

“It’s different with a horse”

Horses as a tool for engagement in a horse therapy program for marginalised young people

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The social, emotional, psychological and mental health needs of young people are highlighted in the social agendas of many western countries. While a range of youth programs have been developed, there are pervasive difficulties in achieving young people’s sustained attention and positive participation in these programs (Santisteban et al. 1996; Slesnick et al. 2000; Stanton 2004; Szapocznick et al. 1988; Tanner et al. 2012). This research analysed some of the ways in which an innovative program using horses engaged marginalised young people in its first session. A total of 49 participants and significant others were interviewed about their experience of the program. Key themes were identified, namely the power of the horse, non-verbal relationships and non-judgemental relationships, which have been found in other studies (Burgon 2011; Frewin & Gardiner 2005; Karol 2007; Schultz, Remick-Barlow & Robbins 2007). Here, these three themes were observed as being associated with engaging young people in the initial stage of this program. This study implies that horses can be effective in efficiently engaging young clients during the initial stages of a program.

Young people grow up in an increasingly uncertain world that poses a range of risks and challenges. Not surprisingly, there is increasing concern about the wellbeing of

young people, and myriad programs have been developed to assist them in shaping their lives (Ewing et al. 2007; Holroyd & Armour 2003). However, many of these programs struggle

to engage or even reach marginalised young people (Santisteban et al. 1996; Slesnick et al. 2000; Stanton 2004; Szapocznick et al. 1988; Tanner et al. 2012). Given the pervasive difficulties involved in gaining young people's sustained attention and positive participation in therapeutic programs, the issue of engagement is important (Ewing et al. 2007, pp.59–60).

Engagement of marginalised young people

Lack of or poor engagement in therapeutic programs can mean that while clients are physically present, they do not participate, learn or benefit from a given treatment. Often having problematic relationships with authority, hard-to-reach young people tend to be reluctant to participate in traditional programs and less likely to develop trusting relationships (Baer, Peterson & Wells 2004). While engagement has been found to lead to positive treatment outcomes (French, Reardon & Smith 2003, p.530), it can take time and a concerted effort by facilitators to achieve (Tanner et al. 2012).

Understandings of engagement differ, but, according to some, it involves the active involvement of young clients in the therapy process (French, Reardon & Smith 2003, p.530), the retention of participants in a given program (Simpson & Joe 2004) and/or the relationship between client and therapist (Dingle, Gleadhill & Baker 2007) consisting of a trusting, empathetic, immediate and sustained connection (Slesnick et al. 2000; Tanner et al. 2012). While these aspects refer to a client–therapist relationship (Dingle, Gleadhill & Baker 2007), there is a discernable lack of literature regarding engagement in the context of equine therapies, particularly with regard to the therapy animal itself. In this study, the therapeutic relationship was between the client and horse and so *initial engagement refers to gaining young people's attention, active participation and response to*

the horse during the first session of the program. Furthermore, while young people have been engaged in treatment programs in a range of ways, there are few specific discussions on how engagement has been achieved. This study focuses on the initial engagement of young people with diverse experiences and issues as they participate in a horse therapy program.

Animal-assisted therapies

Many marginalised, “hard to reach” young people have been found to positively respond to animal therapies (Kruger, Trachtenberg & Serpell 2004, p.22; Trotter et al. 2008). This is because animals in therapy help to mitigate the pressure and stress inherent in more traditional, talk-based therapies. They also provide feedback on social behaviour in explicit ways and provide immediate reactions to positive and negative conduct (Kruger & Serpell 2006). In so doing, animals can assist clients to learn about appropriate social interactions and the implications of their behaviour on others (Brooks 2001; Nebbe 1991). Most studies of animal therapies have focused on behavioural change or program impact rather than initial engagement.

