel calmer and less anxious.
- Experience companionship and emotional comfort.
- Build confidence and a sense of achievement.
- Practise communication and social interaction.
- Develop patience, empathy and respect for boundaries.
- Improve concentration and engagement.
- Experience positive sensory stimulation through touch, movement and the outdoor environment.
- Develop a greater awareness of body language and non-verbal communication.
- Reconnect with animals, nature and the wider community.
- Create positive memories and experience moments of joy.

These benefits will vary between individuals. PAWS'n'Hooves is intended to support general wellbeing and should not be presented as treatment for a diagnosed condition.

What Might a Visit Include?

Depending on the participants, setting and individual animal, a PAWS'n'Hooves visit may include:

- Meeting and observing the horse or pony from a comfortable distance.
- Learning the animal's name, personality and body-language signals.
- Patting or gently grooming the animal.
- Talking to, reading to or spending quiet time beside the animal.
- Participating in simple, supervised care activities.
- Leading the animal through a short, controlled ground-based activity, where appropriate.
- Discussing kindness, trust, safety and responsible animal care.

Participation must always be voluntary. No person should be pressured to touch or approach an animal, and alternatives should be available for anyone who prefers to observe.

How the Program Should Be Implemented

PAWS'n'Hooves requires careful planning because horses and ponies are large, sensitive animals whose behaviour can be influenced by people, noise, unfamiliar surroundings and sudden movement.

Before a visit begins, PAWS and the participating facility should complete an application, risk assessment and agreed scope of work. This should identify the purpose of the visit, participant needs, proposed activities, suitable location, staffing, emergency arrangements and responsibilities of everyone involved.

The program should include:

- Horses and ponies selected for their health, temperament and suitability for therapeutic visiting.
- Volunteers who are experienced and competent in handling the individual animal.
- Appropriate PAWS training, assessment, accreditation and ongoing review.
- A safe, enclosed and accessible visiting area with secure boundaries.
- Adequate space to prevent crowding and allow the animal to move away.
- Controlled participant numbers and close supervision.
- Staff support for participants who require behavioural, mobility or personal assistance.
- Clear infection-control and hand-hygiene procedures.

- Suitable footwear and clothing for volunteers and participants.
- Weather, heat, transport, footing and environmental risk assessments.
- Appropriate insurance, consent and incident-reporting procedures.
- A quiet rest area, water and suitable transport arrangements for the animal.
- A plan for immediately ending or modifying the session if safety or welfare concerns arise.

Activities must remain within the competence and approved scope of the PAWS team. Riding, clinical interventions and complex horse-handling exercises should not be included unless they form part of a separately qualified, insured and professionally supervised service.

Animal Welfare Comes First

A successful PAWS'n'Hooves visit must be enjoyable and safe for the animal as well as the participants. Horses and ponies should never be treated as equipment or expected to tolerate unlimited interaction.

The PAWS'n'Hooves program will be implemented in accordance with the PAWS Pet Therapy Animal Welfare policy, which covers all animals in all programs.

The handler must continually observe for signs of stress, fatigue or discomfort, including avoidance, tension, pinned ears, tail swishing, restlessness, or reluctance to engage. The animal must be given regular breaks and be able to move away from interaction.

Visits should not proceed if the animal is unwell, injured, unusually unsettled or affected by unsafe weather or environmental conditions. The handler must always have the authority to pause or end a session.

How Is It Different from Equine Therapy?

PAWS'n'Hooves pet therapy	Equine therapy
Supports general comfort, connection, engagement and wellbeing.	Usually works towards identified clinical, therapeutic or developmental goals.
Delivered by trained and assessed PAWS volunteers with suitable horses or ponies.	Delivered or directed by appropriately qualified health, mental health, allied health or equine-assisted practitioners.
Activities may include observing, patting, grooming, reading and gentle ground-based interaction.	May involve structured interventions incorporated into a professional treatment plan.
Does not diagnose, assess or treat health or psychological conditions.	May form part of psychological, occupational, physical or other professional therapy.
Outcomes are generally based on enjoyment, participation, social connection and wellbeing.	Outcomes are documented and evaluated according to the participant's individual therapeutic goals.
Does not include riding.	Some services may include mounted activities, although many are also ground-based.

The term "equine therapy" covers several different professional approaches and does not automatically mean horse riding.

The key difference is that PAWS'n'Hooves provides supportive pet therapy visits delivered by trained volunteers who have demonstrated safe and competent horse-handling skills and met all PAWS Pet Therapy standards. Equine therapy, by comparison, involves structured therapeutic interventions delivered within the scope of practice of an appropriately qualified practitioner.

The PAWS'n'Hooves Approach

PAWS'n'Hooves brings together safe practice, animal welfare and the special connection that can develop between people and horses. Through calm, carefully managed visits, the program aims to create opportunities for comfort, confidence, inclusion and joy—one gentle hoofbeat at a time.

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