

Therapeutic riding: Does it make a difference?

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The 1952 Olympic dressage victory of handicapped rider Liz Hartel, has been heralded as a demonstration of the power of using the horse in a therapeutic setting. Despite the worldwide proliferation of therapeutic riding programs, there is little empirical documentation of their benefits, and studies have focused on the physical effects of riding for physically handicapped children. There have been no studies of the psychosocial and physical outcomes of therapeutic riding programs for able-bodied children. The purpose of this study was to determine the effect of an 8-week therapeutic riding program on children's feelings. Anger was assessed using the Children's Anger Inventory; anxiety using the How-I-Feel-Questionnaire; and perceived self-competence using the Self Perception Profile for Children. Physical skills were assessed using 16 items from the Bruininks-Oseretsky Test of Motor Proficiency. Participants were 18 able-bodied children, with no prior organized riding experience, and no known physical impairment, psychological diagnoses, or known history of psychotropic medications. Participants ranged in age from 8 to 13 years old (mean age = 11). There were 7 males, 11 females; 16 were Caucasian, 1 Hispanic, 1 Native American. Participants were involved in 1 hour of therapeutic riding weekly for 8 weeks. All instruments were administered prior to riding the 1st week and after riding the 8th week. Seventeen of 18 completed the entire program, and when specifically questioned all 17 said they enjoyed the program and learned "a lot". When asked what they liked the best, all 17 said "cantering"; when asked what they liked least 16 of 17 said trotting, one said the classes were too short. Despite the positive feedback, there were no significant differences between the before and after riding scores on any psychosocial measures. The motor proficiency examination revealed a significant improvement in balance. These data suggest although riding may be enjoyable and therapeutic, measurement of statistically significant changes in the small populations that can be accommodated in therapeutic riding programs may be difficult, and research should perhaps focus on those individuals with specific psychosocial or physical diagnoses.

