



# Hoofbeats and heartbeats: equine-assisted therapy and learning with young people with psychosocial issues – theory and practice

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## ABSTRACT

The practice of equine-assisted therapy and learning (EAT/L) to deliver psychosocial interventions to young people is a rapidly growing field. However, recent reviews have cited a need for further documentation of a theoretical foundation and evidence of outcomes of these programmes. This paper is a theoretical discussion of psychotherapeutic theories and models that the authors understood as being relevant and giving substance to the application of EAT/L at a Therapeutic Horsemanship centre in the UK. It also describes and defines the practice of EAT/L at the centre. Philosophical and psychological theories/models of Non-Violent Communication, Object Relations, Play and Dramatherapy, Mindfulness practice, and Attachment Theory, all set within a person-centred and relationship-based approach employed at the centre were examined and illustrated in the form of client case material. The authors report the central role relationship plays between client-horse-therapist and horse-handler in the building of trust and resolution of the impact of trauma. The paper highlights a need to carry out well-designed empirical studies with different client groups in the field of EAT/L in order to gain more insight into this growing field.

## KEYWORDS

Equine-assisted therapy; equine-assisted learning; psychotherapy; young people; mindfulness; attachment theory

## Introduction

In this paper we employ the umbrella term equine-assisted therapy and learning (EAT/L) to refer to the growing plethora of equine-assisted interventions that address mental, social and emotional difficulties and/or offer learning support. As a contemporary practice, the field of EAT/L is expanding rapidly and works from the premise that interaction with horses can be therapeutic and of benefit for people who find it difficult to engage with traditional therapeutic or educational interventions (Burgon, 2014; Fine, 2010). Recent reviews of equine-assisted interventions have cited a need for further documentation of a theoretical foundation and evidence of outcomes of these programmes (Anestis, Anestis, Zawilinski, Hopkins, & Lilienfeld, 2014; Bachi, 2012). Given this gap in the literature, this paper will define and then describe EAT/L as led by a registered child psychotherapist trained in play

and drama therapy and a registered social worker. Relevant psychotherapeutic theories and models (attachment theory, mindfulness practice, object relations, non-violent communication, play and dramatherapy, person-centred approach) that we understand as giving theoretical foundation to the application of EAT/L as practised at the centre are discussed, based within the central ethos of relationship-based social work (Ruch, Turney, & Ward, 2010: in this instance with the added dimension of relationship with the horse.

## Background, history and context

Within the developing field of EAT/L there are many different approaches and a lack of uniformity which can cause confusion (Fry, 2013; Hallberg, 2008). For example, equine-assisted therapy (EAT) can refer to physical or psychological therapies and is most simply defined as the inclusion of an equine in a therapy setting to aid treatment outcomes for the client (Fry, 2013). This paper uses the term EAT to refer to psychological therapies only and EAT is best viewed as a strategy employed by qualified mental health practitioners working within their own theoretical orientation (Bachi, 2012, Fry, 2013). Conversely, equine-assisted learning (EAL) is a wide ranging term which covers therapeutic horsemanship (TH) as practised at the centre in this paper. EAL is an experiential method where the focus may be on developing specific skills as well as social, emotional and behavioural development and EAL interventions are often facilitated by professionals such as social workers, teachers and those from related fields.

Though the field of EAT/L is currently unregulated, there are a number of organisations offering frameworks and ethical guidelines for professional standards; The Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International and the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association, both originating from the USA where the field developed are founding organisations (Notgrass & Pettinelli, 2014). In addition the international organisation Horses In Education and Therapy now has members in many countries. In the UK the Equine Assisted and Facilitated Practitioners Network was established by Claire Mission in January 2013 to provide a support platform to practitioners and now has over one thousand members, which illustrates the growth of interest in the field.

Whilst the contemporary field of EAT/L is still in emergence, historical records show that human–animal interactions have been utilised for therapeutic benefits for centuries (Morrison, 2007). However, the deliberate inclusion of an animal as part of a therapeutic treatment plan was not formally documented until the 1960s (Levinson & Mallon, 1969). Since then there is a growing body of literature reporting psychosocial and health benefits of animal assisted interventions (AAI) (defined here as “any intervention that intentionally includes or incorporates animals as part of a therapeutic or ameliorative process or milieu” (Kruger & Serpell, 2010, p. 33)) across diverse populations and conditions (e.g. Hooker, Holbrook Freeman, & Stewart, 2002; Kamioka et al., 2014; Nimer & Lundahl, 2007; Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2013).