In addition to the advantages associated with animal therapies, horses introduce an added dynamic to the therapeutic process. A strong relationship can develop between a horse and an individual involving a non-verbal, emotional connection experienced through the “somatic sensations” of the body (Brandt 2006, p.141). Here, “the body is the basis from which a system of communication” develops (Brandt 2004, p.301; 2006). Equine therapy programs usually draw on this idea of communication so that clients, with support from a trained facilitator, establish a bond with a horse and experience an affirming relationship (Lentini & Knox 2009). The physical setting is also deemed an important, unique component of equine programs (York, Adams & Coady 2008, p.19),

where the natural environment beneficially “invites an awareness of one’s physical being and stimulates the senses” (Schultz, Remick-Barlow & Robbins 2007, p.267). The client can then engage in tactile sensations, such as patting, brushing and comforting the horse, which in turn can provide a rhythmic form of comfort (Karol 2007, p.85; see also Brandt 2006).

Another element unique to equine-centered interventions relates to the relative size and potential power of the animal. As such, close proximity to horses tends to inspire intimidation, caution and attentiveness (Schultz, Remick-Barlow & Robbins 2007). Therapeutic value lies in clients overcoming their natural fear of the horse and developing confidence, as well as a sense of control and self-efficacy (Burgon 2011; Schultz, Remick-Barlow & Robbins 2007, p.266). The reactive, non-verbal interaction between client and horse is also deemed therapeutically important, particularly the immediacy of the relationship and the fact that it does not require articulation of emotions or feelings (Karol 2007, p.84). As responsive prey animals (Burgon 2011), horses tend to react to non-verbal behaviour exhibited consciously and unconsciously by clients. Sensitive but inherently social, horses display an uncomplicated responsiveness, serving as a mirror through which clients can gain valuable insights into their own behaviour (Frewin & Gardiner 2005, p.5; Schultz, Remick-Barlow & Robbins 2007, p.266; Garcia 2010).

While the literature reports that animal therapies engage young people and, in some cases, successfully achieve behavioural change, reports are varied (Brooks 2001; Kruger & Serpell 2006; Nebbe 1991; Selby & Smith-Osborne 2013) and reasons for this variance are less clear. Perhaps, because the types of behaviours and experiences under study are particularly difficult to assess and isolate, meaningful findings can be elusive (Selby &

Smith-Osborne 2013). Therefore, in the interests of contributing to understandings of animal therapies using horses and clarifying how they may succeed, this paper focuses on the element of initial engagement as an early but vital step in a longer therapeutic process. With this goal, the paper analyses the experiences of young clients’ participation in the initial session of a horse-assisted therapeutic program. In this manner, it will explore the clients’ perspectives on the ways they became engaged at the outset. Before presenting this analysis, an overview of the specific program is provided.

The program

The horse therapy program examined in this paper was hosted in a dedicated equine facility on the outskirts of a regional town in central Victoria, Australia. The program was aimed at young people needing to develop social and communication skills, struggling with school, exhibiting behaviours of concern and/or those unresponsive to other modes of intervention. Young people were identified by the youth service that ran the program or referred by schools, other human services, parents or through the justice system. The goal was to assist these young participants to develop social skills and coping mechanisms by forming an affirming relationship with a horse.

The program was co-facilitated by a qualified male youth worker (also a horse enthusiast) as well as a female horse trainer who had developed counselling skills through her work with a youth agency. On arrival at the facility, a lecture introduced issues of horse behaviour and safety as well as desirable behaviours for participants, such as the importance of emotional regulation, leadership, respect and confidence. Following the lecture, 20–30 minutes was usually spent outside learning basic training manoeuvres. Afterwards a horse was selected and brought to a six-metre round yard.

Once the participant was suitably and safely attired, s/he entered the round yard with the facilitator and an untethered horse. While what occurred in the round yard differed slightly between participants, usually the participant spent approximately 15 minutes attempting to establish a “join up”-style connection with the horse (see Roberts 2010). Using body language cues, the horse was encouraged to run the perimeter of the round yard then, using non-verbal cues, persuaded to slowly approach the participant. In doing so, the horse was seen to display trust and a connection which the participant would solidify by petting and rubbing the horse. During this process the facilitator coached the participant, suggesting that they regulate their emotions, be a leader and be “calm and confident”. The majority of participants only engaged in this process once while others took part regularly over a period of time. Entering the round yard in this fashion, and with different horses, clients were encouraged to build social skills in unfamiliar and intimidating situations.

