

The Impact of Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy on Adolescents with Mental Health Concerns

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Abstract

This study examined the benefits of equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP) on adolescents with mental health concerns. Participants engaged in weekly sessions of EAP over the course of eight weeks. Clinical notes on participants' responses during EAP were coded based on behavioral, emotional, and social categories. Results from four participants identified as above average in noncompliance suggested that noncompliance behaviors decreased over time.

A growing body of research shows the psychological and emotional benefits of animal-assisted interventions (Maujean et al., 2015), and programs using horses have demonstrated improvements in social and behavioral challenges in youth and other individuals (e.g., Thomas et al., 2016; Lac, 2020). This study assessed the impact of equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP) on the behaviors of adolescents. Equine therapy has demonstrated effectiveness in alleviating symptoms associated with child psychopathology (e.g., Wilson et al., 2017; Roberts & Honzel, 2020; Mueller & McCullough, 2017; McCullough et al., 2015). However, the existing literature presents with mixed reviews (Anestis et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2016). We do not know of any current research that has quantitatively analyzed clinical notes taken on participants' observable behaviors. The purpose of this study was to augment the current research on

EAP as a treatment for youth with varying degrees of mental health concerns by utilizing a quantitative approach to data analysis. Our primary research question was: Is EAP an effective treatment method for adolescents with mental health diagnoses? Based on previous studies and the pertinent categories that emerged from the data, we hypothesized that the number of observed noncompliant behaviors, negative emotions, and isolating occurrences would improve over time as a result of the program.

Method

Fourteen students enrolled in an alternative-school-day program, who took part in equine-assisted psychotherapy as part of their curriculum, were involved in this study. Individuals were split evenly into groups. They took part in one-hour sessions of equine-assisted psychotherapy once a week on separate days, although week six

consisted of a combined group session. This practice occurred over the course of eight weeks. Both groups received the same treatment conducted by an Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA)-certified instructor in conjunction with a mental health professional each day. Equine sessions consisted of both individual and group tasks involving horses. During the EAP treatment, the same mental health worker attended each session and recorded clinical notes. The individual was not informed prior to sessions on what behaviors to notate. Instead, this recorder took notes on behaviors witnessed from overt observations present in a session for each student. Upon the conclusion of eight weeks of EAP, the clinical notes were coded based on the number of times an observable action was evident in *a posteriori*-established categories, and changes in participants' behaviors over the eight weeks were examined.

Results

Four participants who presented with above average noncompliant behaviors when compared to the rest of the sample were identified using small N design techniques. Over the eight weeks, the group averaged approximately 7.43 instances of noncompliant behavior, and during the introductory sessions, nearly all of the sample was compliant except for the four students who were identified. Each of the four students' noncompliant behaviors were examined at the introductory sessions of EAP (sessions 1 and 2) and compared to their noncompliant behaviors during the post-introductory sessions of EAP (sessions 3-8). Like Figures 1-4 convey (see Appendix), each student displayed more compliance during weeks 3-8 of EAP in comparison to the introductory sessions during weeks 1-2.

The number of noncompliant behaviors for the post-introductory phase are below each participants' median scores (on nearly all weeks except for one) for noncompliance during the introductory phase of the program. No discernible patterns using small N design techniques were detected for the observed number of negative emotions and isolating behaviors, which failed to support our hypothesis.

Discussion

The current study evaluated the effects of EAP on youth with mental health concerns. From the introductory phase of EAP (weeks 1 and 2) in contrast to the post-introductory phase (weeks 3-8), it was demonstrated that four participants displayed more compliance in the post-introductory phase. This result partially supported that EAP had an impact on adolescents in terms of noncompliance and corroborates a research conclusion made by Ewing et al. (2007). Specifically, Ewing et al. (2007) reported changes in conduct among participants based on observations provided by a teacher and equine instructor. However, given that no discernible differences in the other established categories were found, it could be asserted that this study is in line with Anestis et al. (2014)'s research that equine-related treatments do not yet have the support needed to claim their effectiveness. In the future, researchers should utilize larger participant groups to increase external validity and power. In terms of assessing participant behaviors based on clinical notes, *a priori* categories should be established well before equine sessions take place to quantify observable behaviors more accurately. Lastly, enhanced methodological designs, possibly in the form of randomized controlled trials, are important to examine the causal impact EAP may have on treating youth with mental health concerns.