It has recently been argued that compared to other animals, horses bring additional qualities to the therapeutic encounter (Hallberg, 2008). Unlike cats and dogs (companion animals commonly used in AAI), horses are prey animals and are vulnerable as such. As a species their survival has depended on co-operative group living, highly developed non-verbal communication skills and the ability to run away at speed from the threat of a predator (Mills & Nankervis, 1999). As a consequence, horses are social beings by nature

and finely tuned to body language. Horses are therefore highly sensitive and responsive to the behaviour of others which includes humans. This innate responsiveness means they are able to provide feedback which facilitates the therapeutic process of EAT/L.

## **The programme**

The TH centre on which this paper is based serves both young people and adults with a range of psychosocial and physical health issues including young people in the foster care and adoption system, young people struggling or excluded from school, those with emotional/behavioural issues and young people and adults with mental health issues and learning disabilities, including those on the autistic spectrum.

The centre's directors and staff team consist of a qualified social worker, child and adult psychotherapists and counsellors, riding instructors and other experienced horse handlers (meaning those with extensive equine experience and/or qualifications). In addition to TH sessions, other sessions offered at the centre include EAT and EAL. EAT sessions were generally individual sessions with a psychotherapist/counsellor and horse-handler, whereas EAL sessions were more often small group sessions and had an educational/learning emphasis. In all cases the centre followed the diamond model (Brooks, 2006) of always having two members of staff on sessions, one holding a professional qualification (social worker, therapist, teacher or similar) and the other an experienced horse handler.

## ***Philosophical underpinnings of practice***

The welfare of the centre's horses is fundamental to our practice. The centre follows a natural/positive horsemanship approach to management and training. Based on an understanding of equine ethology this is a holistic approach which emphasises the importance of ensuring that the horses' environment meets their innate psychological and physiological needs, alongside the use of non-confrontational and positive reinforcement training methods (Rees, 1984). This is also congruent with our person-centred approach with participants (Rogers, 1951). During EAT/L sessions the horses are able to express themselves as they are either loose or on a slack lead-rope which allows them choice. This helps ensure that EAT/L sessions are a positive experience for the horses (Baragli, Mariti, Petri, De Giorgio, & Sighieri, 2011).

The centre also has a yard cat and several visiting dogs whose welfare is of equal importance. They play an integral part in helping create a relaxed and informal environment at the centre and often choose to initiate contact with participants. Their wishes are always respected and this has, at times, led to helpful exploration with participants on the subjects of choice, feeling rejected and abandoned. In contrast, a participant is often delighted when an animal does decide to spend time with them.

## **Method**

The paper is a descriptive paper utilising a qualitative psychotherapeutic case study research approach of employing composite vignettes of participants' experiences. It is based on the authors' own experiences of working with young people at the centre as therapists and practitioners and grounded in research methods from Hannah Burgon's PhD research study (Burgon, 2014) which followed an ethnographic case study methodology rooted in

a psychosocial research approach (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009). These approaches are aligned to a heuristic approach (heuristic defined here as to “discover or find” (Moustakas, 1990)) which is often employed in art and play therapy research; the closest professional fields with a body of research to EAT/L. The fields of play therapy and art psychotherapy indicate that a heuristic approach is an appropriate model to adopt, as both operate along similar “person-centered” (Landreth, 1991/2012; Rogers, 1951, 1967) and reflexive principles which are at the heart of the model adopted at the centre (Daniel-McKeigue, 2006; Moustakas, 1990; O’Hara, 1986). The psychosocial research approach employed methods aligned to psychotherapeutic approaches including loose, open-ended questions and looking at projection and unconscious elements at play (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009).

The participants’ experiences included in this paper were a selection of young people who attended the centre for both EAL and EAT sessions. There was one male and six female participants. Their ages ranged from 11 to 15 years old and all participants had been referred by either social services or parents/carers with diagnoses of emotional/behavioural difficulties. Selection was initially based on discussion between the authors, at peer supervision with other relevant practitioners, and with parents/carers to identify young people assessed as being suitable in terms of their emotional stability and understanding of the research process in order to ensure informed consent.