Methods

Data were collected over a two-year period between 2008 and 2010. To gain clients’ perspectives of their experiences of their first attempted “join up”, interviews were employed to capture young people’s voices (Denzin & Lincoln 2005). Individual, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 40 clients soon after they exited the round yard following their first session.

All potential research participants were provided with information about the research and consent procedure. For those under 16, this information was provided to parents/guardians. Program staff notified researchers on appropriate days to visit and identified potential program observers or “significant others” for participation. These significant others were adults able to describe the program in the context of their intimate knowledge

of specific participants. The research was verbally explained and, when written consent was gained, interviews took place. All but two young people and two significant others approached participated in the study.

Semi-structured interviews with program participants ranged between 10 and 50 minutes in length, while those with significant others lasted between 30 minutes and one hour (see Seidman 2006). Researchers asked young people a range of broad questions designed to elicit responses on their experience with the horse. These included questions about: themselves (“Can you tell me a bit about yourself?”); the program (“What happened today?”, “Can you tell me about what you did here?”); why they thought they were selected to participate in the horse program; their experience of being with the horse in the round yard (“What was it like?”, “What were you feeling?”, “Are you glad you had this experience, and why?”); their relationship with the horse (“Did you identify with the horse?”, “Did you sense the horse trusted/was scared of you?”); and learnings from, and impact of, the program (“What can you take away from this experience?”, “Was this a waste of time?”, “Has this experience changed the way you think?”). Similar questions were asked during interviews with significant others, where respondents were invited to discuss the program, the client–horse relationship and the program’s effect on specific client/s.

Anticipating that the young participants may find the interview process intimidating, and that talking about their experience of the program may be difficult to articulate (McLeod & Malone 2000), interviewers took various steps to encourage rapport. This included a verbal discussion in lay language around consent, particularly assuring participants that taking part was voluntary. Second, interviews were conducted in a comfortable, familiar area which ensured confidentiality, but which was physically

close to others taking part in the equine therapy. Third, interviews began in a very informal, conversational style, asking participants about themselves and talking about aspects of their lives that they wanted to discuss. Fourth, questions regarding their time in the round yard were posed in simple terms (e.g. “Can you tell me what it was like when you were in the yard with the horse?”). Abstract scenarios were also posed (e.g. “How do you think the horse was feeling?”) to remove the emphasis from the respondent and allow them to speculate about others. Interviewers also watched participants and drew on their observations when interviewing (e.g. “I saw the horse running around the yard; what was that like?”). These observations were also recorded by interviewers and were used to inform the findings of the research project.

All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed into text. Both authors independently coded text relating to engagement as well as participation in, experience of, and response to the program. When both authors discussed their codes, three themes emerged which described the essence of why this initial session captured the interest of these young people and their participation in this first session. Transcripts of interviews with significant others were coded separately and, despite the use of different language, the same themes emphasising engagement were identified (see Miles & Huberman 1994).

Of the 49 interviews, the majority (n = 40) were conducted with young participants recruited from the program. Of these, 23 were female and 17 were male, all were aged between 14 and 18. Twenty-five participants only entered the round yard once (15 went on to have further sessions with horses). Representing different ethnic, socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, some attended independently while others participated in groups associated with local schools or youth services. They also exhibited

a wide variety of needs, issues and problems. Many were not socially integrated into their schools and exhibited emotional, psychological and behavioural problems. Several spoke about their lives but appeared to have difficulty articulating their responses to the program, likely stemming from their age and experiences of social marginalisation. Further, nine were from non-English-speaking backgrounds. However, interviewers observed that many used hand gestures and tried to talk enthusiastically about their experience with the horse.

Nine interviews were conducted with significant others, including mothers, teachers (both primary and secondary), a youth worker who accompanied one young client and a representative of the justice department. Some significant others attended single sessions while others visited on multiple occasions. Most significant others spoke about multiple clients of various ages who were not necessarily research participants.

