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The Effects of Equine-Assisted Therapy on Social Function in Children with Autism: A Systematic Review

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Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) affects 1 in 59 children nationally (Autism Speaks, 2018). Children on the Autism spectrum often struggle with communication, social interactions, and repetitive behaviors (Autism Support, 2014). Equine assisted therapy aims to reduce social stressors and increase social function in kids on the autism spectrum (Anderson, 2011). Equine assisted therapy is defined as the incorporation of equine activities in treatment to reach a patient’s goal or need according to a medical professional (PATH International, 2018). The purpose of this review was to identify if equine assisted therapy affects social function in children with autism.

Methods

• PubMed was used from September 2018 to October 2018
• Search string string (((“Child”[Mesh]) OR “Minors”[Mesh]) OR “Adolescent”[Mesh]) AND “Autistic Disorder”[Mesh]) OR “Autism Spectrum Disorder”[Mesh]) AND “Animal Assisted Therapy”[Mesh]) AND “Social Adjustment”[Mesh] and the similar articles function was used to find relative literature.
• Articles were excluded if social function in children with Autism was not analyzed.
• Initially 13 articles were found, and 10 were used (Figure 3).

Results

• The articles used in this review strongly suggest that equine assisted therapy increases social function in children with autism.
• The majority of the studies concluded that social function increased after horseback riding (seven of the ten).
• Participants reverted back to pre-study social function when the horseback riding intervention was removed (one of the ten).
• The remaining two studies were inconclusive and did not find a statistically significant increase or decrease in social function.

Public Health Implications and Recommendations

Equine assisted therapy should be considered as a beneficial treatment to increase social abilities in children with Autism. Future research regarding social function in children with Autism could include other types of animal assisted therapy such as, canine assisted therapy. Future research regarding which animal assisted therapy improves social function more effectively in children with ASD could also be beneficial.

Conclusion

• A majority of the studies found that Equine assisted therapy increases social function in children with Autism.
• When the Therapy was removed participants reverted back to existing social function, suggesting that equine assisted therapy might only be effective with continuous treatment.

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References

Available upon request