

EQUINE-FACILITATED PSYCHOTHERAPY IN YOUTH EXPOSED TO TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES: PERSPECTIVES FOR THE FUTURE



Inês Pereira-Figueiredo*, PhD in Neuroscience
ThekidsFellows- Research Group in Anthrozoology, Portugal.
*thekidsfellows@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Trauma during childhood can be particularly devastating. The development of the brain and regulatory systems is not complete until the end of adolescence, leading children and adolescents, exposed to trauma or adverse childhood experiences, likely to develop maladaptive responses and lasting negative health effects if left untreated.

Equine-facilitated psychotherapy (EFP) is a specialized form of animal-assisted therapy that utilizes horses in the therapeutic process that may be particularly efficient in treating trauma exposure in youth.

Keywords: human-horses interaction; high-risk background; youth at risk; traumatic experiences.

BRIEF SUMMARY

The earlier interventions with horses focused on physical treatments and riding only, however, in the last years, equine-assisted therapy has been oriented towards a new concept- and working from the ground has been shown as improving mental health.

By handling, riding, or standing at “eye level,” next to a horse, different models evolved but all agree about the effect horses have on at-risk children or adolescents.

It is a reciprocal exchange of interaction between the teen and an overly sensitive animal that facilitates and promotes therapeutic change.

The intervention is based on the equine and the teen developing a therapeutic bond in an environment feel as safe.

Protective and intimacy-promoting figure

Emotional, or communication problems

➔ Reduces anxiety and depression and conduce to openness and confidence.

➔ Improves self-esteem, and interpersonal adaptation skills.



CRITICAL SUMMARY

Existing research shows that the experiential approach adapted to EFP is particularly beneficial for traumatized youth. However, while several authors argue the impact horses can have on human mental health, many of the research projects have weak methodologies.

Several lack a randomized control group, others base their results on parents’ or teachers’ perceptions; also, the clinical heterogeneity among the studies concerning type of problem, its severity, and concurrent therapies reduces its feasibility. This may be because the optimal intervention protocol is not yet established.

As for the data associated with the intervention, it was observed that there is a controversy regarding the terms that define the type of intervention, and the number and duration of sessions varies greatly. Undoubtedly, this variability poses a great difficulty in comparing the results, so it would be necessary to standardize these basic concepts and to develop studies with young people who are at the same point of evolution.

For successful EFP it is also suggested to select the appropriate horse for achievement of a specific therapeutic goal and will be necessary to study the durability of the intervention effects. Confirming the performance protocols with EFP for the rehabilitation could have a great economic and psychosocial impact, reducing the duration of rehab.

CONCLUSION

Equine-assisted psychotherapy interventions hold much promise, particularly in terms of child/adolescent social and behavioral issues, but also preventing future illness and promoting health at adulthood.

In short, more objective studies are needed, namely, to examine with scientific evidence the bond between the patient and the horse, the dynamics of the interaction that is established and to verify the induced neurophysiological changes.

To know more about our Research Projects find and join us at <https://www.thekidsfellows.com/>