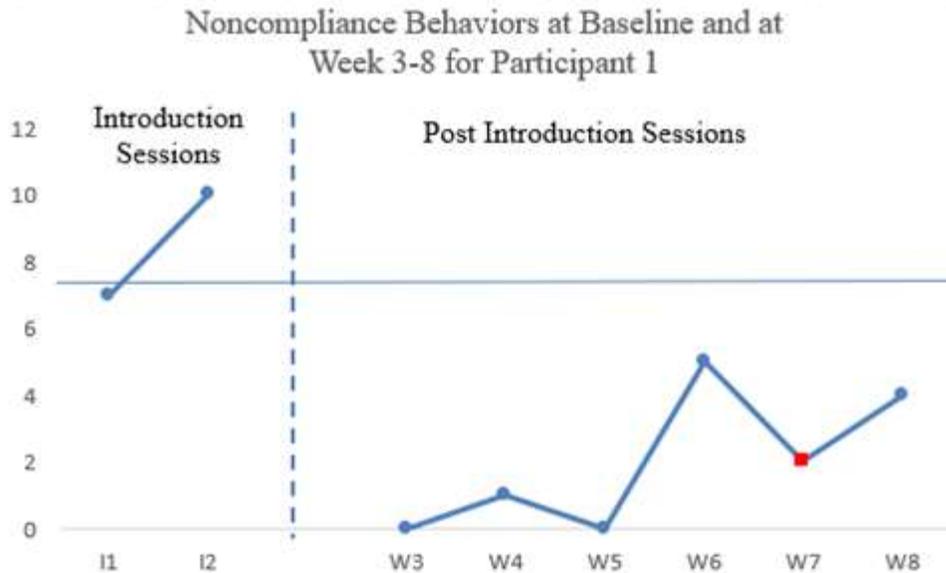
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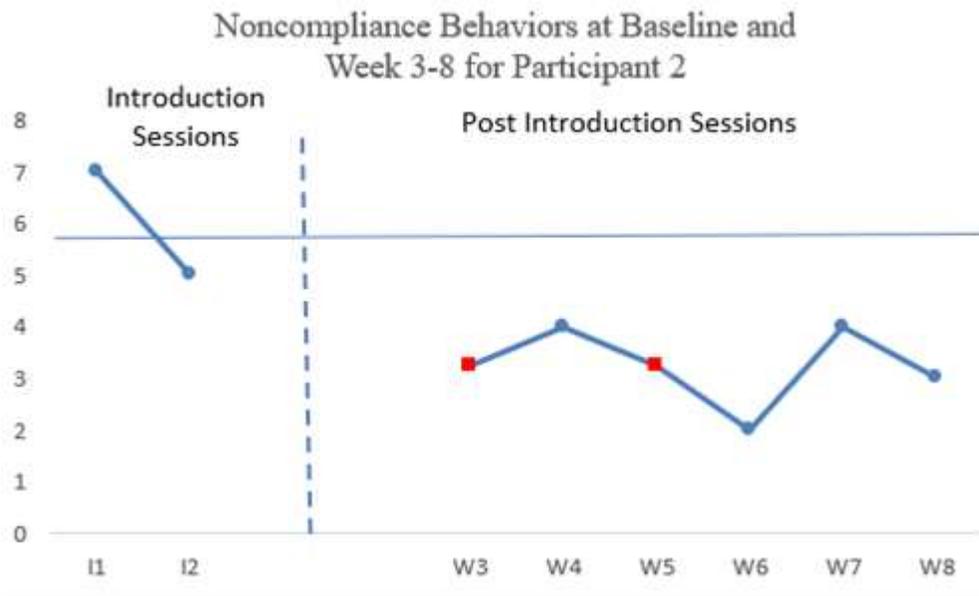
Appendix
Graphs of Participants' Noncompliant Behaviors

