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Horses make great listeners as part of literacy program

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A very shy boy spent time petting a very patient horse on Friday, and even read a book to his new friend.

It all was all part of a pet therapy program for junior high students with autism, being run at Gary Millar's farm near Fort Saskatchewan.

While many people are likely familiar with the idea of therapy dogs or even therapy cats, it may come as a surprise that horses are also being increasingly used to help children with disabilities.



"Horses are incredibly intuitive," said Millar. "They communicate with people in ways that often I don't think we realize how we're communicating. And they have a way of making us feel very good about ourselves."

At Millar's farm, students learn how to interact with horses, how to groom the animals, and even read to them.



Gary Millar runs a horse therapy program for children, including those with autism, at his farm near Fort Saskatchewan. (CBC News)

"Sometimes in class, the kids are reluctant to read out loud, but I think with the horses they feel comfortable that the horse won't judge their reading," said teacher Mandy Adams.

"They're so engaged with this learning, they're very tuned in. I've never seen them all so focussed."

Students in the program say they can tell the horses are actually listening.

"It was actually like he was a person talking to me," said student Cody Severight. "He touched my book and he wanted it ... he would turn his ear and you could feel him."

"It was fun. I actually never read a book to a horse before. It's actually quite interesting."

Even Millar, who knows his horses well, is surprised at just how well the program is going.

"Horses are great teachers. They're just doing a far better job -- an amazing job -- than I had thought they ever could."