Findings

Power of the horse

Program participants: Participants clearly described the power differential and relative size of the horse. They talked about being intimidated when they entered the round yard and were in close proximity to the horse; 25 reported feeling “scared” and 18 stated they felt “nervous”. The researchers observed that participants approached the round yard nervously. Some described mixed emotions: “I felt scared because it was – I started off okay first, but then once I got in there and it started running around I felt a bit scared ...” Researchers noted that young participants listened attentively to the instructor in the round yard and most earnestly tried to take part, rather than dismissing the activity or being overly confident.

Significant others: Significant others also observed the power differential between participant and horse. Some noted how the horse gained the immediate attention of clients: “[...] so it’s a very big, large, living, threatening thing that makes them think – oh I’ve got to be aware of this. This is a potentially dangerous situation now.”

Another commented:

*And she’s worked with the big horses.
There’s a big horse out there that’s damn
near a Clydesdale and she kept saying
– I’m not ever gunna work with that,
I would shit meself if they put me in
there with that ... She had to actually
use her body to get away from it but she
came away thinking, “Wow I did it.”*

One significant other connected the power differential with the engagement and attentiveness of participants who had difficulty engaging in traditional contexts:

*... you could see these were kids who were
generally not so engaged in school ...
normally they would be climbing the walls,
they sat there as quiet as mice because
that’s what the instructor had told them.
They were looking at an animal which
they knew was far more powerful than they
were and they had that instant respect.*

Providing an alternative perspective on participants’ articulations of fear and nervousness, several significant others narrowed in on the size and power of the horse, particularly its ability to intimidate clients and rapidly gain their attention.

Non-verbal relationships

Program participants: During interviews it became clear that the non-verbal nature of the equine relationship was a central component of clients’ initial engagement.

Several participants indicated that they found it difficult to explain their reaction to the program: “You have to experience it to, sort of, understand what I mean.” Others couched their relationship with the horse in terms of being heard: “I felt like it was listening to me.” Some described their connection with the horse in terms of understanding: “... it’s different with a horse because a horse actually understands me but ... my worker can’t, it’s different.” Others talked about the emotional communication with the horse:

*It’s like, the way it’s feeling ... I wasn’t
talking to the horse but I was feeling,
and I’m like, thinking things and saying
good things and encouraging it. I was
trying not to be scared so I could push
the horse away ... I’m like, when they
[facilitators] were talking, I’m like, how
can a horse talk to you or know how
you’re feeling? But it doesn’t happen in
words, but it, it happens in how you feel.*

Significant others: The value of not having to speak or articulate emotions was elaborated by significant others: “They didn’t have to use their voices; they just needed to use their bodies ... ”

Another contrasted the program with more traditional therapies:

*[The psychologist] just wants to stickybeak
and find out what I’m doing and what I’m
not doing [laughs] and he’s going to ask
me stupid questions about that you know,
that’s [the participant’s] view on it. Whereas
with horses ... it takes away the pressure
of sitting in a room, having someone
watch you and ask you stupid questions.*

One significant other who had accompanied a participant on many visits over a long period observed that: “It showed me inside, you know, he wasn’t a bad boy at all inside sort of thing ... it showed me I’m not really bad

inside if the horse accepts you.” Removing the requirement to verbally articulate internal responses appeared to be a driver for these young people’s relationship with the horse and participation in the program’s first session.

Non-judgemental relationships

Program participants: All participants described their experience with the horse in positive, affirming, non-judgemental terms. Seventeen talked about “trust” in some way, either in terms of trusting the horse or the horse trusting them: “Like if a horse can trust you like that, then people could. Like, have more faith in myself.” A connection with the horse was also associated with a sense of unqualified acceptance, confidentiality and a sense of security: “I think it (the horse) felt really safe and protected ...” By experiencing an open, honest and non-judgemental relationship in an environment divorced from past occurrences, young participants developed a unique bond with the horse. This was described as a key reason for gaining and sustaining their attention throughout the initial session in the round yard.

Significant others: Significant others also emphasised these elements and articulated their importance in terms of a non-judgemental connection between the participant and the horse. “I mean, the horse judges to a certain extent but once it makes up its mind, it’s unconditional, it just hands itself over into your care and affection and I think that that’s an immensely affirming thing.” Others emphasised that a connection was achieved in a short time frame, one stating that time with the horse “... would have been empowering for her because she’s experiencing what it is for someone to connect to her ... and it’s done in a short space of time”. Another described the rare opportunity to be vulnerable and open: “... you recognised they’ve been touched. Somewhere that hasn’t been touched for a long time or never been

touched. An aspect of themselves, and I think it’s permissible to display that with an animal. You can’t do that with another human being.”

