

The Role of Equine-Assisted Therapy on improving Self-Esteem, Independence and Engagement among Preschool Aged Children

Brittany M. Sereikis
Dr. Amy Corbett

SUNY Cobleskill

Introduction

Animal-assisted therapy can be a form of therapeutic healing across many different disabilities including developmental or intellectual disabling disorders like Autism or ADHD. Past studies have found that this form of therapy can significantly benefit an individual's cognitive, psychological and social domains (Firman, M., et al. 2016). Animals can be shown to enhance social interactions amongst children that will be of use in their future when they build friendships (Chardonens, E., 2009).

Aim

- This study will evaluate the effects of therapeutic horseback riding on the self-esteem, independence, and engagement, of preschool aged children with developmental disabilities over a 10-week periods.
- By allowing these children to interact with horses, in a supervised environment, there should be an increase in self-esteem, independence and active engagement among these children, compared to children who do not interact with horses.

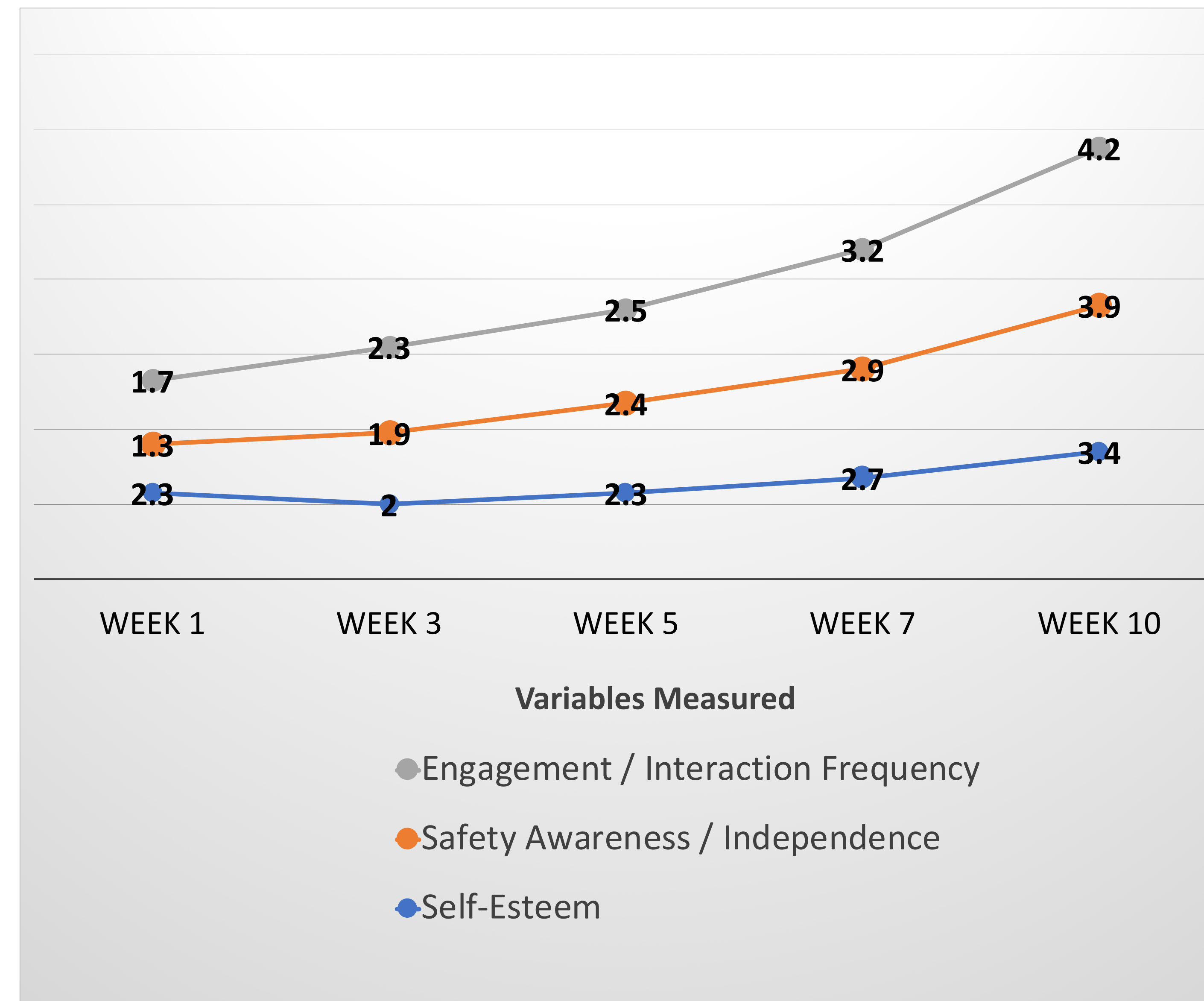


Figure 1: Expected Results



Figure 2. Child demonstrating equine therapy activity

Expected Results

The specific aim of the present study hopes to determine if interaction with horses and therapeutic horseback riding will improve self-esteem, independence, safety-awareness, and engagement frequency among preschool aged children with developmental disabilities. Figure 1: The anticipated results of this study should show that all aspects of each measure will positively increase for each participant with varying levels of data are expected.

Conclusion

The results of this study should suggest that therapeutic horseback riding is an efficient method of therapy for young children with developmental disabilities because it can stimulate multiple domains of functioning by providing a multi-sensory environment.

Methods

- 20 participants aged 4-5 years old, and are identified as having emotional, behavioral, or learning difficulties (i.e. autism, ADHD, anxiety, delayed language development).

Procedure

Setting

Participants will attend one two-hour class, per week, for 12 consecutive weeks. The college students will engage in activities with the participants such as grooming and petting a horse, teaching the participants about horses, and riding and conducting mounted activities.

Safety

The activities are designed to familiarize the students with the safety behaviors around horses, petting and grooming the horse, and how to safely ride. Participants will learn what behaviors they can and cannot do while being around horses, how to properly, interact, groom and feed treats to horse.

