

Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy to Enhance Social Functioning in Children with Autism

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Outline

- Problem-Framing
- Research
- Product
- Dissemination

LEND Competencies

- **Competency 1: Family-Centered Practice**
 - Demonstrate an awareness/sensitivity to the impact of disability on family

- **Competency 5: Research and Critical Thinking**
 - Critically review literature
 - Demonstrate skills in access/utilization of electronic information, resources, and databases
 - Demonstrate verbal presentation skills including the use of PowerPoint

Problem-Framing

- Children with Autism may have a difficult time communicating their needs and/or engaging with others
- Many families seek out **interventions and resources** geared toward enhancing social development
- By helping children with Autism to further develop their communication and engagement skills, they may be able to better foster relationships

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Research Question

- Can Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy help to enhance **social functioning** for children diagnosed on the Autism Spectrum?

Research Methods

- Literature Review
- Informal Interviews with Professionals
- EAP Session Observations at *Equine Therapeutic Connections*
- IRB Consideration

What is Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy?

- Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) is a collaborative effort between a mental health professional and a horse handler working with clients (and horses) to address treatment goals
- EAP is not therapeutic riding or hippotherapy
- Clients engaged in EAP are asked to interact with the horse within a safe, enclosed setting

The EAP Process

- Goal development guides the therapeutic process
- EAP professionals believe clients can learn about themselves and others by participating in activities with horses
- Mental health professionals engage clients with questions about the experience (when appropriate)
- “What do you think the horse is feeling?”

Tasks Involved in EAP

- EAP is individualized to help clients with their specific goals
- EAP sessions are designed to symbolize “real life” experiences
- Clients are asked to make choices and problem-solve
- Common tasks are: selecting a horse, helping to “dress” the horse, walking, brushing, and guiding

Literature Review

- Four qualitative research studies
- Studies assessed social functioning following ongoing EAP sessions (Programs ranging from 5-10 weeks)
- Study samples were between 15-60 participants
- Children and adolescents ages 5-17
- Data collection involved pre, mid, and post surveys completed by parents

Literature Review Key Findings

- Parents reported some measurable growth for their children following the EAP programs
- Survey results showed that 33% percent of the children involved showed improvements in sociability
- This growth included decreased levels of violent and aggressive behaviors, enhanced ability to spend time away from parents, and greater ability to communicate needs

Future Research Needed

- Research on the influence of EAP on the social functioning of children with Autism is limited
- In order to better understand its purpose and proper implementation, **future research is needed**
- While current research provides a foundation of knowledge, this intervention still needs to be better explored

Informal Observations and Participation

My learnings:

- As an informal interviewer
- As an observer
- As a participant

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Product

- Brochure that describes EAP and outlines possible intervention outcomes for children with Autism
- Provides a clear description of the EAP process and treatment goals
- Not intended to “sell” EAP, but rather to provide families and professionals with information

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Dissemination

- EAP brochures were distributed to graduating social work students
- Presentation regarding the use of EAP for future clients
- Feedback: “A niche intervention but a very important one for families looking for options”

Conclusion

- Children with Autism may benefit from Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy
- More conclusive research is still needed
- As with all interventions, it may work for some and not for others

References

- Anderson, S., & Meints, K. (2016). Brief Report: The Effects of Equine-Assisted Activities on the Social Functioning in Children and Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 46(10).
- Borgi, M., Loliva, D., Cerino, S., Chiarotti, F., Venerosi, A., Bramini, M., Cirulli, F. (2015). Effectiveness of a standardized Equine-Assisted Therapy program for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 46(1).
- Fundamentals of EAGALA model practice* (7th ed.) (2012). Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association
- Van Den Hout, C., & Bragonje, S. (2010). The effect of Equine-Assisted Therapy in children with Autism Spectrum Disorders. *Vrije University*.

Questions?
