

Equine Assisted Therapy: A Unique and Effective Intervention

Equine therapy alleviates multiple emotional and behavioral struggles.

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Equine Assisted Therapy
Source: Aspiring Families, Center for Mental Health and Wellness

There is increasing recognition and integration of Equine Assisted Therapy in the traditional mental health field. [Growing evidence](#) supports the effectiveness of treatment with horses in a therapeutic environment. [Studies](#) have resulted in a body of literature supporting the therapeutic value of the human-animal interaction. Equine Assisted Therapy can help clients with [depression](#), anxiety, [ADHD](#), [conduct disorders](#), [addiction](#), trauma, [eating disorders](#), spectrum and health difficulties, [dissociative disorders](#), Alzheimer's disease, [dementia](#), and other mental health difficulties.

What is Equine Assisted [Psychotherapy](#)?

[Equine Assisted Therapy](#) is a form of [experiential therapy](#) that includes horses and a specialist psychologist or counselor working together with a client to create positive change. The therapist is specifically trained in Equine Assisted Therapy in conjunction with traditional training in the mental health field.

Equine Assisted Therapy often includes a number of beneficial equine activities such as observing, handling, grooming, groundwork, and structured challenging exercises focused on the child's or adolescent's needs and goals. Equine Assisted Therapy provides unique non-verbal opportunities for the client to enhance self-awareness, recognize maladaptive behaviors, identify negative feelings, and face self-defeating cognitions. It may be used for clients with [psycho-social difficulties and mental health needs](#) that can result in significant changes in [cognition](#), mood, judgment, insight, perception, social skills, communication, behavior, and learning.

Benefits of Equine Assisted Therapy

In light of research and observational findings, experts suggest that Equine Therapy—a common form of [animal-assisted therapy](#)—may yield a variety of psychotherapeutic benefits in the following domains:

- **Trust:** The first step in Equine Assisted Therapy is to trust the horse, the therapist, and yourself. This is a profound step towards growth in interpersonal relationships and healing. Learning to trust an animal such as a horse is very powerful in the development and restoration of trust for those whose ability to trust has been violated by difficult life experiences.
- **Anxiety Reduction:** Research on the human-animal interaction indicates that contact with animals and horses significantly reduces physiological anxiety levels. Some children and teens are initially afraid of horses. With the support of an expert therapist and a trained therapy horse whose genuineness and affection help allay these fears, children are empowered to embrace therapy to diminish anxiety.
- **Depression and Decreasing Isolation:** Depression is frequently associated with feeling rejected by peers, feeling different from peers, and feeling left out. Depression is an intrinsically isolating experience. The horse's unconditional acceptance non-verbally encourages children and adolescents back into the camaraderie of life to engage in positive social interactions that decrease depression and isolation.
- **Mindfulness:** Equine Assisted Therapy integrates mindfulness at almost every step as the child learns to be present, in the moment, calm, centered, focused, and fully engaged. Horses are very sensitive and pick up on others' emotions quickly, and accurately reflect these feelings in mirroring ways to the child. One can almost experience it as [bio-feedback](#), but it is the dynamic between the child and the horse that is creating the

feedback loop. With mindfulness, the child is able to learn new, positive ways of being, which has a significant impact on cognition, feelings, and behaviors associated with depression, anxiety, trauma, obsessions, impulsivity, [emotional regulation](#), and other mental health issues.

