

Perceived Benefits of Therapeutic Horseback Riding on QoL for Youth with Autism

Julie J. Christensen^a, PhD, Lauren Halladay^a, Dana Olzenak^a, PT, DPT, and Susan Taylor-Brown^b, PhD

^a University of Rochester Medical Center; ^b EquiCenter, Inc.



Background and Study Aims

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 (Ward et al., 2013); and has been shown to be effective in such areas as emotional reactivity, inattention and distractibility, and communication (Bass & Llabre, 2011). EAT has also been positively linked to improvements in behavioral management and self-regulation (Gabriels et al., 2012, 2015), speech (Gabriels et al., 2012), sensory issues (Ward et al., 2013), and overall physical functioning (Alzenman et al., 2013).

However, there is a lack of understanding of how these therapies are experienced from the perspective of the youth themselves. This exploratory study aimed to describe the perceived benefits of therapeutic horseback riding (THR) on quality of life for youth with Autism, comparing and contrasting the experience from the youth and parent perspective.

Sample

Three youth, ages 9-15, with Autism Spectrum Disorder, and their families participated in this project:

- 9 year-old, Asian male (Autism, apraxia, hypotonia)
- 10 year old, Caucasian female (Autism)
- 15 year old, Caucasian male (Autism, intellectual disability)



Methods

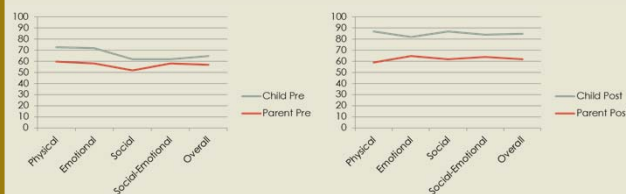
This project utilized a mixed methods approach to eliciting feedback from both riders and families. Data collection took place over a 6-month period of time (October 2014-April 2015), and included the following components:

- Quantitative measures
 - PedsQL™ (Varni, 1999) – Child and Parent
 - Overall satisfaction survey – Parent only
- Qualitative multi-step photo elicitation process
 - Child photo taking session with EC volunteer
 - Researcher photo-driven observation
 - Photo interview and wrap-up interview with child
 - Context interview with parent

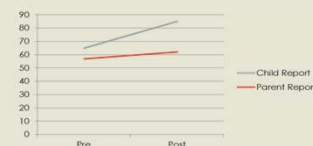
Findings

Youth and parents reported positive gains in quality of life (QoL) outcomes as a result of participation in EAT.

Youth self-report of QoL was consistently higher across all domains in comparison to parent report at both pre- and post-test.



Youth reported greater overall QoL gains over time.



Additional Findings



An emotional connection is developed between the youth and the horse.

Interviewer: Are you happy or sad in this picture?
Youth: Happy.
Interviewer: You're happy?
Youth: Yup. Yup. I'm happy.
Interviewer: What makes you happy?
Youth: He is happy.
Interviewer: The horse is happy?
Youth: The horse is happy. Yup.

Through riding, youth develop a sense of competence and confidence that is not attained in other aspects of their lives.

Interviewer: What would you say to someone who is thinking of coming to the EquiCenter?
Youth: Have you ever ridden? I could help you.
Interviewer: How would you help?
Youth: I'd help them learn the position for their hand. I would help them carry the saddle if they needed help.

Parent: It's definitely confidence and being able to talk to people about participating in riding and making it a topical conversation. ... It's the one thing that he is autonomous with.

Implications

Participation in EAT resulted in perceived growth in self-confidence, competence and ability to develop emotional attachments. New questions emerge related to the ways in which the human-horse interaction, observed to be largely non-verbal in nature, contributes to these gains.

Contact Information

Julie J. Christensen, PhD, LMSW
Director of Employment Programs
Strong Center for Developmental Disabilities
University of Rochester Medical Center
585-273-3713
Julie_Christensen@urmc.rochester.edu

Susan Taylor-Brown, PhD
Director of Operations and Research Development
EquiCenter, Inc.
585-624-7772
staylorbrown@equicentermy.org

Funding provided by from the Center for Community Health Community Health Supplemental Funds Grant, University of Rochester.