An Exploration of Equine-Assisted Therapy Benefits for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Case of Healing with Horses Therapy Center, Bulawayo.

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the perceived benefits of Equine-Assisted Therapy (EAT) in children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The research aimed to investigate the psychological, social, behavioral, and communication benefits of Equine Assisted Therapy. A descriptive qualitative research approach was adopted, utilizing semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth information. Seven participants, including an Equine-Assisted Therapist, Occupational Therapist, and volunteers, were selected using purposive non-probability sampling. Thematic data analysis revealed that Equine Assisted Therapy was beneficial in improving psychological development in children with Autism. Notably, reduction of fear, mood regulation, and attachment patterns were observed. The therapy also facilitated the development of social and interaction skills, enabling children to engage more effectively with their environment and others. Furthermore, behavioral and communication improvements were evident, with non-verbal children demonstrating significant progress in identifying sounds and developing speech. The findings suggest that Equine Assisted Therapy can be a valuable therapeutic approach for children with autism spectrum disorder, providing a unique and engaging way to promote psychological, social, behavioral, and communication development. The study's implications are significant, offering insight into a methodology that can benefit children with Autism and informing psychologists and therapists about the positive impact of Equine Assisted Therapy on children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder. By highlighting the benefits of Equine Assisted Therapy, this research contributes to the growing body of evidence supporting the effectiveness of animal-assisted therapies in promoting human well-being. The study's findings have important implications for practice, policy, and future research, underscoring the need for further investigation into the therapeutic potential of Equine Assisted Therapy for children with autism spectrum disorder.

Keywords-Equine Assisted Therapy, Autism, Psychotherapy, Psychological, Social, Behavioral

INTRODUCTION

Leo Kanner is credited as the first person to give a detailed description of Autistic behavior (Kanner, 1943). According to (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are explained as persistent deficits in verbal and non-verbal social communication skills and social interaction across multiple contexts and restricted repetitive behaviours and activities which manifests during the developmental stage.

A number of therapies have been developed to help in treatment of autism spectrum disorders. Besides the traditional forms of therapy, post-modern approaches have introduced new psychological interventions. Studies have established that the relationship between animals and humans may improve the subjective wellbeing of humans through facilitating psychological, social and physical benefits (Fine & Beck, 2010). Recent years have seen the rise in the development of multiple interventions that integrate animals as a main component and catalyst to achieve therapeutic goals (Fine & Beck, 2010).

Animal-assisted therapy has been practised for a very long time even before it was established as evidence-based therapy. Although there are conflicts as to when it began, reports attribute its genesis to the early 20th century. Some sources claim that animal-assisted therapy was being practiced as early as 1792 (Klontz et al., 2007). Levinson, (1965) argues that the use of animals as therapy was coincidental and largely attributed to their availability and daily domestic use. The formal study of animal assisted therapy is thought to have been implemented in the 1960s (Benda, 2005). Boris Levinson is usually acknowledged as the father of animal-assisted therapy (Bachi et al., 2012; Geist, 2011). It should be noted that generally pets have been part of human lives since ancient times (Levinson, 1965).

According to (Klontz B. T., Bivens, Leinait, & Klontz, 2007), horses have the ability to facilitate therapeutic change as they have a unique ability to reflect and interpret nonverbal behaviour in humans. This relationship enables the therapeutic process. Horse-assisted therapy falls into the category of therapies known as Equine Assisted Therapy. Equine Assisted Therapy has been proven to have multiple physical benefits, as well as Psychological and social benefits (Fine & Beck, 2010). Equine Assisted Therapy has been implemented in the treatment of different mental health conditions which include Autism, ADHD, Dementia and Anxiety Disorders among others.

There are many forms of Equine Assisted Therapies (EAT) carried out by different professionals with varying qualifications. Generally, an expert in horse management facilitates the therapy. Equine Assisted Therapy utilizes human-animal interaction to improve physical, emotional and cognitive impairments. (Lentini & Knox, 2015). It uses a multi- dimensional approach which involves horse grooming, horse riding among others. According to (Bizub, Joy, & Davidson, 2003), Equine Assisted Therapy has gained popularity as a therapeutic model for autism spectrum disorder.

A number of studies have been conducted globally to determine the effectiveness of Equine Assisted Therapy in the treatment of autism spectrum disorders. Research findings suggest that it is an effective therapy in treatment of Autism. The benefits of the therapy range from social benefits, physical as well as emotional. Some of its established benefits include ability to facilitate development of social relationships, (Lanning & Matyastik-Baier, 2014), modification of behaviour, (Lentini & Knox, 2015) and regulation of emotional and cognitive impairments, (Gabriels, et al., 2012).Some of the perceived benefits of the therapy on cases of Autism Spectrum Disorders include, improved language, emotional regulation, and improved social interactions, (Karol, 2007, Sams, et.al , 2006).