The significant others were clear that unqualified acceptance and the depth of the relationship distinguished this program from other youth programs. They suggested that this was a major reason why young people were interested, actively participating and emotionally present while in the round yard. However, significant others indicated that engagement with the program and identification with the horse did not occur for all participants. Three significant others reported not observing special connections between horse and client, which they related to the duration of participation; they suggested that single sessions were associated with greater difficulty achieving engagement.

Discussion

Researchers observed that young people engaged in this first session. Participants appeared interested, actively participated in the “join up” (Roberts 2010) and enthusiastically talked about their experience afterwards. Such engagement is significant given the difficulties and length of time traditional therapies take in achieving this type of engagement (Ewing et al. 2007). Observations of and interviews with these young participants suggested that their interest in this program was captured by the horse. The non-verbal process of developing a relationship, the non-judgemental relationship that transpired and the intense connection with the horses seemed to appeal to these young people.

Unlike animal therapies that utilise smaller animals, horses introduce a significant degree of physical intimidation, which induces fear and wariness for participants. As such, the young people appeared to listen and actively participate in a session more intensely. Others have

described the size and intimidation associated with the horse as important therapeutically (Burgon 2011; Schultz, Remick-Barlow & Robbins 2007) but here it was identified as a possible driver of initial engagement. Recognised in other studies of animal therapies (Karol 2007), the non-verbal nature of the interaction between participant and horse also seemed to be a key element of the experience. That there was no requirement or pressure for participants to speak, reflect or self-analyse in order to participate in the program appeared to be one of the reasons why these marginalised young people were eager participants. The experience of a non-judgemental and also strong and affirming relationship between participant and horse seemed to further underlie effective engagement of clients in the initial session. After a single session in the round yard, participants described a positive emotional connection with a horse, which they said made them feel good, safe and trustworthy. Participants and significant others stated that young people valued this connection because it was free of judgement, it was confidential and was divorced from past negative experiences.

This study suggests that traditional therapies, particularly those based on verbal communication, may undermine effective and timely engagement with marginalised young people. De-emphasising the need to verbally articulate internal responses in therapeutic contexts may replicate some of the value of the horse in engaging young people. While the power of the horse cannot be replicated in more traditional therapies not utilising animals, some of elements, such as the natural, tactile setting of the outdoor environment, can be transposed to other types of therapies. Additionally, experiences that are not overtly therapeutic, such as taking part in an affirming activity and/or effecting a positive outcome (as occurs in the round yard), could also be manufactured

in alternative circumstances. Thus, there are lessons that can be learned from the horse as therapist, including that young people want to be valued and to grow in natural situations (Brandt 2006; Garcia 2010; Karol 2007).

Clearly, these findings must be accepted with caution. Findings are not generalisable and the data reflect only one group of clients immediately after only one session. Other limitations exist, including the use of interviews in which some young respondents struggled to talk about their experiences and feelings. Further long-term outcomes for young participants could not be established. However, as a snapshot of initial engagement in a horse therapy program, the use of a horse appeared to capture the attention of most of these young people, encourage their active participation and facilitate a genuine emotional response.

Conclusion

Both program participants and significant others provided insight into the ways in which horses appeared to gain participants' attention, trust and respect. This is important given the frequent difficulties of effectively engaging marginalised young people (Baer, Peterson & Wells 2004; Santisteban et al. 1996; Slesnick et al. 2000; Stanton 2004; Szapocznick et al. 1988; Tanner et al. 2012). It also implies that characteristics of some traditional therapies could undermine initial engagement for some young people. The pressure on young people to talk, verbalise their feelings and answer questions, in conjunction with the perception of being judged and feeling impersonally connected to a therapist, seemed to be overcome in this program by a horse, which demanded attention, did not judge or require conversation, and which facilitated a strong connection based on mirroring participants' emotions and behaviours.

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