

When Love Is Not Enough

Any adoptive parent of a child from overseas or American foster care will tell you that it's the disabilities you don't see that take the real work. This is what makes you dig deep. When love is not enough, what do you do? You start desperately searching for therapeutic remedies to fill in the gaps — to create trust where there is none, to build new neural pathways to form a more secure but unique bond to your baby, to try to quiet the chaos inside their little brains and bodies, to help them regulate emotions they never learned to do for themselves as infants, and to help them get out of their own way in the classroom and with their peers. Early trauma and deprivation changes their brain. Permanently.

When we held our baby girl for the first time in a government office overseas, we had no idea the depths of her need. Sure, Skye had a physical disability with her foot, but we had top surgeons waiting for her at home in Chapel Hill to correct the defect and get her walking, running, jumping and dancing—our little fashionista cried when she wore two shoes for the first time. Even with many casts, an excruciating surgical recovery, and months of physical therapy, that was the easy part.

The real work came later. The effects of early trauma don't always show up right away, but when they do it takes over your whole world. Skye's needs required intense therapy from a specialist, which was not covered by insurance. Any parent of a child with a disability will tell you that insurance frequently covers little if any of the therapies needed for their child. It adds up fast and you find yourself prioritizing what you can do and how often you can do it. We were first told about 'Horse & Buddy' when our oldest child (also adopted overseas) was being evaluated, but with the cost of various therapies for both children we couldn't afford to add therapeutic riding. We waited five years to be able to get this service for our daughter, but without charitable donations to bring the cost of riding down significantly, we would still be waiting. Riding a horse changed everything for Skye.

When Skye began working with Holly and Panama, she had zero trust in either of them, so she tested boundaries in all the self-defeating ways she had always relied on. The combination of Holly's patient expertise of various disabilities—including the invisible disabilities that so many adopted children with significant early trauma suffer from—and Panama's gentle nature and intuitiveness broke down the barrier within a few months. As soon as Skye built the trust that she both craved and feared, she let go and got to work. We saw her meeting her therapeutic goal of reinforcing all those attachment neural pathways that we had worked so hard to create for her in psychotherapy. She did this by really knowing her animal, learning to be in control on the horse's terms, and in performing caregiving tasks for her horse by untacking after a ride.



Skye's progress was amazing, but a new thing we didn't expect started to happen. Her anxiety started falling away. Her confidence started to increase as she enjoyed tremendous success building her riding skillset. Behaviors that were difficult for caregivers and educators to manage and also humiliating for her socially, vanished. It was truly remarkable. Because of her work at 'Horse & Buddy' we've seen almost no regression during this pandemic. We are stunned and grateful. Skye is a totally different kid now. She's relaxed, funny, confident, more in control of her emotions and behavior. Through 'Horse & Buddy,' Skye became herself for the first time in her life.

It has given us so much hope that Skye can grow up to have a positive fulfilling life, and that everyone else will be able to see how special she is. We will continue her riding as long as possible. When love wasn't enough, 'Horse & Buddy' filled in those gaps in a thousand little ways. We are forever grateful.

**Names have been changed to protect the privacy of the rider*

