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It is of course not uncommon for uncontrolled behavior to begin again as soon as the pony stops. It is the gentle rhythmic repeated motion that is the most powerful doctor. At first the act of stopping seems to give the children the feeling that they have been destroyed or lost their bearings.

In my experience there has been only one autistic individual—an adult—who absolutely refused to come into any contact with a horse, contact that would have allowed him to accept awareness of the “other,” the world around him. All that can be said is that we were at least able to bring the horse quite close to him when we were trying to get him into the saddle.

The incident reminded me of Donna Williams in her book *Nobody Nowhere: the Remarkable Autobiography of an Autistic Girl*, where she says, “Any physical contact produced a crushing sensation as if I were falling into a black hole with an irresistible magnetic force, in which I was losing my identity, being swallowed, eaten alive, or swept away by a huge wave.”

As you have seen in this chapter, the sensation of touch helps to forge an awareness of whatever surrounds the person. It could be said to “create” the surroundings because before the process begins, the autistic child hardly acknowledges them: he refuses to accept the existence of what is around him. Contact with the horse leads to an improvement in posture, followed by the beginnings of emotional awareness. Objects become a reality that can be mastered. The children learn to pick up a broom and to use it to sweep out the pony's stall, and to push the wheelbarrow and use it for its purpose, taking away the horse droppings from the stall, for instance, or transporting bags of grain or hay bales.

Naturally, all five standard senses are vitally important, but if one of them or more is lacking, or cannot be developed, there are the sixth and even seventh senses that we are aware of, which can come to the res-

cue: an awareness of self and a sense of balance. Some neuroscientists consider these two senses the *anchor of identity*. The awareness of self brings together the unconscious mechanisms that keep the body balanced, thanks to the combined workings of vision and muscular activity. Autistic children can have this anchor provided the environment and their activities favor the building up of their sense of identity.

## HEARING

Of all the senses, this is possibly the one that produces the most acute reactions. An autistic child is hypersensitive to particular noises, and seems to be unaware of others. Volume has nothing to do with which noise gets through to him and which does not. Of the ones he notices he has to pinpoint their position and fit them into the other markers that describe a familiar environment—just as very young children do.

Autistic children usually shy away from noises that are directly in front of them, so the riding teacher's voice should come from either side or behind, only rarely from in front. Daniel Tammet said in *Born on a Blue Day*, "I used to find it very difficult taking in noises around me, and I would regularly put my hands over my ears in order to blot them out and concentrate." All people filter the information and noises that surround them,

### The sound envelope

**J**ust as we talk about a "psychic body envelope" (see p. 12), so we also use the expression "sound envelope." We all hear sounds in complicated ways. Sometimes we filter out those we don't want to hear or concentrate on those we do. We hear some sounds combined with vibrations—who has not heard a car pass by with loud music accompanied by the throb of bass? And, we hear sounds that result from something we are doing, such as dragging our fingernails across a pane of glass, knocking something over, slamming a door, pushing a wheelbarrow across gravel, or walking on creaky floorboards.

so it is hardly surprising that those with autism do the same, but in their own special way.

### **Julie**

*Julie, sixteen months old, stares into the woods. She has heard the distant barking of dogs pursuing a wild boar. On the other hand, she pays no attention to the loud noise of a machine that is clearing the brush from only yards away.*

I always try to get my young riders to listen to the sounds in the woods: when the church bells ring out nearby, they talk about bird songs. Before the age of two to three years old, church bells are not part of their repertoire. However, the background noise of the pony club, including the teachers' voices as they speak to the children or the horses, is a constant that gives them the feeling of stability they need. Over this familiar hum they can pick out all the individual sounds of human voices, the neighing of the horses, bird songs, shouts, the sound of someone crying, but mostly the sound of laughter, music, footsteps, and the natural sounds of wind, rain, and thunder. Just occasionally they might be aware of moments of quietness.

My belief is that whereas sight and hearing are the most useful senses for most people, here at the pony club it is touch, smell, and sight that reign supreme. For this reason I am very careful about my bearing, about how I show emotion and affection, about the tone of my voice and my choice of words. I behave exactly as I do with very small children: I do not rely on the artifices of normal modes of communication; I feel I get back to a more primitive, but a purer mode.

You should try it! I am always calm and I use simple words that describe objects and a situation in the most direct way possible. Before I am accepted into the private world of my little riders, I never look at them directly but speak to one side. Right at the start, I often do not speak at all; I just walk quietly beside them and wait for them to make the first move.