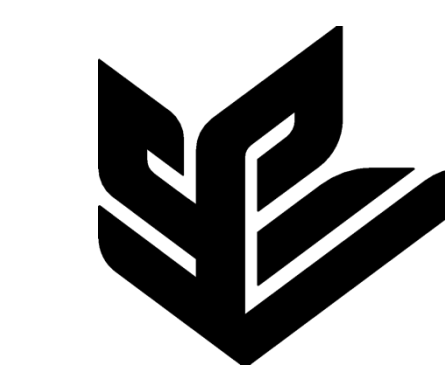


Equine Assisted Psychotherapy's (EAP) Effect on Attachment for Former Foster Children



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ABSTRACT

Research has shown the importance of secure attachment, and the negative impact that insecure or disorganized attachment can have, especially for foster or adopted children. Attachment interventions have helped improve behavior problems and increase emotion regulation. Studies have shown that equine assisted psychotherapy (EAP) can help participants increase emotion regulation and decrease behavior problems. In this study, 50 adolescent former foster children will participate in weekly psychotherapy or EAP for one year. The primary aim of this study is to measure the effectiveness of EAP against traditional psychotherapy within this population, measuring outcomes on emotion regulation, behavior problems, and attachment.

INTRODUCTION

Importance of attachment

- Attachment style has an important effect on development and psychological well being (Rose & O'Reilly, 2017).
- A secure attachment in childhood is important for future mental health and wellbeing (Gregory, Kannis, Sharman, 2019).

Attachment and foster children

- Attachment is recognized as an important issue among foster and adopted children where adopted children predominantly fail to create secure attachments due to the disruption in their parent-child bond at an early age (Rose & O'Reilly, 2017).
- Disorganized attachment among adopted teens positively predicted internalizing problems and showed higher rates of behavior problems than non-adopted teens (Pace, Di Folco, & Guerriero, 2017).

Attachment interventions

- Studies have shown that utilizing attachment interventions have improved executive functioning among toddlers and helped parents serve as effective co-regulators. (Lind, Raby, Caron, Roben, & Dozier, 2017).
- Among adopted teens, establishing secure attachments reported fewer internalizing problems (Pace, Di Folco, & Guerriero, 2017).
- Research encourages clinicians to treat foster children within the framework of attachment theory (Gardenhire, J., Schleiden, C., & Brown, C. C, 2019).

Equine therapy

- Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy has shown to be as effective as group therapy in increasing positive affect among adolescents, as well as improving emotional regulation, communication, relationship skills and overall functioning (Honzel & Roberts, 2020; Perkins, 2018; Lee, Dakin, & McLure, 2016).

Current limitations in research

- Future study of equine assisted therapies compared to established effective treatment is needed (Selby, A., & Smith-Osborne, A. (2013).
- More empirical information is needed around interventions addressing (a) attachment-related behavior and (b) emotion regulation for children adopted prior to adolescence (Rose & O'Reilly, 2017; Pace, Di Folco, & Guerriero, 2017).

PRIMARY AIM AND HYPOTHESES

- Primary aim; To test the effectiveness of EAP compared with traditional psychotherapy. We will test this with the following hypotheses:
- RQ1: Does equine assisted psychotherapy increase emotion regulation for former foster children?
 - H1: We hypothesize that equine assisted psychotherapy will increase emotion regulation for former foster children.
- RQ2: Does EAP decrease behavior problems?
 - H2: We hypothesize that equine assisted psychotherapy will decrease behavior problems.
- RQ3: Does EAP increase sense of attachment?
 - H3: We hypothesize that equine assisted psychotherapy will increase attachment between children and their caregivers

METHODS

Participants

- **Participants:** adolescents (13-18) who were in the foster care system for at least 6 months prior to age 12, and are now in a permanent home either with biological parents, relatives or adoptive caregivers for at least 1 year without disruption
- **Sample size** - 50 total, 25 in each group (psychotherapy and equine therapy)
- **Sampling procedures-** We will collect participants through local child placing agencies that do both foster care and adoption (such as Olive Crest, Amara, Catholic Community Services, as well as DCYF).

Procedures

- Data will be collected at the beginning of the first session of either psychotherapy or equine therapy (T1) and again after one year of the intervention (T2). At the end of the study, families will be given the option to continue either EAP or traditional psychotherapy if they wish.
- The design of our study is mixed methods, both qualitative and quantitative, using interviews, self-report questionnaires and caregiver questionnaires. The intervention will follow the EAGALA framework for conducting EAP.

MEASURES

Effectiveness of EAP Compared to Traditional Psychotherapy

- The effectiveness of EAP compared to traditional psychotherapy will be compared using the scores from the data of each of the following measures.

Emotion Regulation

- Adolescent ability to regulate emotion will be assessed by the 10-item self-report questionnaire, Emotion Regulation Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents (or ERQ-CA) (Gross & John, 2003) at T1 and T2.
- Scores specifically measure cognitive reappraisal ($\alpha = .71$) and expressive suppression ($\alpha = .72$). Scores at T1 and T2 will be compared between treatment groups.

MEASURES continued

Behavior Problems

- Adolescent behavioral problems will be assessed by the CBCL 6-18 (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001; Frigerio et al., 2004; Frigerio et al., 2009), a 112-item questionnaire on adolescent behavior as rated by caregivers. This data will be collected at T1 and T2 and compared between treatments groups.
- The CBCL 6-18 identifies syndrome scales: internalizing problems ($\alpha=0.80$) and externalizing problems ($\alpha=0.89$).

Caregiver-Adolescent Attachment

- The Friends and Family Interview (FFI) which is a 27 item semi-structured interview aimed at understanding the attachment of adolescents, will be used to assess attachment (Steele & Steele, 2005)
- The FFI scores across 9 dimensions on a 7 point scale, and ultimately produces a final classification of attachment style as secure, dismissing, preoccupied or disorganized.
- This measure will be implemented at T1 and T2, and scores will be compared between treatment groups.

RESULTS

- We will use a two sample t-test to compare the differences in emotion regulation among both groups.
- We will use a two sample t-test to compare the differences in behavior problems among both groups.
- We will use a chi-square test to compare the differences in attachment styles among both groups--before and after to show changes (showing that the two interventions weren't different before, but were different after in how attachment styles changed).

Discussion

- If equine assisted psychotherapy is shown to be an equally or more beneficial treatment for this population, it could provide a recommended treatment option for this population.
- If this study shows that equine assisted psychotherapy is not beneficial for this population, understanding what barriers or factors may have impacted the experience of the clients could be important for future research of equine assisted psychotherapy.
- If this study shows that equine assisted psychotherapy is beneficial for this population, it would contribute to the literature more evidence for the use of equine assisted psychotherapy, which is a newer and less studied treatment than traditional psychotherapy.
- Understanding the mechanisms by which therapy is effective is an important area of study for marriage and family therapy researchers. While this study aims to measure attachment, emotion regulation, and behavior problems as they are affected by the treatments, future study assessing the relationship between these variables could be beneficial for further understanding of attachment in children.
- There are many social implications of this study. Contributing to the research more evidence for equine assisted psychotherapy might allow it to become a more recognized and evidence supported treatment, which could open opportunities for funding for this treatment through insurance or other third party payers that require evidence support for treatments. While equine assisted psychotherapy has been used with many different populations, contributing to the literature research on this specific population has the social implication of widening the use of equine assisted psychotherapy, as well as widening the potential treatment options for this population.