Riding Skills

The participants will practice mounting and dismounting, how to use verbal commands, such as "whoa" to stop the horse, and "walk on". Participants will practice stirring the horse to change direction, weave through equally distanced poles, or practice stopping the horse by pulling on the reins.

Measures

Variables will be measured using the experimenter's observations. All variables will be measured on a 5 point scale; 1= Not able to achieve and 5=achieved.

Self-Esteem

- Positive behavior will include: smiling, talking to an adult, a peer or a live horse.
- Negative behavior will include: frowning, averting gaze, distraction, anxiety, fear, crying.

Safety Awareness and Independence

- Participants will be rated on how well they can perform the task that was given to them, how many times it takes the participants to perform the correct task after being corrected, and how well the participants respond to being corrected by the instructors.

Engagement and Interaction Frequency

- Behaviors that will be categorized as approach: grooming horse with a brush, petting the horse, riding the horse, and vocalizing either with peers, adults or to horses.
- Behaviors that will be categorized as avoidances: physical escape, lashing out at another person or an object, non-responsiveness, and closed off body language.

References

- Chardonens, E. (2009). The Use of Animals as Co-Therapists on a Farm: The Child-Horse Bond in Person-Centered Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy. *Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies*, 8(4), 319-333. Retrieved from <http://ezproxy.cobleskill.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edb&AN=47029583&site=eds-live&scope=site>
- Firmin, M. W., Brink, J. E., Firmin, R. L., Grigsby, M. E., & Trudel, J. F. (2016). Qualitative Perspectives of an Animal-Assisted Therapy Program. *Alternative & Complementary Therapies*, 22(5), 204-213. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.cobleskill.edu/10.1089/act.2016.29073.mwf>
- Maujean, A., Kendall, E., Lillan, R., Sharp, T., & Pringle, G. (2013). Connecting for Health: Playing with Horses as a Therapeutic Tool. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 41(4), 515-522. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.cobleskill.edu/10.1002/jcop.21547>
- Three Gates Incorporated. (Photograph). (2019).
- Ward, S. C., Whalon, K., Rusnak, K., Wendell, K., & Paschall, N. (2013). The association between therapeutic horseback riding and the social communication and sensory reactions of children with autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 43(9), 2190-2198. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.cobleskill.edu/10.1007/s10803-013-1773-3>