

## Research program IZS VE 13/13

### Welfare of horses in therapeutic sessions for children with autism: monitoring and assessment

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This project aims at assessing horse welfare in therapeutic sessions for children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Together with behavioural observations, physiological measurements will be taken to evaluate animal stress levels during different activities (following a standardized protocol previously validated). Possible stress-related increase in catecholamine and cortisol levels will be assessed as well as behaviours indicative of discomfort in horses. The Infrared Thermography (a non-invasive technique to remotely measure the temperature of a body) will be used to monitor different conditions of stress without any interference between the experimental procedure and the spontaneous behaviour of the animal.

Considering the recent increase of animal-assisted therapeutic approaches, this project will provide a reliable method for assessing welfare in horses (and other species), ultimately helping professionals to better develop interventions considering the animal's perspective. Transferability of this study to stressful situations for horses such as transports, fairs, racing etc. should also be taken into account.