

The effectiveness of equine-facilitated therapy with at-risk adolescents: A summary of empirical research across multiple centers and programs

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Children with learning disabilities, conduct problems, or clinical diagnoses are “at risk” for the development of severe emotional disorders in adolescence. Severe emotional disorders not curtailed in adolescence often lead to serious psychopathology in adulthood. Therefore, positive and effective interventions at the crucial adolescent stage are imperative to the emotional growth of youths at risk. However, a child who shows signs of problems may not cooperate with traditional forms of therapy. This lack of cooperation could be due to negative parental interaction or an effect of a behavioral disorder. Many “at risk” adolescents view therapists, teachers, or adults in general with mistrust or apprehension. In order to overcome this hurdle of apprehension, mental health professionals often turn to alternative methods of therapy to meet the needs of emotionally disturbed youth. The present study focuses on such an alternative method that utilizes equines in a therapeutic role with “at risk” adolescents. This study explores the use of equines as therapeutic co-facilitators and education enhancers in five different programs across the United States. The programs are evaluated both collectively and individually in this presentation.

General procedure for all programs evaluated: A total of five different programs were evaluated, with 126 youth ranging in age from 8 to 17 years (mean = 13; 101 males and 25 females) participating in the evaluation. Each program conducted its equine-facilitated program without any changes to the programs or interference from the program evaluators. The program coordinators simply added a pre-test that was administered before the session began and a post-test after the session ended. Each program chose from a number of constructs to measure, depending on what issues their particular groups of adolescents were working on. The constructs included: self-esteem, depression, locus of control, loneliness, empathy and aggression.

As part of the equine-facilitated therapy (EFT) or equine-facilitated learning (EFL) process, the youth is paired with a horse and trained volunteers at the introduction of the session. Each program was designed to teach skills such as cooperation, trust, and responsibility with the goal of transferring these learned skills into their own lives and everyday interactions. The youth works with a horse as a partner throughout the length of the EFT or EFL session. The rationale behind teaming one horse with one child is to form a feeling of ownership and connection between the child and horse.

Generally, each program lasted from 6 to 14 weeks, with sessions ranging from 1 to 2 hours in length. Some programs met once a week while others met twice a week. Specific details about each program will be included in the presentation.

Results: Unfortunately, when all the programs were grouped together, no statistically significant differences between any of the constructs included in the pre- and post-tests were found. However, evaluation of the programs individually produced statistically significant results in some of the programs, as follows:

(1). ***Jackson County 4-H Therapeutic Program***, a NARHA certified center located in Jackson County, Missouri (the program has recently changed its name to Helping Hands Therapeutic Riding Center). Paired sample t-tests revealed a significant increase in self-esteem as measured by Harter's (1998) perceived Competence Scale for Adolescents ($t_{1,6} = -2.90, p < .03$). Self-reports on the Self Esteem Index (SEI; Brown & Alexander, 1991) confirmed the findings of increased self-esteem on Harter's scale. The overall score on the SEI significantly increased following the program ($t_{1,6} = -3.45, p < .01$).

In addition, the participants' reports of feelings of being in control of their own lives, as measured by a modified version of Norwicki and Strickland's (1983) Locus of Control Scale (LOC), indicated that participants experienced increased internal locus of control following the program ($t_{1,6} = 2.70, p < .04$).

(2). ***Horsepower Therapeutic Learning Center***; a NARHA premier certified operating center located in Colfax, North Carolina. Paired sample t-tests revealed a significant decrease in self-reports of hostility utilizing the hostility subscale of Buss and Perry's (1992) Aggression Questionnaire ($t_{1,14} = 4.79, p < .0001$). The global aggression score of the Aggression Questionnaire also decreased significantly following the program ($t_{1,14} = 3.06, p < .001$).

Although no statistically significant results were found for the program at ***Capital City School***, a special education day school for "at risk" youth located in Topeka, Kansas, this presentation will include the results from our three-year evaluation of this program. It is believed that much can be learned from the design, successes, and failures of this program (called "HorsePower"). In addition to the EFL experience at the ranch (first at Serenata School of Equestrian Arts in Big Springs, Kansas and then at R & D Ranch in Topeka, Kansas), HorsePower has been incorporated into the classroom as an academic subject. All aspects of classes for the participants (including reading, math, and social studies) have an equine theme. Thus, HorsePower became an education enhancer as well as a therapeutic intervention.

Discussion: In addition to these results, a past empirical pilot study found a significant decrease in depression following a 7-week program of equine-facilitated therapy (Bowers & MacDonald, 2001). A qualitative study conducted with children in a residential center showed improvement in interpersonal communication, sensitivity towards others, and relationship building among participants in a therapeutic vaulting program (Vidrine, Owen-Smith & Faulkner, 2002). A body of evidence concerning the effectiveness of equine-facilitated therapy programs with at-risk youth is starting to emerge.

While the statistically significant findings of these studies are very promising, the qualitative results (in the form of case studies and examples from individuals' lives) are even more powerful. Obviously, something does change in many of the lives of youth who participate in

these programs. As anecdotal success stories accumulate, the demand for empirical evidence continues to grow in this developing field.

References

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