

The Hopkins Centre

Research for Rehabilitation and Resilience



Therapy without a therapist:
Interaction with a horse can
provide psychosocial benefits to
young people deemed 'at-risk'.

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BRIEF STUDY OVERVIEW

Introduction:

- Evidence suggests equine therapy may provide psychosocial benefits to young people 'at-risk'.
- However, it is unclear how these benefits arise.
- Differences between equine programs include the inclusion of different therapists.
- We aimed to find out what benefits 'at-risk' young people received from an equine program with no specific therapeutic, or therapist, involvement, and through what mechanisms these benefits may occur.

Method:

The program:

- A 7-week program for young people to interact with horses, care for them, and eventually ride them.
- Students worked with a horse and volunteer equine coach for around 2 hours, once a week.
- Activities included grooming, saddling, and trotting the horse. In the last couple of weeks, students mounted the horse and were led around an arena.
- The program was exclusive of any specific therapeutic content apart from any which may naturally occur in the process of learning about and interacting with a horse.

Participants:

- Young people (12-16 years old) attending flexible schooling. Young people did not attend mainstream school for a variety of reasons. The school runs a mobile, flexible school program.

Measures:

- Behaviour Rating Inventory of Executive Function (BRIEF).
- Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ).
- Semi-structured interviews with teachers and students and researcher observations and notes.

Conclusions:

- Students benefitted from positive engagement, social connectedness, increased confidence and improved relationships and attachment.
- Behaviour and attention regulation improved.
- The social context of the equine program contrasts with other contexts in these young people's lives allowing them to engage through more positive relational, affectionate behaviour.
- For the boys, positive rather than damaging masculine behaviours occurred.
- Mechanisms underlying these outcomes included motivation and ability to connect with the horse, and a positive environment.
- Where students have not responded to traditional interventions, equine programs offer an alternative method to decrease problem behaviours that cause young people to leave school early.

STUDY RESULTS

Study 1: Pilot

- Young people (N = 7) aged 14-16 years mostly boys (N = 6).
- Thematic analysis was undertaken on researcher observations and interviews with a school teacher.
- Young people benefitted from positive engagement, social connectedness, increased confidence and relationships and attachment.
- Mechanisms identified were a desire and ability to connect with the horse, and a positive environment.
- For the boys, positive rather than damaging masculine behaviour occurred.
- Furthermore, the compatible student-environment interactions provide a backdrop which makes other positive changes possible.

Study 2: Quantitative

- Quantitative data from 50 young people (29 boys).
- Attention and hyperactive behaviours improved reducing ADHD symptomology.
- Changes to emotional symptoms were not consistent and a longer dosage may be needed.

Study 3: Qualitative

- This paper draws upon insights from posthumanist theory.
- Students and teachers identified benefits arising from the intervention in terms of embodied affects (developing trust, affection and enjoyment in knowing how to interact with, care for and ride horses) as well as subtle changes in behaviour, relationships and self-confidence within young people's lives.
- Our analysis suggests that the horse-human relationship can be understood in the context of leisure based learning involving horses, volunteer trainers, young people, teachers, yards, grooming tools, saddles and outdoor space etc.
- Our post-humanist perspective on the mechanisms or processes of 'change' emphasises the affective pedagogies through which horse-human learning is produced.

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