

Research Presented at: The American Counseling Association International Conference, March 2006, and the Hawaii International Conference on Education, January 2006.
By Kay Sudekum Trotter, M.Ed., LPC, NCC, RPT, University of North Texas

The Effectiveness of Equine Assisted Group Counseling with At-risk Children and Adolescents

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of equine assisted group counseling and curriculum school-based group guidance in decreasing children and adolescents negative behaviors, while also increasing children and adolescents positive behaviors as determined by, a) reducing internalizing behavior problems, and b) reducing externalizing behavior problems.

Two types of behavior instruments, the Behavioral Assessment System for Children (BASC)—Parent Rating Scale and the Self Rating Scale; and the Animal Assisted Therapy—Psychosocial Session Form (AA-PSF), were used to provide multiple measures of the same construct in this pretest-posttest comparison group quasi experimental design study. The population studied was comprised of 113 elementary and 106 middle school volunteer children and adolescents identified as at-risk for academic or social failure in third grade through eighth grade, ages 8-14, who attended public school in North Texas.

Children and adolescents were referred by teachers, school counselors, and parents, then by grade level where assigned to one of the two therapeutic interventions; equine assisted group counseling (n=140), which received 2-hour weekly sessions for 12 weeks in a ranch setting, or curriculum school-based group guidance (n=79), which received 1-hour weekly sessions for 12 weeks in a school classroom setting.

Results of the BASC Self-Report indicated that the equine assisted counseling group showed statistically significant improvement in five behavior areas, and the guidance comparison group showed statistically significant improvement in four areas, with only one behavior area the same as the equine assisted counseling group. Thus, both are effective according to the children though each is affecting different behaviors. The BASC Parent-Report indicated that the equine assisted counseling group showed statistically significant improvement in twelve behavior areas, whereas, the guidance comparison group showed statistically significant improvement in only one behavior area. This one behavior area is the same as equine assisted counseling group. Thus, only the equine assisted counseling intervention was very effective according to the parents.

Results of the AA-PSF (equine assisted counseling group only) showed statistically significant improvement in all 3-scale scores. 1) Overall behaviors, 2) increased positive behaviors, and 3) decreased negative behaviors. Thus, equine assisted counseling is clinically effective in increasing positive social behaviors and in decreasing negative social behaviors.

The experimental outcome of this study support that equine assisted counseling is an evidence-based effective mental health treatment that demonstrated statistical, practical, and clinically significant changes in decreasing negative behaviors, while also increasing positive behaviors with at-risk children and adolescents. Furthermore, the results suggest that equine assisted counseling is an more effective treatment modality than curriculum school-based group guidance.

Kay Sudekum Trotter, M.Ed., LPC, NCC, RPT, is doctoral candidate at the University of North Texas. Correspondence concerning this article should be address to Kay Trotter at 3308 Camden Dr, Flower Mound, TX 75028, 214-755-3309 and at Kstrotter@comcast.net