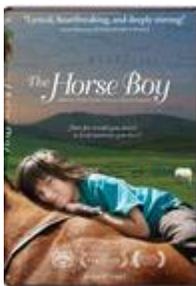


## Horses and Autism

A review of the film



### **The Horse Boy**

(2009)

Michel Orion Scott (Director)

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Reviewed by

[Donald Oswald](#)

The field of autism treatment is known for its propensity to pursue alternative, complementary, and sometimes preposterous interventions in the hope of a cure. Parents of children with autism and the professionals who serve them seem particularly prone to seek out and try practices devoid of scientific support or even of a reasonably coherent theory to support them. Thus, one is inclined to approach *The Horse Boy* with a certain jaded skepticism.

*The Horse Boy* is the story of parents who traveled to the ends of the earth, or at any rate as far as Mongolia, to help their son, Rowan, a boy with autism. Although they did not claim to be looking for a cure, they hoped that extended contact with horses, and the services of traditional healers, would yield some positive benefit for Rowan. Few families will have the resources to follow in their footsteps, but it is clear that the impetus that drove them is not uncommon.

The use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) interventions to treat autism is widespread; the most rigorous study thus far found that more than 30 percent of a sample of children with autism were using some CAM intervention (Levy, Mandell, Merhar, Ittenbach, & Pinto-Martin, 2003). Many physicians reportedly encourage parents in the use of these interventions, including highly controversial treatments such as chelation and secretin injections (Golnik & Ireland, 2009).

There has been little systematic investigation of the effects of animal-assisted therapy for children with autism. While some positive effects have been reported (Martin & Farnum, 2002; Solomon, 2010), the studies are methodologically weak. A meta-analysis of 49 studies of animal-assisted therapy included only four studies involving children with autism, with effect sizes ranging from 0.10 to 1.42 (Nimer & Lundahl, 2007).

The most commonly reported animal-assisted therapies for children with autism involve dogs, dolphins, or horses. Rupert Isaacson, Rowan's father and narrator of *The Horse Boy*, had a long-standing interest in riding and hoped that his son would learn to ride as well. Isaacson was inspired to propose the excursion chronicled in the film after watching Rowan's positive reaction to being on a horse at the family's home in Texas. Isaacson, a travel writer, also had previous experience with shamans and traditional healing rituals. Thus was born the idea: to take Rowan to a part of the world where riding is still an integral part of the culture and to seek the help of the most respected shamans.

After a brief introduction to Rowan and the challenges of autism, the film records the family's experience of the trip. In an early scene, shamans from across Mongolia are gathered to perform traditional healing rituals for Rowan. One of the shamans detects a malevolent female spiritual presence, which Rowan's parents associate with a deceased family member who had reportedly suffered from bipolar disorder, and much of the ritual is oriented toward removing this negative influence. The family then sets out on horseback across the country. However, early in the journey, Rowan becomes attached to riding in the van accompanying the group and refuses to ride the horses.

The excursion ends with a visit to the "reindeer people," a nomadic tribe that herds and rides reindeer. The final encounter with the shaman of the reindeer people is anticlimactic, but subsequently Rowan achieves bowel control and is reported to have stopped his tantrums. The film does not claim that the experience has cured Rowan's autism, but his parent express satisfaction with the changes in his presentation.

The film follows a book of the same title, released in 2009. Isaacson was reportedly paid over one million dollars in advance by the publisher Little, Brown—money that supported the trip and contributed to the establishment of a therapeutic riding enterprise now operated by the family (Rich, 2009). The story is interleaved with clips of interviews with Simon Baron-Cohen, Steve Edelson, and Temple Grandin, who provide commentary on the nature and treatment of autism.

*The Horse Boy* is not a great work of art. The entire undertaking shows considerable hubris, traveling halfway around the world on a venture with a highly uncertain outcome, to

say nothing of the narcissism of engaging a film crew to record every step of the way. Isaacson comes across as somewhat self-indulgent, and the film includes too much of his narration over scenes of striking Mongolian landscape.

But in the end, it portrays accurately the intensity of the drive that parents feel to do anything humanly possible if it holds even the remote possibility of helping their child. Possessed of sufficient resources, perhaps many parents would travel to Mongolia, ride a horse to the most remote valley, and suspend all commitment to Western scientific medicine and education, if they thought their child could be healed.

The point, however, is not that this film was made, well or badly, wisely or not—the point is that as parents we are subject to irrational belief and action when it comes to our children. We are inclined to hope for miracles, whether we name them such or not. And the question for psychology is, What is a responsible position with respect to this ever-present parental tendency? Faced with parents' desperate inclination to try any new intervention that is promulgated on TV or the Internet, clinicians are frequently called upon to take some stance. A dismissive or hostile reaction to untested interventions is more likely to negatively affect the clinician–parent relationship than it is to actually discourage parents from trying the new treatment.

A basic responsibility for the clinician in this dilemma is to evaluate the potential harm of the intervention; if it is intrinsically dangerous, there is an obligation to inform parents of the danger and act to protect the child. However, with a few notable exceptions, most of the complementary and alternative interventions are not unambiguously dangerous, and the task is most often to assist parents in making a sound decision by providing information about the likely outcomes.

That information might include consideration of the negative effects of dashed hopes and the impact on the family's financial status. Parents may also need encouragement to persist with evidence-based interventions while trying alternative treatments; it is safe to say that if the treatment distracts parents from such persistence, there is likely to be real harm in terms of lost opportunity for the child.

In addition, the field would do well to consider the impact that the plethora of treatments du jour have on the steady accumulation of scientific knowledge about effective interventions for children with autism. Professionals may also be distracted by unproven treatments, advocating their use or investing precious research resources in appealing but ultimately unproductive interventions. There is a fine line to walk to avoid overlooking potentially useful interventions while maintaining a standard for the kind and amount of evidence that would lead one to launch a systematic investigation of the intervention.

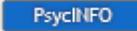
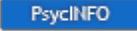
*The Horse Boy* is unlikely to produce, in the families of children with autism, a spike in travel to Mongolia. It may, however, yield a surge of interest in horseback riding as a form of treatment for the condition. Riding is a valued entertainment for many people, and there is no reason to suppose that it will fail to provide pleasure for some individuals with autism as well, many of whom find too few pleasures in their lives. There is minimal risk of

harm in the activity itself. If expectations are limited to the anticipation of the benefits of engaging in a pleasurable exercise, and if the activity does not interfere or conflict with evidence-based treatment and education, there is little reason to discourage parents from offering their child the experience.

If, however, the approach is billed as a treatment for autism, it constitutes fraud. One can say with confidence that there is no credible scientific evidence that horseback riding has any significant impact on the core symptoms of the disorder. Nor is there any coherent theoretical framework that would support investing substantial research resources to evaluate that impact. Like horseback riding, *The Horse Boy* is best judged solely for its entertainment value.

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