

by Kristine Klopp, HBA and Brandy Davis, B.S.

Have you ever
played checkers
with a horse?

What about
Equine Billiards?



Checkers and Equine Billiards are two of the many activities used by equine programs employing Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) methods in combining people with horses for therapeutic purposes.

Current research has shown that equine therapy is affective to address such issues as abuse, family relations, behavioral problems, learning disabilities (i.e. ADHD), substance abuse, eating disorders, depression, etc. Equine therapy is an example of experiential education, allowing the individuals to learn from natural consequences, mistakes and successes.

Why use a horse? By nature, horses communicate primarily through body language. This not only applies to other horses but also with humans. The participant's body language affects the horse's behavior; when their body language changes, the horse will begin to act differently. Therefore, the participants are given an immediate response to changing their actions.

Participants typically are not skilled at reading equine body language and tend to place their own emotions and intentions onto the horses behavior. This provides an abundance of information to the facilitators that can then be used therapeutically. This type setting is less threatening and allows the participants to draw on the experience and compare it to other situations and relationships. When a participant can compare a horse's actions to that of someone in their life, they can assess it without an emotional response from that person and with less emotional stigma of their own.

For example, at the Three Springs, Inc. Paint Rock Valley outdoor therapeutic program all residents complete the Equine elective as part of a SACS accredited education program. Approximately half of the time in the elective, the residents are taught lessons in equine science. The curriculum follows the Alabama High School Course of Study Guidelines. Included in the lessons are nutrition, anatomy, and first aid for horses, disease prevention, and many others. The residents also learn about and perform daily maintenance and care of the animals.

The other half of the elective is spent participating in therapeutic Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) activities. These activities fall under guidelines set forth by EAGALA.

EAGALA certifies Equine Professionals as well as Counseling Professionals to work as a team in EAP activities. Two individuals are required to facilitate the EAP activities. This allows one facilitator to focus solely on the horses and the second facilitator to focus solely on the participants. Two facilitators ensure the safety of everyone involved.

Though most people initially think it is odd that the participants are not taught to ride in the elective, it takes watching just one session to realize that the EAP activities are therapeutic and appropriate for this long-term treatment setting. These activities are designed to build teamwork, resourcefulness and self-esteem in a non-

threatening environment, and are especially effective with adolescent populations.

Most of the activities are set up with one or more horses in an arena or other type enclosure. Often the animals are loose. It is safer to have the horses free of constraints, rather than tied to something stationary because horses instinctively flee dangerous situations rather than turning to fight in the same situations.

In the activities, the participants are generally given five basic rules. *These rules are:* 1) no talking, 2) no touching the horse, 3) no using halters or lead ropes in any way, 4) no bribing the horse, and 5) no using anything outside their community (the enclosed area). While these rules vary by activity, they are designed to eliminate participants' typical coping mechanisms and manipulation tactics requiring them to think outside of the box and look for new ways to deal with situations.

Participants are then given the goal; a description of what the result of the activity should look like. This may be to get a horse through an obstacle course, over a jump or into a specific area. A group does not have to complete the objective to be successful. How the group functions holds greater significance than whether or not they accomplish the goal.



What is often observed in these activities is an initial inability to utilize the many resources available to them. Typically, participants are so focused on what they cannot do that they fail to see what they can or are able to do. This information is discussed during the debrief process.

During the debriefing session, the participants are given the opportunity to summarize and point out any interesting events that may have taken place during the course of the exercise. Staff facilitators serve as a guide for the conversation by asking specific questions. These questions often trigger the participants to make connections to their life in and out of treatment. This style further allows those who struggle with authority figures to become more open. It also allows more of an opportunity to explore the participants' perspective and for them to come up with solutions on their own. The goal is for the participants to take these newly found skills and information about themselves and apply them to situations in their life.

The effects of Equine therapy were particularly noticed with a specific individual at the Paint Rock Valley program. In an effort to improve communication in her group, the group was presented with an activity called Billiards. It resembles actual table billiards, except on the ground. The horses act as the billiard balls, and the participants move the horses.

During the activity, the last horse the group needed to "get into the pocket" had been chased and harassed until he finally did what the group wanted him to do. Once he went into the pocket he spent the entire debriefing period standing in that spot, exactly where the group had left him. He even fell asleep there. After discussing how the activity progressed and what they learned for approximately 30 to 45 minutes, the facilitator asked, "What are the horses doing now?" The member of the group who was having a particularly difficult time was extremely eager to answer this question and give her perspective. When given the opportunity to answer, she stated that the horse was in his 'safe place' and that he had figured out the rules and was no longer being chased around and harassed. She said he knew how to live peacefully there.

This adolescent then compared the horse to herself at Three Springs. She knew the rules, she did not have to worry about drinking or drugs because there are not available. She knew that she was safe and had food and shelter. Prior to this, the young woman had participated in many discussions with virtually every staff member within her Treatment Team, concerning her attempts to sabotage her progress in the program. Equine Billiards helped her to finally see why she had been doing this, and from that day on seemed to work toward the goal of going home and made safety plans for all those things she was scared to face away from her "safe place." She went on to successfully graduate the program.

The previous example is only one of many that illustrates the power and therapeutic value of the EAP activities. The results have allowed instructors and therapists to see the effectiveness in using horses to assist in the healing and restoration of children and their families.▼

Kristine Klopp began her career with Three Spring, Inc. in 2001 as an Equine Instructor at the Paint Rock Valley girls program in Trenton, Alabama. Kristine currently serves as Director of Family Services and is completing her Masters degree at Alabama A&M University.

Brandy Davis, Director of Equine Services at Paint Rock Valley, is one of two Level 1 EGALA certified staff members on the campus. Brandy began her career with Three Springs in 2003 as an Equine Instructor.

Three Springs is a nationally recognized leader in youth services, founded in 1985 to provide therapy and education to adolescents experiencing emotional, behavioral and learning problems. Operating year-round, Three Springs helps children develop positively by providing therapy and education in a structured environment. Located on more than 20 different campuses in ten states, Three Springs is a trusted and respected resource for helping adolescents deal with serious problems.

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