Figure 1
Noncompliant Behaviors for Participant 1



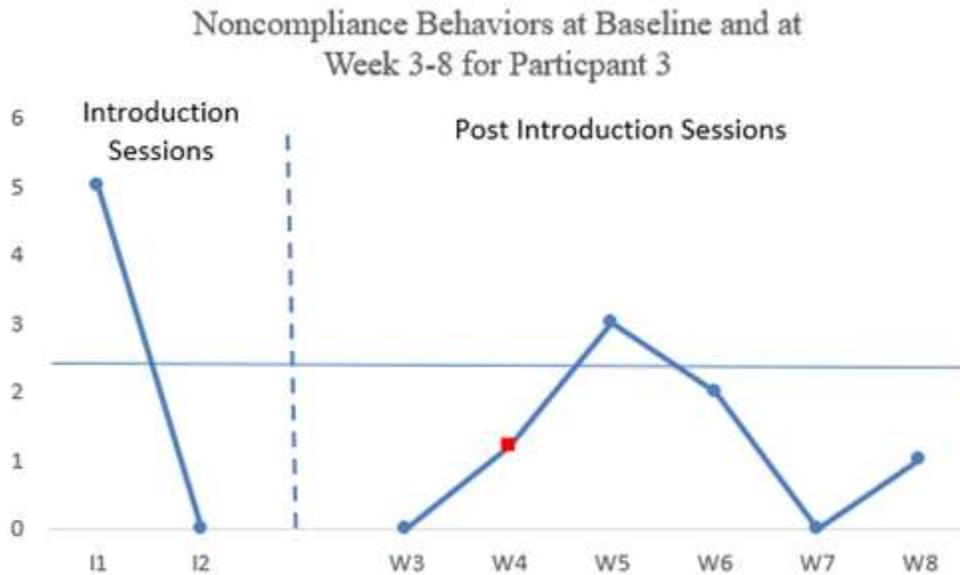
Note: Student was absent on week 7. Marker for missing data represent the average noncompliance for student across weeks 3-8.

Figure 2
Noncompliant Behaviors for Participant 2



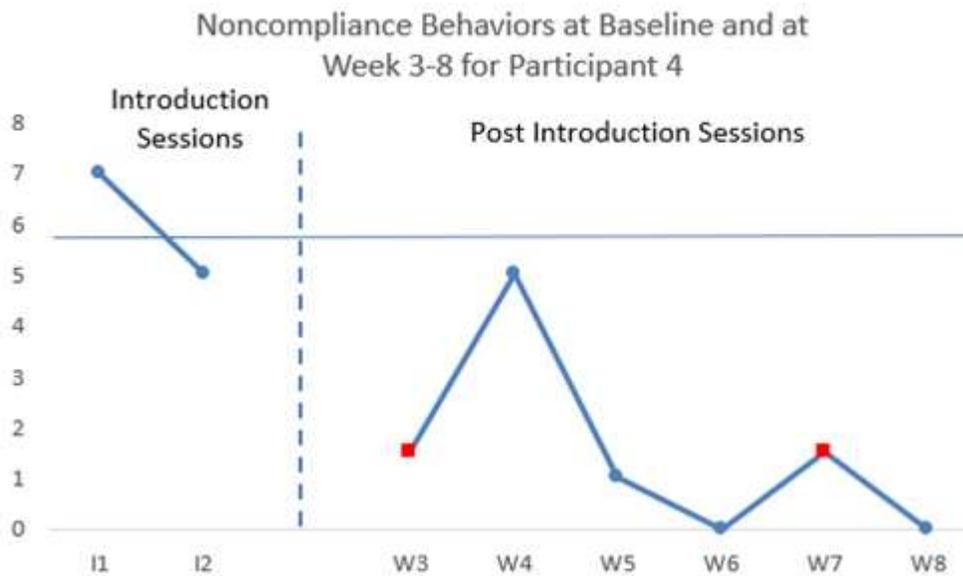
Note: Student was absent on week 3 and 5. Markers for missing data represent the average noncompliance for student across weeks 3-8.

Figure 3
Noncompliant Behaviors for Participant 3



Note: Student was absent on week 4. Marker for missing data represent the average noncompliance for student across weeks 3-8.

Figure 4
Noncompliant Behaviors for Participant 4



Note: Student was absent on weeks 3 and 7. Markers for missing data represent the average noncompliance for student across weeks 3-8.

Recommended Citation

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