

Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy for At-Risk Adolescents: the Influence on Self-Image, Self-Control and Trust.

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Purpose:

This study examines Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) and hypothesizes that EFP would improve the self-image, self-concept, trust, and general life satisfaction of at-risk adolescences when compared to a control group. This study gives an in-depth description of EFP and how it is used to improve an individual's mental health.

Design/Methods:

This study is a controlled pilot study. The participants included 29 at-risk adolescences in a residential treatment facility ranging in age from 14-18 years old. There were 14 participants in the experimental group and 15 participants in the control group. The groups were not randomly assigned but there was no statistical significant differences between the experimental and control group. Some stressors and problems in the participants lives included: divorce, low socio-economic status, court order for the treatment center, having a criminal record, having severe personal and adaptive needs, below-average age-related knowledge, and poor interpersonal communication skills. The participants in the experimental group participated in 14 to 26 EFP session with the exception of 2 participants who joined the study later. The EFP sessions were led by certified MSW therapists and focused on the individual needs of each participant. The variables studied were the participants' self-image, self-control, trust, and life satisfaction. Self-image was measured using the Offer Self-Image Questionnaire (OSIQ), self-control was measured using the a schedule for assessing self-control behaviors, trust was measured using the Children's Interpersonal Trust Scale, and life satisfaction was measured using the Student's Life Satisfaction Scale. The questionnaires were given to the participants in the experimental and control groups prior to the start of EFP and at the end of the year. Additional in depth interviews were given as well. One year follow-up interviews were also given to study the long-term effects of EFP.

Results:

For trust there did seem to be an improvement in the experimental group although the results were not significant when compared to the control group. For self-control there was a significant improvement for the experimental group. For self-image the results were not significant. For life-satisfaction, the experimental group did show an improvement although the results were not significant when compared to the control group. The one-year follow-up interviews did show more positive behaviors with the participants in the experimental group when compared to the control group.

Conclusion:

Although many of the results were not statistically significant, the study concluded that EFP does improve trust, self-control, self-image, and life-satisfaction in at-risk adolescences, as well as improving their behaviors long-term.

Strengths:

It is hard to conduct research related to EFP and this study did so with a control group. The study looked at both the short-term and long-term effects of EFP. They had certified therapist (MSW) carry out the EFP, which is not common in other studies.

Limitations:

The experimental and control groups were not randomly selected. 40% of the participants were receiving additional therapy besides EFP. The variables were difficult to measure in a standardized way and there was a small sample size.

Future Research:

This was a pilot study and one of the first studying the effects of EFP. More research needs to be done to understand the theory and implications of EFP. Future studies should try for a larger sample size. The authors recommend doing qualitative research of EFP to examine the unique therapeutic process.

Practical Applications:

The use of horses as therapy tools is becoming more popular and respected by the medical and health community. This study adds to the literature on the positive effects of using horses in therapeutic settings related to improvement on mental health.