Information on the research paper was provided and consent was gained from participants and their parents/carers in line with ethical guidelines approved for Hannah Burgon’s PhD research at Cardiff University. The UKCP of which Di Gammage is a member was also consulted, and their research guidance followed (UKCP, 2008).

This paper is a theoretical discussion of psychotherapeutic theories and models that the authors understood as being relevant and giving substance to the application of EAT/L at the centre. To give examples of where theory is relevant to practice, vignettes from sessions with a number of young people were drawn upon. These were from the session notes which were written up as part of the centre’s session procedures and informal discussions with participants in the course of their EAL or EAT sessions. Confidentiality was ensured by employing pseudonyms and amalgamating the vignettes in order to further avoid identification of participants.

## **The centre’s philosophy and practice**

Based on our therapeutic and equine experiences, we have developed our practice over a number of years and understand it to draw on several core principles, the main ones being:

- Creation of a safe space, emotionally as well as physically
- Choice for client and horse
- Acceptance and non-judgement of client and horse
- Relationship is central
- Learning through modelling and instruction when necessary with respect and empathy
- “Process orientated” rather than “task orientated”
- “Being” rather than “doing” model

To this end we draw on a number of different, though inter-related, philosophies, models and theories:

- Non-violent communication
- Person-centred approach
- Object relations theory
- Play and dramatherapy
- Mindfulness practice
- Attachment theory

Each one could be the subject of a paper in its own right, however, within this context we wish to give a brief overview to illustrate each philosophy's relevance to the field of EAT/L.

### **Non-violent communication**

Many relationships are based upon power where one party exerts their power over the other in a coercive way and often underpinned with fear. Non-violent Communication is a practice based on the approach developed by Rosenberg (2003). One of its core principles is that all humans share universal needs such as safety, sustenance and relationship/connection. The strategies we use to meet those needs are as varied as there are people. It may be that these strategies are not effective in achieving needs or that they bring negative consequences. At the centre, the human team asks the question "what need is behind this behaviour strategy?" This approach allows us to be curious and enquiring and to genuinely hold a position of non-judgement towards our clients.

Horses too have needs; they share with humans the need for safety, companionship/connection and understanding. At the centre we have observed our horses choosing to be with us, which is understandable given that they are social animals who have evolved to live co-operatively. We are acutely aware of the danger of exploitation of our horses. This ethical issue has also been raised by VanFleet and Faa-Thompson (2010) who note having witnessed therapy animals appearing exhausted and indifferent. Sessions at the centre always include a horse-handler who specifically focuses on the horse's needs. VanFleet and Faa-Thompson also stress how neglect of the horse's needs is counter-therapeutic for the client. In accord with animal-assisted play therapy (AAPT) guidelines, our horses' needs are seen as equal to human needs. The centre's clients frequently comment on how well treated our horses are and the significance of this in the clients' own healing process. As one young person commented when asked how she felt about a particular activity "*I trust everyone here, [because] the horses aren't just made to do things, you listen to them here and allow them a choice*".

### **Person-centred approach**

Developed by Rogers (1951, 1967), the person-centred approach has at its core the fundamental belief that every human being has an innate tendency to grow to their full potential given the right conditions. Rogers named these conditions as unconditional positive regard, empathy and congruency. For many young people and especially the young people attending our centre, this ability to reach their full potential is blocked by life experiences. The young person's comment cited above is an illustration of core Rogerian conditions in practice.

## Object relations theory

Object relations is a psychological theory proposed by, amongst others, Melanie Klein, W.R.D. Fairbairn and Donald Winnicott (Fairbairn, 1952; Winnicott, 1965). The theory is based on the premise that each of us, beginning with the primary relationship has developed an internal world made up of every significant person (object) we have experienced in our lives. This is a dynamic and evolving internal world, changing with each new encounter, although the earliest are regarded as the most influential. Melanie Klein is credited for the terms “good breast” and “bad breast” which are polarised parts of the mother object (Likieman, 2001). Here the infant, according to the theory, must split and perceive as separate these two aspects, otherwise the persecutory bad breast may threaten the nurturing good breast. Splitting is one of the first defence mechanisms employed. Its use is essential in distinguishing our enemies from our friends at times of threat. Providing the “facilitating environment” (Winnicott, 1965) is good enough then these “good” and “bad” objects will, over time, become integrated. This integration corresponds with our ability to tolerate ambiguity in relationship; being able to see both the good and the bad, whatever that may mean, in oneself and other.

