Equine-facilitated psychotherapy for at-risk adolescents: The influence on self-image, self-control and trust

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Abstract
This article describes the theoretical-conceptual frame of equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP) for adolescents at-risk, the unique components of this intervention, and its implementation in an evaluation study. The study was conducted at a residential treatment facility for adolescents at-risk. We examined the outcomes of EFP on self-image, self-control, trust and general life satisfaction. Fourteen resident adolescents comprised the treatment group, and were compared with a matched group of 15 residents who did not receive EFP (control). The treatment comprised a weekly individual EFP session over a period of seven months. The study found a trend of positive change in all four research parameters within the treatment group. Additional indications of the intervention’s positive influence were also found and are discussed.

Keywords
equine-facilitated psychotherapy, at-risk adolescents, self-image, self-control, trust

Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) is a form of Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) that involves horses and takes place in and around the natural surroundings of the stables. Equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP) differs in essence from therapeutic riding. Most studies of the latter focus on physiological aspects (Baker, 1996; DePauw, 2000; Taylor, 2001; Vidrine et al., 2002). In contrast, limited research exists regarding mental, emotional, and social components that equine assisted activities/therapies (EAA/T) address (Bachi, 2005; Bizub et al., 2003; Burgon, 2003; Gatty, 2001; Kaiser et al., 2004), and to date, these studies rely on individual researchers’ personal doctrines rather than on an overall “EFP theory” (Bachi, 2005). Currently, published literature about EFP consists primarily of anecdotal reports (Dalke, 2008; Hallberg, 2008) and case studies (Karol, 2007) which suggest a common trend and illustrate the need for a unique theory for equine therapy, rigorous research to examine the human-horse bond, and evaluation of EAA/T effectiveness.

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