

Reconstructing children's perspectives on equine-assisted interventions.

A qualitative study in progress

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Background: The poster summarizes an ongoing cumulative PhD-project at the University of Cologne, Germany. Three interviews and drawings have been conducted for a pilot study (Barzen 2020b) and twenty for the main study (analysis in progress), so first results can be presented. The study focuses on understanding the experiences of children participating in equine-assisted interventions, a perspective that has been little explored. The understanding of the children's perspective enables an improvement of the equine-assisted field, as the therapeutic and pedagogical practice can be reflected based on this study.

Research gap

Lack of studies in which children themselves are interviewed about their experiences in the equine-assisted setting (Barzen 2020a)

Research question

What is relevant about equine-assisted interventions from children's perspectives? (Barzen 2020b)

Research goal

Complementing existing studies and their findings on equine-assisted interventions by including children's perspectives

Target group

Children under increased psychosocial stress (7-14 years)

Studied intervention

Weekly sessions including grooming, groundwork and riding

First results

New tasks and challenges arise in situations with the horse

- Acquisition of new skills and knowledge
- Horse as a cause of stress and fear
- Riding as a special experience

Support and coping strategies with new tasks and challenges

- Orientation and safety thanks to the riding instructor
- Taking the horse's perspective
- 'Mutual' affection between child and horse

By mastering tasks and challenges, the child gains confidence and competence

- Influence on the horse
- Helping other children
- Feeling of being admired while riding
- Overcoming fear and experiencing success

Methods

Children's interviews

- Main survey instrument
- Semi-structured interviews with open questions (e.g. everyday life at the stable)
- Analysis with the Grounded Theory, building categories from the empirical material to elaborate the relevancies of the children, until a theoretical saturation is reached (Glaser & Strauss 1967)

Children's drawings

- Supplementary survey instrument
- Conversation starter and additional material: "Draw a picture of yourself at the stable"
- Picture interpretation based on Panofsky (1975): Description, interpretation, reflection of results based on what the child has said in the interview

Insight into the material

Girl (8 years old) about the riding instructor: "She helps us and she shows us how to do it with the horse, and she helps us to ride and (...) she loves us, she also sometimes talks to us about nice things"

Main topic of the drawing

Feeling safe at the equine-assisted setting thanks to the riding instructor

- Holding hands with the riding instructor (support)
- Child is wearing a helmet and is leaning towards the riding instructor (safety)
- Riding instructor wears riding boots (Expert status)
- Position of the riding instructor (sideways feet and legs a bit open → stability)
- Similarity between girl and riding instructor (same facial expression, similar color and hair → role model)

→ **The pedagogical riding instructor plays an important role, giving the child safety at the equine-assisted setting and supporting the child in overcoming fears and building self-confidence**



Overview published articles

Main study: Application of the methods of both preliminary studies to further develop previous results (data collection)

Pre-study children's drawings: Testing data collection and analysis (image interpretation) and generating initial results (Barzen 2020c)

Pre-study child interviews: Testing data collection and analysis (grounded theory) and generating initial findings (Barzen 2020b)

State of research: Summarize previous findings to identify a desideratum and formulate the research question (Barzen 2020a)

Research basis: Critical reflection on existing explanatory approaches in the research field of animal-assisted interventions (Barzen 2019b)

Conclusion: The first results show, that it is particularly relevant for the children to master challenges within the context of equine-assisted interventions. The children talk about new skills and new knowledge that they have acquired while working with horses. Children can overcome challenges and fears with the help of the educational riding instructor as a role model, who provides support and safety. A lot of children describe a 'mutual' relationship with the horse and try to reflect situations from the horses point of view. Through the intervention, the children can develop self-efficacy, as they learn to influence the horse, to help other children and to experience success.

Literature

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