As prey animals, horses lack an ability to develop ambiguity. For their survival they need to see the world in stark good or bad, or rather, “safe” or “dangerous” terms. Despite their domestication, horses remain especially adept at recognising danger. At times, they will react as if there is a threat where no threat exists. It could be said then that horses operate by default from this splitting defence mechanism. Fear will be the default position for a horse that has experienced harm. Many children, particularly those who have experienced neglect, abuse and fractured attachments, operate largely from this “fight-or-flight” position. They are hyper alert, looking for the signs of danger (whether or not they actually exist in external reality), because they have learned that the world is a dangerous place and survival is key.

In addition to these internalised good and bad mothers the growing child also internalises those parts of him or herself in relation to these mother-objects. So, the loving mother object has in relation to her a lovable child and the persecutory mother has in relation to her an unloved and therefore, unlovable, child. This first relationship provides the blue print for all others and we carry these concepts of ourselves throughout life. For a child who predominately experiences herself as unlovable is likely to expect the same from each new relationship (Landy, 1994). Relationships can be terrifying for children who have lacked early secure attachments with care givers. For many of the children and young people we see at the centre, the basic building blocks of relationship are just not there. Insecurely attached young people are highly suspicious of a world that is experienced as hostile, invasive yet unreachable. For many such young people face-to-face encounters with a stranger (the therapist) provoke high anxiety and necessitates activation of psychological defences. One such young person, Maria, could only tolerate interaction with the therapist outside the confines of the therapy space.

*After several months of working together in EAT, Maria warned the therapist “not to come any closer”. She went on to explain that she was evil and bad. She wanted to protect the therapist from herself and possibly herself from the pain of rejection (in non-violent communication, a strategy to meet the need of safety took priority over the need for connection). As the conversation unfolded, it transpired that Maria had been told she had damaged her mother whilst in the womb. “Even as a baby, I was evil”. Throughout Maria’s life, this “evil”*

*had been at the core of her identity and had manifested in many destructive ways. She had grown into her role. The therapist, careful not to undermine the belief originating from Maria's mother (as this would have thrown her into a moral dilemma) acknowledged it and added, "yes, but this isn't all of who you are", thereby opening up the possibility of expanding Maria's role repertoire. This was provided by Jess, one of our mares. Jess had no agenda or judgement about Maria. She simply accepted Maria as she was. The therapist and horse-handler watched from a distance as Maria, with the utmost of care, wiped Jess' weeping eyes with a sponge. No words were necessary in that moment. Maria turned and smiled. She had, with the aid of Jess, revoked that self-belief "I am evil".*

### **Play and dramatherapy**

Object Relations theory uses the language of drama and theatre – projection, role and embodiment. This is also the language of play and dramatherapy (Jennings, 1999; Landy, 1994; Slade, 1995). Play allows us to metaphorically step into another's shoes to feel what it may feel like being in their situation. Sometimes they may be the horse's shoes. This playful approach serves to reduce the intensity in relationship (the antidote to fear and mistrust of relationship) and allows for a gentle reviewing of often rigid views of the world and self. (Brown & Vaughan, 2010; Nachmanovich, 1990; Sutton-Smith, 2009).

Horses show a disregard for our fixed positions and any label we or others may have attached to us. Horses meet and respond to you in the present. They offer opportunities that enable exploration of our inner most feelings in the most immediate ways. During an EAT session one of our mares once had the most elaborate and explicit sexual exhibition to a gelding, leaving those present with no doubts as to her intentions. This presented an opportunity for the client who then began tentatively to acknowledge hidden feelings of affection and attraction that exposed their own vulnerabilities. To make this situation safer, they spoke, initially through the metaphor of the horses, e.g. how would the mare feel if her advances were rebuffed by the gelding? Could the gelding trust the mare? Healing happens in the present and in relationship (Sills, 2009) and horses invite, and at times, demand that we meet them in the present moment. For this reason, any projections onto them are, ultimately, our own. Within an environment of non-judgement, we believe it is possible to explore these projections and to arrive at a deeper understanding of ourselves.

### **Mindfulness**

Mindfulness practices are now being incorporated into mainstream therapeutic and educational activities in schools and other youth arenas in the UK with many reported benefits including increased attention and concentration, calmness and general well-being (Biegel, Brown, Shapiro, & Schubert, 2009; Goodman, 2005; Zylowska et al., 2008). Whilst there is little written on the links between Mindfulness practices and EAT/L, through our work at the centre with both horses and young people with a range of psychosocial support needs we believe that there are natural correlations and links between these two fields.

