

Parental Perceptions of the Equine-Assisted Therapy Program in Mississippi

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Introduction

Parents who have children participating in therapeutic riding programs are often overlooked when assessing the level of satisfaction of such programs. Parental satisfaction is crucial when assessing the overall impact such programs have on its participants. However, information measuring the improvement of a child's developmental needs through therapeutic riding programs is lacking. Research has shown that therapeutic riding may increase the quality of life and developmental/growth needs for children with disabilities (Kids Health, 2021).

Developmental skills, such as cognitive, physical, social, and/or emotional challenges, can all be improved when children participate in equine-assisted interventions like therapeutic riding (Jacob et al., 2015). Several types of therapeutic interventions take place in private practices, schools, or even in an individual's home. Though not all children benefit from conventional therapies like as physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy, therapeutic riding programs are a unique experience for children with disabilities as a therapeutic intervention (WindReach Farm, 2019).

Without knowledge regarding the level of satisfaction parents have about their child's participation in therapeutic riding programs, how does one know if such programs are meeting the needs of these children? If parents are not satisfied with their child's development in such programs, then the number of participants in such programs may decrease or most importantly, the developmental needs of children with disabilities may not improve.

The purpose of this study was to describe the perceptions of parents whose children have participated in an equine-assisted therapy program conducted at Mississippi State University. Specific objectives of the study were 1) describe why parents chose equine-assisted interventions for their child, 2) describe their child's development before and after participation in the program, and 3) describe their levels of agreement on the following areas of parental satisfaction: developmentally appropriate care, family centered care, coordinated care, technical competence, and interpersonal competence.

Conceptual Framework

The Multidimensional Assessment of Parental Satisfaction (MAPS) (Ireys & Perry, 1999) guided this study. This developmental and evaluation tool uses five dimensions of care that pertains to parental satisfaction with providers including developmentally appropriate care, family-centered care, coordinated care, technical competence, and interpersonal competence (Ireys & Perry, 1999). While the number of children with disabilities is increasing, there is a warranted need for data on the satisfaction of programs in which children are placed (Ireys & Perry, 1999). Parental satisfaction is often overlooked and is yet important when measuring a child's development (Kittredge, 2020). Satisfaction can be measured and compared across different varieties of disabilities and can play a unique role for personal appraisal that cannot be abstracted from data or care directly (Ireys & Perry, 1999). While children participate in programs like therapeutic riding, they need to excel in their targeted skills as they grow and learn. If a program is lacking parental satisfaction, it can take a toll on a child's development and growth, so examining the needs for parental satisfaction is rather important in school or therapy settings (Kittredge, 2020).

Methodology

An electronic survey was sent to 22 parents whose children participated in the Mississippi State University Equine-Assisted Therapeutic Riding Program with 50% ($f = 11$) of them completing the survey. The therapeutic riding program was inactive at the time of data collection due to COVID-19 restrictions, so email was the only way to contact parents. Parents were asked an open-ended question for them to identify the reasons their child participated in equine-assisted therapy programs. Next, parents were asked to rate their child's growth and development before and during participation in the equine-assisted therapy programs using the scale 1 = Far Below Average to 5 = Far Above Average. Lastly, parents were asked to rate their child on the five constructs recommended by Ireys & Perry (1999) on an evaluation instrument developed by Kerr (2021) for measuring parental satisfaction in equine-assisted therapy programs. Each construct contained Likert-type statements where parents used the scale 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree to rate each statement. Means and standard deviations were used to summarize and describe data.

Results

Three themes surfaced when identifying reasons why parents chose equine-assisted therapies for the child. Those themes were: 1) parent being interested in local equine-assisted therapy programs, 2) the benefits the therapeutic riding program provided to their child's needs, and (3) the love of animals. Before participation in the program, parents indicated their child was "somewhat below average" in their social interaction skills, communication skills, motor skills, hand-eye coordination, and self-esteem. After the program, parents held an improved, though neutral perception, on each of the five developmental areas. When asked to rate the constructs on their level of parental satisfaction with the program, "Technical Competence" was the highest-rated construct ($M = 4.68$, $SD = .41$). The lowest-rated construct was "Coordinated Care" ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.02$).

Conclusions

Parents placed their children in the therapeutic riding programs because their children love animals, particularly horses. Furthermore, information within the community indicated this program was good for children with special needs. Even though there were limited therapeutic interventions in the area for children, parents felt this program was more beneficial for their child when seeking other options. Before participating in the program, children were below average in social interaction, hand-eye coordination, and communication. Even by participating in the programs, communication was still a concern for children in the program. Overall, parents were the most satisfied with the technical competence of the program staff followed by the staff making sure the activities were developmentally appropriate for the children.

Implications/Recommendations

While parents are satisfied with the program, staff members delivering the program could be more personable and interactive with parents. Furthermore, staff members should develop a relationship with local and state health care providers who recommend therapeutic services. Once the limitations of the COVID-19 pandemic subside, additional data should be collected to determine if parents are still satisfied with the program.

References

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