While a number of researches have been conducted worldwide and also in neighboring South Africa, Zimbabwe still has limited research in the area of Equine Assisted Therapy. This has led to limited appreciation of the therapy. As such the study hopes to raise awareness of this therapy as well as to explore its potential benefits in improving the lives of children living with autism spectrum disorders. The existence of a centre in Bulawayo which offers these services motivated the study and hence through this study it is believed that Equine Assisted Therapy will gain popularity as a complementary therapy to psychotherapy in Zimbabwe.

Objectives

1. To determine the Perceived psychological benefits of therapy in children with autism spectrum disorder.
2. To identify the perceived social benefits of therapy in children with autism spectrum disorder.
3. To explore the perceived impact of therapy on behavior and communication skills.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative case study approach, utilizing a descriptive qualitative research design to gain insight into the benefits of Equine-assisted therapy for autism spectrum disorder. This design allows for accurate description of situations or phenomena (Kumar, 2011).

A non-probability sampling method, specifically Purposive sampling, was used to choose participants who meet the desired characteristics. Seven female participants were chosen, including the director of the therapy program, an equine-therapist, four volunteers, and an occupational therapist.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexible and in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions. Interviews were administered face-to-face and online, audio-recorded, and transcribed to ensure correct interpretation.

Thematic content analysis was used to identify emerging common themes and subthemes. Important themes identified included overall benefits, psycho-social benefits, and behavioral benefits of equine-assisted therapy. The data was grouped according to re-occurring themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Research questions addressed the following:

1. Are there psychological benefits related to Equine Assisted Therapy among participants of equine-assisted therapy?
2. Does Equine Assisted Therapy provide social benefits for children with Autism?
3. Are there any behavior and communication changes due to Equine Assisted Therapy in children with autism spectrum disorder?

RESULTS

Psychological Benefits of Equine Assisted Therapy

Therapy facilitated the elimination of fear . They became accustomed to the horse and relaxed. An example of a child who would start humming as the therapy proceeded was cited, “There’s one little girl, at some point during therapy, she begins humming and patting the horse’s back.”

Psychological aspects such as emotional stability, confidence, and mood regulation were reported to be a result of the therapy, “The children gain confidence, especially those who have improved co-ordination.”

The therapy has an impact on their mood, “They are very happy compared to when they first came”.

A volunteer reports that one child was asked how Therapy feels like and responded;

“It makes me feel like a princess”

Interaction with the environment and also with other people improved after a number of sessions; “Even after a couple of sessions you find they start saying words, start interacting with people”.

Social Benefits of Equine Assisted Therapy

The therapy helped children develop social skills, such as confidence and mood regulation. The children managed to develop interaction skills that they had not possessed before: “Even after a couple of sessions you find they start saying words, start interacting with people…”

There were reported significant changes in the children due to Equine Assisted Therapy, “You can see in one session an enormous change, from the beginning of the session to the end of the session.”

Another volunteer reported, “Absolutely, it’s amazing, the difference it makes in the kids’ lives whatever the challenges it really helps.”

Behavior and Communication Benefits of Equine Assisted Therapy

Respondents indicated that there was great improvement in the children in terms of their behavior. Therapy made a huge impact on the behavior patterns of the children according to the respondents. Respondents indicated that equine-assisted therapy has a calming effect on the children.

“…..you put them on the horse, their character changes completely, they become confident, they are happy there’s one little girl who giggles all the time.”

Children who had presented with restlessness became composed after starting the therapy, ".. At the end of the session we are dealing with different children altogether"

"It calms them a lot….."

Communication patterns were slowly developed. The participants reported that children who had been non-verbal greatly improved during the session, they started to make sounds and with time some said their first words. The therapist confirmed, "Yes they do, it usually takes a couple of sessions for them to start making sounds."

The therapy helped the children to identify sounds and also it improved their attention skills. While previously they were unable to focus and pay attention, they improved in that regard.

"We have never taken longer than a month to help a non-verbal child to start talking."

Children also learnt to follow instructions as they received them from the instructor leading them. Participants perceived the therapy to be very effective. Riding on the horse seemed to make a huge difference. For example one child was reported to change completely on the horse,"…..one child once she is on the horse becomes excited and is always giggling"

DISCUSSION

Research findings identified psychological benefits of therapy on children with Autism spectrum disorder. Participants highlighted that the therapy improved self-confidence in the children as they became more independent and developed key skills. This aligns perfectly with the findings by (Lemke, et al., 2014) who reported that interaction with horses increased self-esteem and boosted confidence. Therefore, confidence was established as a psychological benefit of Equine Assisted Therapy.

Psychological aspects such as emotional stability, and mood regulation were also reported to be a result of the therapy. The therapy also impacted their mood, children were excited with some observed to giggle and enjoy the ride. The impact of the therapy in relation to emotions and mood also aligns with findings by (Ro & Clark, 2009).

The participants confirmed that the therapy impacted the children's social skills. A notable improvement in social interactions was indicated, children moved from being fearful and engaged more with others. Previous studies support that Equine Assisted Therapy improves the social life of Autistic children Bass, Duchowny, & Llabre, 2009). Equine Assisted Therapy was reported to bring about improvements in social engagement skills among people living with Autism as stated in (Esposito et al., 2011). Participants agreed that as soon as children mounted the horses they became calm, while they had previously displayed signs of restlessness. Dingman, (2008), also supports the fact that horses provide a calming effect in the case of Autism.