The Western health model of Mindfulness has evolved from ancient meditative traditions with their roots in Buddhism. In its simplest definition Mindfulness is the practice of being aware and attentive to our thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations in the present moment (Biegel et al., 2009; Germer, Siegel, & Fulton, 2005; Kabat-Zinn, 1994). The contemporary

method of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) (Biegel et al., 2009; Kabat-Zinn et al., 1992) has been argued to be an especially useful and relevant method with young people as it engages “multiple sensory systems (e.g. listening, tasting, smelling)” and involves movement (Wagner, Rathus, & Miller, 2006, p. 186). MBSR techniques use body scan exercises, stretches, mindful walking and yoga to facilitate regulation and calmness.

MBSR practice has many links with the exercises we incorporate in horsemanship sessions at the centre and is a natural fit with EAT/L not least because work with horses requires mindful awareness, physical movement and sensory experience and can therefore be especially useful for young people who find traditional talk therapy too intense. Body scan exercises, such as those employed in some of the riding and groundwork activities practised at the centre focus on bringing awareness to each part of the body in turn, but without judgement.

### **Horses and mindfulness**

Horses naturally live in the moment and strive for a peaceful existence: to forever be galloping around would use up far too much energy for an animal that needs to graze for a large proportion of its day. Horses are therefore naturally in a “mindful” state: they are fully embodied and seek calmness and connection with each other and the world around them, qualities sought by practitioners of Mindfulness meditation practices. The qualities that horses bring to the work with young people in our EAT/L practice then enable the introduction to Mindfulness concept and practices to happen in a naturally occurring way such as provided in the following example with work with Charlie.

*Charlie was referred to the centre with a number of diagnoses including “attachment disorder”, “oppositional disorder” and “challenging behaviour”. To begin with Charlie appeared quiet and rather closed/defensive. He was reluctant to engage too closely with the horses, preferring to observe the practitioners working with them and declined from actual contact. Sometimes Charlie could be quite confrontational with the practitioners but this was generally ignored in the same way that a young horse behaving this way would be at the centre – within reason and as long as the behaviour was not dangerous.*

*There were no expectations for Charlie to engage and indeed reticence was noted and reflected back to him with the understanding that this was a sensible approach to take, and getting to know the horses at a distance was one that the practitioners would also advocate, pointing out that the horses would also be observing him using their well-attuned senses of sight, smell and hearing in order to ascertain whether he was someone safe to be around or not. Charlie was gently encouraged to join in discussion on how he felt the horses would like him to behave around them. He suggested “calm”, “quiet” and “getting to know and trust me”.*

*After a few sessions Charlie did start to want to engage with the horses and soon learnt to groom, pick out their feet and lead them with growing confidence. He was especially drawn to our quiet, maternal mare Daisy who he developed a trusting, gentle, relationship with and would often hug and stroke her.*

*One windy day we introduced Charlie to our “Mindfulness breathing” exercise. This encourages the young person (YP) to think about how the wind may affect the horses and introduces the Mindfulness breathing exercise within a meaningful context. As are many YP who are hypervigilant, Charlie could easily identify that the horse may feel anxious in the wind as their senses are compromised. We then walked around the horses and asked Charlie if he noticed*

where they were breathing from. Charlie quickly spotted that Daisy was breathing long slow breaths from her stomach, whereas our newer horse Maya was breathing quicker shorter breaths from her chest. He saw that Daisy was relaxed and Maya more anxious. With hands and then heads resting gently against Daisy's stomach, Charlie found he could calm his own breathing. We reflected together on how we breathe from different areas of our bodies (upper, lower chest, stomach) depending on whether we are anxious or relaxed but that we can also get "stuck" into breathing from our chests and how this can mean we are not getting enough oxygen into our bodies. Besides being tired though lack of oxygen, Charlie noted they would "always be scared". As an afterthought, Charlie reflected, he too was often tired at school. With Daisy's steady breathing, Charlie found he too could regulate his breath. It was a real achievement for him to remain so still and focused for this length of time.

