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How a Shetland pony is helping transform the life of young NI boy with rare genetic disorder

Three-year-old with KAT6A Syndrome needs therapy sessions, including some with a Shetland pony



Leo leading Amy for a walk, assisted by Cathy O'Reilly (left) from Mencap and One Equine Trust Practitioner Kathryn Morton (right).



Staff reporter

Wed 30 Apr 2025 at 08:12



Little Leo Moley from Co Down needs multiple support therapies due to a rare genetic disorder, but his family never imagined that a Shetland pony would become part of his weekly therapeutic routine.

The sessions are part of a National Lottery-funded project, run by One Equine Trust, which brings Shetland ponies and trained practitioners to the Mencap NI centre in Belfast. Working with the ponies improves the skills and confidence of young children with learning disabilities or developmental delays, including three-year-old Leo.

“Leo is non-verbal so he can’t tell us how he’s feeling, but we know by his body language and his engagement in the exercises with the ponies, that he’s really enjoying himself,” explains Leo’s mum, Laura, who also has a seven-month-old daughter.

“We travel from Seaforde to Belfast three times a week for Leo to go to nursery at Mencap as it is specially tailored for his needs. He’s able to get physiotherapy, occupational therapy and speech therapy, all at the nursery here, which is brilliant, but to also be offered the Equine Assisted Learning sessions once a week has been an amazing experience.”

When Leo was one year old, doctors discovered he had a hole in his heart and six months after that he was diagnosed with a very rare genetic disorder called KAT6A syndrome, which less than 400 people in the world have been diagnosed with.

KAT6A syndrome can impair the growth and development of the brain and the central nervous system, leading to developmental delays, but it is commonly undetected at birth.



Three-year-old Leo with mum Laura Moley and Amy the Shetland pony

“Leo was born prematurely, but all his tests came back fine. It wasn’t until he was missing developmental milestones that his dad, Shane, and I realised that we may need to reach out for more investigation,” says Laura.

“Leo went through lots of testing, he had surgery on his heart, and now he needs support for moving, eating and communicating. We’re not sure if speech will ever come for him.”

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The sessions with the ponies are also adding extra sensory stimulation to Leo’s day. He’s experiencing new textures, sights, sounds and smells.

For children like Leo, therapy is a daily activity, but not usually with horses. Thanks to a £20,000 grant from The National Lottery Community Fund, One Equine Trust is able to facilitate two Shetland ponies named Amy and Buttercup being brought to the Mencap NI centre to teach young children to walk the ponies, groom them, and sing to them. Without realising it, the children build their confidence with animals, develop their motor skills, and strengthen their mobility.

“The sessions with the ponies are also adding extra sensory stimulation to Leo’s day. He’s experiencing new textures, sights, sounds and smells. He loves being outside with the horses and his friends, taking turns to walk the ponies, which is also helping his social skills,” says Laura.

“The sessions work well because the ponies are so calm, it helps the children with emotional regulation as well. I think the ponies are the perfect size too, with them being level with Leo’s wheelchair for him to brush their hair and pet their head.



“Leo is learning a lot and in the past six months he has really come on – his fine motor skills have improved, and he’s started crawling and he’s able to push up into a kneeling position. We’re also hoping he might even be able to start feeding better soon and not need his feeding tube.”

“ It has been amazing to observe how the ponies respond to the different needs of the children and engage at their level and the practitioners have adapted the activities to suit the needs of our children depending on their age, stage and mobility

Claire Shepherd, Early Years Lead from Mencap NI says providing Equine Assisted Learning activities for children attending their early intervention and preschool service has been a great addition to their services this year.

“This project, which has been made possible thanks to a grant from The National Lottery Community Fund, has enhanced the children’s learning, helps them to develop social skills, practise gross and fine motor skills, and have fun while learning through play,” says Claire.

“It has been amazing to observe how the ponies respond to the different needs of the children and engage at their level and the practitioners have adapted the activities to suit the needs of our children depending on their age, stage and mobility. For example, all children are given opportunity to lead Amy or Buttercup, whether this be walking independently or while supported in specialised chairs or walking frames.



Harry taking a turn at grooming Amy

“We’ve seen children who are usually scared of animals bonding well with the ponies, and some children walking more than usual while they are leading the ponies. One parent told us that due to their child’s specific needs, they never imagined this would be an activity their child could fully take part in.

“It’s making a real difference.”

Through a variety of open funding programmes, The National Lottery Community Fund continues to deliver on its strategy until 2030, helping those most in need by supporting projects like this. One Equine Trust helps young people and those with special educational needs to enhance their well-being and lead happier, healthier lives. Find out more about their work at oneequine.org.

To find out more about applying for National Lottery funding visit tnlcommunityfund.org.uk.
(<https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/>)

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