

The Effectiveness of Hippotherapy for Children with Language-Learning Disabilities

Source:

Macauley, B. and Gutierrez, K. (2004). The effectiveness of hippotherapy for children with language-learning disabilities. *Communication Disorders Quarterly*. 25 (4) : 205-217.

Purpose: To examine the effectiveness of hippotherapy for children with language-learning disabilities (LLD) versus traditional therapy.

Design/Methods: Participants included three boys, ages 9, 10, and 12 years, with LLD who were receiving, and had been receiving since the age of 5, traditional speech and language therapy services. The boys also had individualized education plans at their schools. Composites scores for the *Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals—Third Edition* had to be at least one and half standard deviations below the mean and a reading level of at least two levels below current grade had to be present. A 21-item client satisfaction questionnaire was used to gather data from all the participants, as well as their parents, at the end of traditional therapy (T1) and then again at the end of hippotherapy (T2). Traditional therapy sessions were 1 hour long, twice a week, during the fall academic semester and hippotherapy sessions were 1 hour long, twice a week, for 6 weeks. Traditional therapy and hippotherapy activities were individually designed to target each child's speech and language goals which included receptive language, expressive language, reading, and writing goals.

Results: The four research questions addressed were (1) Will children with LLD and their parents report improvement in speech and language abilities following hippotherapy; (2) Will the children and their parents report improvement in their children's motivation to attend speech-language therapy following hippotherapy; (3) Will the children and their parents report improvement in the children's self-concept following hippotherapy; (4) Is hippotherapy less effective, both more effective, or as effective as traditional therapy. A comparison of the responses from T1 and T2 indicated that the parents and the children reported improvement in speech and language abilities after both therapies; however, responses were significantly higher following hippotherapy. Participants and parents also noted the additional benefits of improved motivation and attention.

Conclusion: The innovative approach and unique quality of hippotherapy is particularly beneficial in motivating children to attend and participate in therapy, as well as reducing any negative or shameful feelings regarding therapy. Reports indicate that the children looked forward to coming to therapy and their parents did not have to bribe or cajole them. Children also felt comfortable enough to discuss their hippotherapy experience with friends. Parents felt that their children's abilities to communicate in everyday situations was better following hippotherapy than traditional therapy. Conversely, the children felt their communication was improved more from traditional therapy. Their responses may be due to a greater sense of awareness of pencil and paper tasks or speech tasks that one would generally expect to see in a traditional, classroom type setting. When atop a horse and in an arena setting, children are more unaware of the speech and language skills they are acquiring as their thoughts are more focused on the horse and horse related activities.

Strengths: Study includes both children and parent perspectives.

Limitations: Study recognizes that parents may have responded more favorably to hippotherapy due to its novelty and the inherent influence of the researcher's expectations during survey-based research. Future studies should include a larger sample size and expand to other geographic locations to improve external validity.

Practical Application: Continue to research how hippotherapy may benefit clients with communication disorders other than LLD. Encourage SLPs, especially those with equestrian skills, to learn and develop hippotherapy skills and integrate hippotherapy into practice.