We discussed how horses look to each other for guidance on whether the environment is safe or not, and how they are able to see if another horse's breath and heart rate increase as a sign that there may be danger, and conversely if the other horses' breath and heart rates return to normal the herd will also relax and begin to graze again.

Charlie practised bringing attention to his breathing and was then able to put this into practice leading Daisy a short walk in the wind. When she raised her head and appeared a little anxious Charlie stopped and stood calmly, breathing slowly into his stomach, to model to Daisy that there was nothing to fear. He was rewarded by Daisy turning her head to him then letting out a sigh, so giving Charlie immediate positive feedback on his actions.

We suggested to Charlie that anytime he felt himself getting agitated or anxious at school he could remember the breathing exercise he had done with Daisy and bring his attention to breathing slowly from his stomach.

In a later session Charlie told us how he had indeed done this on an occasion in school where he had felt angry with another YP but how he remembered breathing with Daisy and how this had helped him to walk away from the confrontation.

Charlie has been able to internalise the calming horse, Daisy, and a calmed Charlie in relation to her. At a particular time (when feeling angry towards someone else), Charlie had been able to make use of this internalised object – Daisy – who has been able to exert a feeling of calm upon him – not unlike the good enough mother able to hold and regulate her agitated infant.

### **Horses and attachment**

Attachment theory (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bowlby, 1988; Hughes, 2004) is based on the premise that human beings have an innate need to securely attach to each other throughout life; the success of relationships being heavily dependent on the first attachment formed between infant and primary caregiver (usually the mother). Secure attachment includes the reliability and consistency of the attachment figure, his/her attunement to the infant, his/her ability to "hold" the infant both physically and psychologically and an ability to meet the infant's changing needs:

Children who have parents who are sensitive and responsive are enabled to develop along a healthy pathway. Those who have insensitive, unresponsive, neglectful, or rejecting parents are likely to develop a deviant pathway which is in some degree incompatible with mental health. (Bowlby, 1988, p. 136).

What is important to note is that although an individual may have experienced insecure attachment in infancy and childhood, it is still possible to develop more secure attachments in later life. It is not easy as there are many more defences (as we can see in the case of Maria above) but within a non-threatening, consistent and non-judgmental environment such early self-perceptions of feeling unworthy, unloved and therefore, unlovable can be gently but unmistakably challenged. This is facilitated at the centre by providing an environment where the needs of human and non-human animals alike are respected as the following example with Eva demonstrates.

*Despite a succession of placement breakdowns, assessments and inconclusive diagnoses, much of Eva's early life experiences were unknown to children's services. Eva quickly formed what appeared to be an anxious attachment to the centre's cat. Eva could not let Maeve out of her sight and would hold onto her way beyond the cat's desire to be left alone. Without judgement we reflected upon how Maeve may be feeling and what she may be wishing to do. To begin with, Eva could not recognise Maeve's needs in the relationship, only her own need to keep Maeve with her. One day, when the farmer arrived to take away our mountain of horse manure, it was Eva who noticed Maeve's terror of the noisy tractor. She swiftly removed the cat from the yard and retreated into our classroom, holding, comforting and soothing the poor animal. After the danger had gone, Eva carefully wrote out instructions for others on what to do the next time if she wasn't around to protect Maeve.*

*Two weeks later we told Eva we were to get a new horse. This was a significant life event for the centre horses as introducing a new horse into an established herd can create anxiety and tension for herd members (as well as for the newcomer) whilst new relationships are being developed. Knowing our mare Jess' great difficulty in accepting other horses into the herd, due to Jess' upbringing, Eva immediately set to work with an action plan that demonstrated her understanding of horse social behaviour and Jess' needs.*

#### *Bonding ideas*

- (1) Swap Jess' poo with the new horse for one week*
- (2) Swap their bedding for 1 week*
- (3) Let one out first (Jess) with the new horse's stable door closed (before we let them out together)*
- (4) Take both for a walk in hand together*
- (5) Feed opposite each other*
- (6) If all this works, let them out in a field together (with someone watching just in case)*

For a child who was still learning the ground rules of relationship and attachment, we warmly welcomed her valuable guidelines. The guidelines were not only intended for our handling of the horses, of course. We believed they were a very clear communication of her own need to take relationship building one sure step at a time.

