

Perceived Benefits of Therapeutic Horseback Riding for Youth with Autism

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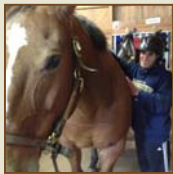
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Abstract

This exploratory study aims to describe the perceived benefits of therapeutic horseback riding for youth with Autism, comparing and contrasting the experience from the youth and parent perspective. Results of this study will allow the EquiCenter, in partnership with Strong Center for Developmental Disabilities, to assess the ways in which Equine Assisted Therapy may be a useful piece of the treatment plan for youth with Autism and other developmental disabilities.

Background

While there has been an emerging body of literature supporting the use of therapeutic horseback riding and hippotherapy for the purposes of improving motor control, sensory processing, social responsiveness, and/or speech production (Bass & Llabre, 2011; Bass, Sams, Fortney, & Willenbring, 2006), there is a lack of understanding of how these therapies are experienced from the perspective of youth with Autism and other developmental disabilities. Nationally, children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) make up the largest population being served by equine assisted activities and therapies (Horses and Human Research Foundation, 2011). While not considered traditional therapy, Equine Assisted Therapy (EAT) has been utilized with youth with autism as a means to enhance their ability to engage in age-appropriate relationships, and has been linked with improvements in areas such as emotional reactivity, inattention and distractibility, and communication (Bass & Llabre, 2011).



Sample and Method

Four youth, ages 9-23, with Autism Spectrum Disorder, and their families participated in this project.

- 3 male, 1 female
- 3 Caucasian, 1 Asian

This project utilized both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect information from riders and families.

Data collection included the following components:

- Modified photovoice process for youth, involving a six-step data collection process including photo taking sessions and one-on-one semi-structured interviews (Christensen, 2013)
- Quantitative: Pediatric Quality of Life Inventory (Peds-QL™) Youth and Parent report (Varni, 1998)
- Parent satisfaction survey, developed by EquiCenter
- Demographic information and physical therapy goals were collected as part of study intake
- Parent focus group

Contact Information

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Preliminary Findings

- Overall level of parent satisfaction with EAT, as part of the child's overall therapeutic plan, was high.
- Parents most commonly attributed EAT with improvements in core strength and balance, as well as overall social skills. However, all participants received multiple forms of therapy, and parents noted that it was difficult to specifically identify the impact of EAT versus other forms of treatment.
- Youth largely viewed their riding sessions as an enjoyable activity and social outing. They did not necessarily acknowledge riding as being a therapy. However, youth did attribute riding to improvements in their physical fitness, including improved posture and balance.
- Youth demonstrated a sense of belonging and purpose at the EquiCenter. They described strong connections with volunteers and staff. Youth also had a clear understanding of the steps required to prep a horse for a lesson, and often took an active role in this process.
- Youth developed emotional attachments to their assigned horse, and had a desire to take an active role in the care of the horse. This was demonstrated through brushing and massaging the horse, and providing healthy treats.
- Youth recognized the potential risk in being around horses. They were aware of the safety procedures, took the use of protective equipment seriously, and counted on staff and volunteers to ensure their safety.