- Self-Esteem: Children's confidence is enhanced as they challenge themselves to learn and master new skills. They improve their ability to tackle new projects and challenges in a natural, non-competitive, and non-judgmental environment, which leads to improved confidence, [self-assurance](#), and self-esteem.
- Impulse Regulation: Children and teens who struggle with impulse control and emotional regulation can benefit tremendously from Equine-Assisted Therapy. The need to communicate with a horse calmly and non-reactively promotes the skills of emotional awareness, emotion regulation, [self-control](#), and impulse modulation. Equine-Assisted Therapy is effective in reducing children's irritability, agitation, and impulsivity, and increases [cooperation](#), emotional regulation, capacity for delay, and behavioral control.
- [Self-Efficacy](#): Experiencing success with challenging exercises and goal-focused activities in non-verbal ways fosters initiative, problem-solving, and renewed internal feelings of self-efficacy. Experiences of "I did it!" replace feelings of helplessness and lack of [motivation](#), empowering the child and adolescent to take on challenges in many areas of coping and healing.
- Positive Identity: As the horse and therapist work in close alliance with the child and adolescent, a gradual sense of acceptance and feeling "liked" emerges to enhance the child's positive [self-concept](#) and identity. The child bonds with the horse to create a positive and healthy relationship that fosters the child's identity and self-definition.
- Communication: Learning to communicate and achieve harmony with a large animal promotes [intuition](#), stepping outside of one's comfort zone, and patience. Horses' sensitivity to [non-verbal communication](#) assists children to develop greater awareness of their emotions, the non-verbal cues that they may be communicating, and the critical role of non-verbal communication in relationships.
- Growth With Nature: Through Equine Assisted Therapy children and adolescents have a unique opportunity to encounter the outdoors from a new perspective. Feelings of joy and connection are often discovered or revived as children experience nature's beauty in a renewed way.

Especially for children and [teenagers](#), engaging in therapy in a more natural, peaceful, outdoor environment greatly enhances the benefits of therapy.

- Self-Acceptance: Many children are initially concerned that they will do something embarrassing while learning about and interacting with the horses. Yet children quickly learn that every individual has their own equine experience, and they learn to focus inwardly on their comfort level in their own skin as opposed to making comparisons. Fears of [embarrassment](#) in public are thereby often reduced and self-acceptance increased. Children and adolescents also learn that progress is a journey, and self-acceptance for every phase of that journey is critical to [resilience](#).
- Social Skills: Equine Assisted Therapy supports children in learning appropriate non-verbal and verbal communication, receiving and understanding positive and negative feedback, reciprocity in relationships, [assertiveness](#), initiative, and engagement. It is very powerful in moving children who are socially isolated or withdrawn to a more open, positive, and appropriate social platform. A positive relationship with a horse is often the first, safe step toward practicing the social skills needed to initiate closer relationships with people, learn trust, and engage in social reciprocity.
- Assertiveness: Working effectively with a large animal can be intimidating and Equine Assisted Therapy provides the foundation for children to learn how to be more assertive, clear, and directive. Communicating effectively with a horse and engaging in challenging exercises that include the horse foster the child to demonstrate initiation, assertiveness, and direction; all important skills that enable them to express their needs and feelings more effectively in relationships.
- Boundaries: Many children and adolescents have experienced prior relationships as controlling, [traumatic](#), conflictual, or untrustworthy. Healing takes place as they discover that the relationship with horses occurs within the context of a healthy, safe, and mutually respectful relationship between themselves and the horse. Children quickly learn that although physically bigger and more powerful, the horse typically mirrors the child's emotions and operates within the boundaries of this safe and mutually caring relationship.
- [Creativity](#) and Spontaneity: Many children with socio-emotional difficulties may be emotionally inhibited, rigid, or despondent, and are likely to

have lost some sense of spontaneity. The creativity, spontaneity, and playful aspects of Equine Assisted Therapy and equine activities can help restore spontaneity, creativity, and ability for healthy recreation and play.

- Perspective and Giving: By developing a caring and nurturing a relationship with a specific horse, the child develops a positive [attachment](#) outside of their home and school. Through grooming activities and caring for the horse, children are able to learn to give, nurture, connect, and put aside the absorbing focus of their struggles, self-defeating thoughts, negative, sad emotions, and [anxious](#) ruminations, and instead direct their [attention](#) and thoughts externally toward safe and caring interactions.

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Equine Assisted Therapy can be a powerful and magical way to assist our children and adolescents in multiple social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and behavioral domains. Equine Assisted Therapy is being recognized as a more integral part of psychotherapy and mental health and can serve as a unique and effective intervention that should be considered as a resource by parents and professionals.

About the Author



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