

FROM VOLUNTEER TO VISIONARY

How Therapeutic Riding Impacts Sensory Processing and Functional Outcomes for Children

For Dr. Samantha Dunleavy-Shotsberger, a recent graduate of Western Michigan University's Occupational Therapy Entry Level Doctoral program (WMU OTD), occupational therapy and horses have always gone hand in hand. Growing up, she had a passion for both and found the perfect blend of her interests in therapeutic riding (TR). Samantha started as a volunteer at the Cheff Therapeutic Riding Center in Augusta, Michigan, and it soon became the foundation for her doctoral capstone project and ultimately, her future career.



Samantha Dunleavy-Shotsberger, OTD, OTR/L



Participants from Read and Ride Program

FINDING HER PATH

Samantha's capstone, *Evaluating Sensory Processing and Functional Outcomes of Children Participating in a Therapeutic Horseback Riding Read and Ride Program*, stemmed from a desire to explore the impact of TR on children's sensory processing and academic performance. Utilizing a single-subject ABA research design, she observed children in 1st grade who were 6-7 years old before, during, and after a six-week therapeutic riding intervention.

While existing research on TR's impact was limited, Samantha's findings were clear: off-task behaviors in the classroom decreased.

Additionally, students demonstrated notable improvements in attention, self-confidence, and persistence with difficult reading tasks. She saw the most growth with the participants in weeks

4-6 in regards to not engaging in off-task behaviors (i.e. not looking at their book or fidgeting), reinforcing the importance of routine and regulation for therapeutic riding. Beyond the objective data, Samantha saw the transformation firsthand. Children were engaging more independently, pushing through challenges, and finding joy in reading in ways they hadn't before.

TURNING PASSION INTO PROFESSION

Following her capstone, Samantha's dedication and expertise led to an unexpected but exciting opportunity when she was hired as an occupational therapist at the Cheff Center. In this newly created role, she now combines her love for OT and horses and helps children to develop essential skills through both therapeutic riding and hippotherapy.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

In addition to her work at the Cheff Center, Samantha also works part-time in a hand therapy clinic. Looking ahead, she's pursuing both her therapeutic riding and hippotherapy licenses and is set to host a capstone student in 2026, coming full circle from where her own journey began.



Photo of Dr. Dunleavy-Shotsberger and her horses, Merlot and Dhiesel, taken by photographer Gary Yonkers

ADVICE FOR THOSE INTERESTED IN THERAPEUTIC RIDING

For those considering therapeutic riding, Samantha encourages taking that first step by volunteering or self-study. Her journey provides a first hand example of how passion and perseverance can lead to meaningful outcomes.

- [More](#) information on the Cheff Center
- [More](#) information on therapeutic riding

WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT DR. DUNLEAVY-SHOTSBERGER'S PROJECT?

- [Here](#) is the full article on ScholarWorks
- [Here](#) is Samantha's Capstone Dissemination Video