

HORSE-PLAY CAN BE THERAPEUTIC: EQUINE ASSISTED PSYCHOTHERAPY

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A group of violent 17 year-old boys in a correctional program used to require physical managements by staff on a daily basis. After introducing horses into their program, the boys learned how to control their violent outbursts and worked together solving problems.

Barbara Lester, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) at a treatment boarding school for adolescents wrote, "Now that I've started to do horse sessions, it's hard to think of doing talk therapy in an office with adolescents. In that setting, their real patterns emerge and the student can not cover up or manipulate. I have learned more about a teen in one horse session than in a month of individual work."

These results are being obtained from new techniques of using horses to improve the emotional, behavioral, and mental lives of adults, children, and families in a field called Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP). Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) is a rapidly growing field in which horses are used as a tool for emotional growth and learning. The work is not about recreation or riding horses. Rather, the focus of EAP involves setting up problem-solving activities involving the horses, mostly ground activities. These activities are designed to reveal important insights and require the client or group to apply certain skills. Non-verbal communication, assertiveness, creative thinking and problem-solving, leadership, work, taking responsibility, teamwork and relationships, confidence, and attitude are several examples of the tools utilized and developed by EAP. This approach has been compared to therapeutic ropes courses, but it has the added advantage of utilizing living beings which respond to the participants.

One popular group activity is called Life's Little Obstacles. This involves asking the participants to get a horse to go over a jump placed in the arena. The jump can represent any challenge which the group is facing, such as going to school, or getting a child to school. It doesn't sound too difficult until the rules of the activity are given: no physically touching the horse, no halters and lead ropes, no bribing, and no verbally talking to each other. The horse provides a great metaphor to working with kids or adults. Each horse has his own distinct personality, and doesn't always want to do what you are asking him to do. The process of trying to accomplish this goal ends up leading to some pretty intense discussions and insights.

Lynn Thomas, LCSW, co-founder of the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association, states that the success of EAP comes from the horses. "Horses react to our body language. This gives incredible and immediate feedback to what people are communicating non-verbally. Participants learn that if they want to change the horse's behavior, they have to change their own behaviors, thoughts, and feelings. It is powerful because it is more than just talking, it is *doing!*"

EAP incorporates a team of a horse professional working with a mental health professional.

Because of this, even mental health professionals with no horse background can get involved in this work.

EAP is gaining popularity in the mental health community mainly because the success with clients has been so overwhelming. Doug Mann, M.Ed., LMFT, of Journey Home, Inc., in Colorado, found that horses being added into his treatment sessions improved recidivism rates with male juvenile offenders. In addition, Linda Myers, MA, CCDCIII-E, NCACI, of Ohio, reports that statistics provided by the Geauga County Juvenile Court also show improved recidivism rates for juvenile offenders since incorporating equine-assisted therapy. In the Subsidy Grant programs, in 1998, 67% did not recidivate within 3 months of their termination from the programs, compared with in 2000, 79% did not recidivate within 3 months of treatment termination. In fact, the Geauga County Juvenile Court has now nicknamed the horse program the “Last Chance Corral” as they send kids who couldn’t make it in any of the other programs.

In a recent research project, Mann and Williams (2002) found that 82% of the youth in Equine-Assisted Family Therapy demonstrated clinically significant improvement from treatment from an average of 5 sessions. Each of the clients had failed to make progress in previous conventional methods of therapy according to their parents. Conduct Disorders demonstrated the most clinically significant improvement followed by Mood Disorders and Psychotic Disorders. All three diagnostic categories demonstrated above average improvement compared to other approaches, in a shorter time with a lesser cost.

The Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) is the leading organization in the new and rapidly growing field of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP). Founded as a non-profit, 501(c)3 organization in July 1999, EAGALA has grown far faster than anticipated. It now has over 2,000 members located in every U.S. state, Canada, Mexico, England, Scotland, Belgium, Sweden, Germany, New Zealand, and Australia.

EAGALA offers a certification program to train professionals how to conduct EAP sessions. Over 1,000 individuals have completed the Level I training. EAGALA founders Greg Kersten and Lynn Thomas have been instrumental in helping start and train over 200 Equine Assisted Psychotherapy programs across the U.S. and Canada.

If you would like more information on Equine Assisted Psychotherapy, please contact EAGALA at 877-858-4600, www.eagala.org. A Resource Handbook is available which lists programs which offer these services, including outpatient and residential programs.