

The Impact of Hippotherapy on Grieving children

Source:

Glazer, H., Clark, M., & Stein, D. (2004). The impact of hippotherapy on grieving children. *Journal of Hospice and Palliative Nursing*, 6(3), 171-175.

Purpose:

To explore the impact of a 6-week hippotherapy program for grieving children and to determine whether the children, parents, and adult volunteer would view the program as encouraging the processing of grief and person development.

Design/Methods:

Five children participated in a 6-week program at a local equestrian center. Ages ranged from 4 to 14. Children were required to have previously participated in a local support group program which worked closely with the equestrian center. Each child was paired with a volunteer who stayed with the child during the entire set of sessions. The goal of the activities was to increase the child's riding ability and knowledge of horses. Examples of activities include riding independently, balancing, maneuvering an obstacle course, and painting and bathing the horse. Parents/grandparents occasionally participated in the activities. Each session ended with a closing circle. Children were asked to share what they learned from their relationships with the horses that they were going to use in their lives. Parents, children, and volunteers were asked to reflect on and write down what occurred during the program and what the child did and said during these sessions. These written transcripts were used as data and analyzed by a qualitative researcher who was not connected with the program. Data were analyzed using open coding procedures.

Results:

Data analysis revealed three categories which captured the effect of the horse and interaction with the horse on the child. Categories included (1) *Confidence building* which included developing a sense of mastery, independence, and overcoming fears; (2) *Trust building* which was derived from comments indicating the nonjudgmental aspects of the relationship and the horse's response to the child's commands; and (3) *Communication* which resulted from comments indicating sharing of secrets with the horse and affectionately talking to the horse. Children showed improved self-esteem, self-confidence, trust, and communication. During the final group circle, when children described their feelings and thoughts, they indirectly had to identify the loss (the horse) and behaviors they had to develop in order to release grief and reclaim life.

Conclusion: The hippotherapy program was a success. Parents indicated increases in their child's communication, talk about the deceased, self-confidence, and self-esteem. Children expressed pride and joy in their accomplishments with the horses.

Strengths: Can be used as an adjunct to talk or play therapy. Operating a support group in a stable has the potential to add another dimension to interventions.

Limitations: Program was only 6-weeks long. Study suggests expanding to 12-weeks. Analysis could not be presented to the original researchers to check for content validity and reliability; thus, there were some initial differences in interpretation.

Practical Application: The program shows the importance of using a variety of expressive activities for grieving children in order to promote a safe way and safe place to express grief.