While children had presented with fear, and could not express themselves, turned away from people and were withdrawn, exposure to therapy led them to develop interaction skills. Children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder have more difficulties especially in social areas. Thus, interaction with animals such as equines is considered to inevitably increase social functioning of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. These constructs are not contrary to research findings by (Lanning & Matyastik-Baier, 2014). The former cites improvement in social interaction as a key benefit of Equine Assisted Therapy. Therefore, results from the study validate the claim that Equine Assisted Therapy benefits Autistic children in the social aspect.

The participants commended the therapy in that it facilitated the development of speech in children who had been non-verbal at the onset of the therapy. This has been supported by (Zilcha-Mano, et al., 2011) , who states that interaction with the horses stimulates verbal and non-verbal expression of feelings. Participants related that in less than a month the children started to make sounds. non-verbal expressions such as waving hands, stroking the horse, dancing on the horse's back were also evident.

Participants alluded to the fact that as a result of the therapy, children developed better attention skills. They managed to focus on communication and also to follow given instructions. This is validated by previous study which established improved ability to follow instructions, compliance behaviours and social interaction skill, (XueLing Tan & Simmonds, 2018). Hence Assisted Therapy was perceived to be of benefit to the development of behaviour and communication skills.

Limitations

The first limitation is related to the location of the research. The research was conducted at Healing with horses' therapy centre which is the only therapy centre offering Equine Assisted Therapy in Bulawayo. This factor contributed to a limited population for sampling as the research required a sample of people actively involved in the therapy process. The result therefore might not apply to other geographical settings.

Due to a limited population, the sample size was compromised. The study had 7 participants. The small sample size also affects generalization of the results. Small sample sizes have been reported to be a core concern in the study of Equine Assisted Therapies, (Bachi, 2013).

According to (Lentini & Knox, 2015) Standardized measures with a sample population greater than 10 have shown more meaningful results. A larger sample would have been more effective in proving more perceptions and views in regards to the therapy. Therefore, the sample size greatly affected the research findings.

The study utilized a qualitative approach which was a limiting factor. Qualitative research utilises the narrations and perspectives of the participants rather than experiments. This approach is prone to desirability bias, as participants may provide responses that they perceive to be favourable to the study. According to (Bachi, 2012), previous studies have been affected by inconsistent results and the documented feelings of participants. The designs are also unable to provide information on causal relationships and Long-terms effects of Equine Assisted Therapy cannot be determined (Brandt, 2013).

CONCLUSION

The study's main aim was to explore the perceived benefits of Equine Assisted Therapy in the treatment of autism spectrum disorders. The presenting problems in children with Autism were identified as a foundation to exploring how the therapy impacts the children and weather it addresses the presenting problems. Responses gathered from the participant interviews revealed that the therapy has a positive impact on children with Autism. The volunteers and therapists engaged in the therapy speak highly of the benefits of the therapy. The identified benefits include improvement in psycho-social well-being, motor skills, development of behaviour as well as communication skills.

Although the present study detected some notable therapeutic benefits it did not establish the cause-and-effect relationship that results in the outcome of the therapy, it is also unclear how long the resulting improvements can be sustained outside the therapy setting. Also, the effectiveness of the therapy was not widely explored and it was not assessed. Effectiveness studies are a necessary direction for current and future research in the field of equine-assisted activities and therapies and psychotherapies. There is therefore a necessity to pursue further study in this area. It should however be noted that this study has unraveled an appreciation of Equine Assisted Therapy and has also provided a possible framework for further studies in this area.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A Clear Definition of Therapy in Discussion.

There is a need to clearly define Equine Assisted Therapy . It is noted that the term is broad and covers a number of approaches. Equine Assisted activities and therapies is an umbrella term which embraces two types of Equine-Assisted interventions namely: Equine Assisted Activities (EAA) and Equine Assisted Therapies (EAT), (Gabriels & Pan, 2015).

Studies Involving Comparison Groups

Human-Animal Therapies have been criticized for their lack of control groups (Bachi, et al., 2012). There is little research on the efficacy of the therapy but more on the perceptions and perspectives of certain interest groups. It is recommended that future research include comparison groups to compare the efficacy of the therapy. Comparison between other types of therapy approaches is recommended as well as comparison between individuals engaged in Equine Assisted Therapy and those not participating.

Longitudinal Designs Investigating Effectiveness of Equine- Assisted Therapy

There is a shortage of longitudinal studies in the area of Equine Assisted Therapies. As a result, the long-term effects of Equine Assisted Therapy cannot be determined (Brandt, 2013). Improvements in methodologies could help provide solid evidence to show that Equine Assisted activities and therapies are effective (Bachi, 2012; Lentini & Knox, 2015). Recommendations for longitudinal studies are suggested in order to have more concrete data on the benefits of Equine Assisted Therapy.

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