### **Horses in relationship with us**

Although, like us horses have their own distinct personalities that have been shaped by their individual life experience (Hausberger, Bruderer, Le Scolan, & Pierre, 2004), they are also available to receive the projections of the humans who come into relationship with them. This process happens constantly in any relationship but in the therapeutic context, such projections can be explored more explicitly and provide opportunities for the YP to learn

more about themselves. When a YP first attends a session at the centre they are introduced to all the horses and it is often in this first meeting that they express an attraction to a particular horse. Participants/clients are often drawn to horses whose personality and/or life history has parallels with their own as the following example with Tamsin illustrates.

*Tamsin was referred to the centre after having recently gone into foster care. She was initially reluctant to visit as she had previously been attending another equine centre and had grown attached to their horses. However during her first visit Tamsin was immediately attracted to Jupiter, a young horse who had only recently arrived at the centre from abroad. We explained that Jupiter was a young horse in the process of settling into his new home, having travelled from a different country where he had experienced poor care – therefore Jupiter was currently being handled primarily by just one person in order to help him feel secure. Tamsin understood that Jupiter needed to first form a secure attachment with one person before feeling safe to work with others.*

*For the first few sessions Tamsin would go straight to Jupiter to see how he was and would always ask how he was getting on. After coming for a number of months and learning non-confrontational horse-handling skills, Tamsin was given the opportunity to work with Jupiter and “his practitioner” (according to Tamsin) who had been working with him since his arrival at the centre. Tamsin took the responsibility very seriously. She was calm, focused and attentive throughout, sensitive to his body language and responsive to his needs. This was reflected by Jupiter’s behaviour with her as he too was calm, focussed and responsive. It was noted that she was “beaming at the end of the session”.*

*The following week she worked with her usual practitioner who made note that “Tamsin arrived immediately keen to tell me about Jupiter last week. She was really pleased”.*

*Tamsin attended the centre for several months and worked with other horses. One in particular was Brock. Tamsin, working towards riding Brock, was working on building a trusting relationship between them. Tamsin developed a bond with him also and was delighted during one session when he called in greeting to her as she approached. She understood that this was a significant event – his greeting a sign of the secure relationship they had developed.*

*A move of placements resulted in an abrupt end to our work with Tamsin. On her final session it was notable that it was Jupiter who she wanted to spend time with. Tamsin took Jupiter out for a short walk and then led him to a patch of “tasty grass” and stood by quietly holding his lead-rope as he ate. Before leaving she gave Jupiter a final big hug.*

Through being with the horses Tamsin experienced a rebuilding of trust in relationship. This was especially poignant as she arrived determined not to allow herself to be vulnerable in relationships because life had taught her that when she cared, she got hurt. Tamsin identified with Jupiter’s history and recognised the centre’s practice to create a safe consistent holding environment for him so that his fear might diminish and his ability to trust develop. In effect, Tamsin and Jupiter healed together. Although untimely, she nevertheless managed her ending with the horses well and we felt confident Tamsin’s experience would serve her well in the future.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have provided examples of where theory relates to practice within our work with young people who have suffered a range of trauma or abuse/neglect and related challenges. Relationship is the central tenant which underpins all other theoretical aspects

put forward as being relevant to EAT/L. Relationship is crucial between all members present – human and non-human animal – whether it be horse, cat, dog, therapist, horse-handler and participant/client. Through modelling real, congruent, respectful and caring relationships with the horses which is demonstrated by acknowledging their different needs and personalities and can also include setting boundaries and sometimes confronting difficult decisions, participants feel safe that their needs will also be respected and are able to step into relationship; often first with a horse they may identify or have a connection with, and then with the practitioner and other members at the centre. Once relationship has been established it is possible for other aspects of the work to unfold. Here metaphor and analogy, the use of play and projection and activities with the horses which include mindfulness exercises for example, can be introduced within the ‘holding’ environment of a ‘secure base’ provided by the horses.

There is a plenitude of anecdotal reports of the benefits of EAT/L from practitioners in the field including the overwhelming positive feedback we receive from participants/clients, carers and referring agencies stating how EAT/L at the centre has improved relationships and mental health and increased the confidence and self-esteem of participants together with a multitude of other benefits. This is alongside the developing body of empirical research which is starting to bring credibility to the field and has resulted in organisations such as The Priory residential addiction centres including it in their treatment programmes. However, we recognise that there is a need for further well designed longitudinal studies with larger and different client populations to bring greater understanding and insight to this developing field.

## Notes on contributors

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