Equine-assisted activities and therapies: enhancing the social worker’s armamentarium

Mary Acri, Kimberly Hoagwood, Meghan Morrissey & Shirley Zhang

To cite this article: Mary Acri, Kimberly Hoagwood, Meghan Morrissey & Shirley Zhang (2016) Equine-assisted activities and therapies: enhancing the social worker’s armamentarium, Social Work Education, 35:5, 603-612, DOI: 10.1080/02615479.2016.1173669

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2016.1173669

Published online: 19 Apr 2016.
Equine-assisted activities and therapies: enhancing the social worker’s armamentarium

Mary Acri, Kimberly Hoagwood, Meghan Morrissey and Shirley Zhang

ABSTRACT
Introduction: Equine-assisted activities and therapies (EAAT) have gained prominence as a viable therapeutic approach for a range of mental health and developmental problems, yet is not widely known and not conventionally provided within the social work educational curriculum. Thus, the purpose of this study is to provide a review of various certification bodies available to social workers in order to bring EAATs into their therapeutic work. Methods: A multi-stage process, including consultation with experts in the field and an online search was undertaken to locate certification programs for mental health professionals. Results: Seven certification organizations were identified; programs varied with respect to mental health pre-requisites, type of certification, training components, and cost. Discussion: There has been substantial growth in EAAT for children with mental health and developmental problems, and there are a range of certification types to select from. Factors to consider when choosing which type of certification to pursue, and barriers to certification are discussed.

KEYWORDS
Continuing professional development; education; curriculum development; skills teaching education; children and families practice; mental health practice; therapeutic work practice; research-minded practice

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 15 January 2016
Accepted 28 March 2016

CONTACT
Mary Acri mary.acri@nyumc.org

© 2016 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Introduction

Equine-assisted activities and therapies (EAAT) have gained prominence as a viable therapeutic approach for a range of mental health and developmental problems including anxiety, depressive symptoms, irritability, inattention and distractibility, behavior problems, and impaired communication and social skills (Boshoff, Grobler, & Nienaber, 2015; Conniff, Scarlett, Goodman, & Appel 2005; Gabriels et al., 2015; Kendall, Maujean, Pepping, & Wright, 2014; Pendry, Carr, Smith, & Roeter, 2014). EAATs, which fall under the American Veterinary Medical Association’s category of animal-assisted therapies (American Veterinary Medical Association [AAT], 2015), are typically provided adjunctively along with other treatments, although there is a precedent for their delivery as a stand-alone therapeutic approach. Yet there remains some inconsistency in definition of EAATs and a variety of different certification standards for training in EAATs exist. The purpose of this paper is to provide a systematic review of certification standards to facilitate more consistency in
the field and particularly across educational programs, as well as to promote higher quality research and practice in the promising new area of EAATs.

There are two subcategories of EAATs: equine-assisted therapies (EAT), such as hippotherapy and equine-assisted psychotherapy, and equine-assisted activities (EAA), including therapeutic horseback riding, interactive vaulting, therapeutic carriage driving, and other horse-related activities (e.g. grooming and stable management; Gabriels et al., 2012). Several EAAT are used as treatments for mental health and developmental problems, although there is considerable variability both across and within EAA and EAT subcategories. For example, equine-assisted counseling, as described by Trotter, Chandler, Goodwin-Bond, and Casey (2008), is a 12-week program co-led by a mental health professional and an equine specialist in which children interact with horses, participate in activities (e.g. haltering a horse), and are provided with education about horses (e.g. how horses communicate, horse anatomy, horse safety) to resolve emotional and behavioral problems in a group setting. The EAA equine-facilitated psychotherapy includes both un-mounted and mounted activities (e.g. riding). In contrast, Lanning et al. (2014) describes a therapeutic riding program delivered in an individual or semi-individual format delivered by a certified riding instructor in conjunction with side walkers (volunteers who walk alongside the horse to balance the rider), and a volunteer who leads the horse. Program components included education about horse safety, horsemanship, and riding activities to facilitate the child’s skill at riding and grooming and augment behavioral skills.

Currently, there is no unifying theory as to why activities and therapies involving horses are psychologically beneficial. Amoit and Bastian’s (2015) recent review presents several theories that explain the relationship between humans and animals that undergird a range of therapeutic approaches, including biophilia, which is the tendency for humans to connect emotionally to other living things, and attachment, which is defined as a bidirectional connection between humans and animals. Specific to horses, Kendall et al. (2014) conducted a review of the literature in order to identify common themes that explained the psychological benefits of therapeutic riding specifically. Across 30 articles, 3 hypotheses emerged; (1) therapeutic benefits are not due to the horse itself, but rather a component of the program or intervention (e.g. the setting, being connected to nature), (2) interacting with equines is a positive experience that leads to enhanced psychological health (e.g. facilitates healing and feelings of normality, particularly among individuals with physical disabilities; is a distraction from distressing emotions and experiences, allows for social interaction with others via the group process), but these outcomes could be achieved via therapeutic approaches with other animals, and (3) the horse has unique aspects not found in other therapeutic approaches that enhances psychological health (e.g. the individual gains riding skills, that in turn may enhance their sense of mastery and control; the individual’s sense of intimacy and potentially empathy is developed through caring for and grooming the horse.

A summary of the literature suggests that equine activities and therapies are associated with enhancements in mental health and functioning, including social functioning and behavior among children with emotional and behavioral difficulties (Pendry et al., 2014), emotional-focused coping and subjective well-being among children with behavior problems (Boshoff et al., 2015), and among children with autism spectrum disorder, improvements in sensory seeking, and inattention-distractibility (Bass, Duchowny, & Llabre, 2009), adaptive and motor skills (Gabriels et al., 2012) and decreased irritability, hyperactivity, and improved social cognition, social communication, and enhanced verbalizations (Gabriels
et al., 2015). Specific to social work, a review that canvassed the evidence of equine-assisted activities, and equine-facilitated psychotherapy primarily, found several benefits including improvements in self-esteem and confidence, functioning, locus of control, and anger (Smith-Osborne & Selby, 2010). Notably, however, some studies failed to show any benefit; additionally, many of the studies did not use standardized measures to assess psychological change, had small sample sizes, were qualitative in nature, and assessed the outcome variable at one time point. As a whole, these findings are promising but suggest more rigorous research needs to be conducted before leading to any firm conclusions about EAAs, or the larger category of EAAT in the social work field.

While some research is ambivalent, there is enough to warrant consideration of EAATs as having the potential to contribute positively to social work practice. However, equipping social workers to provide EAATs is challenging for several reasons. First, integrating promising interventions into social work education has been a difficult endeavor as schools have struggled to keep pace with providing information about new therapeutic approaches in a changing practice landscape that is undergoing significant flux (Mirabito, 2012). This is even more challenging given the staggering number of available therapeutic approaches: Approximately 15 years ago, for example, over 550 interventions were being utilized for children and adolescents alone (Kazdin, 2008), and that number is likely higher at present.

An additional concern is that social workers are not active consumers of research about practice; instead, they rely on their own experiences, advice from colleagues, and other means to direct their practice. Relatedly, schools of social work have been faulted for not producing graduates who actively utilize the scientific literature in their clinical work (Howard, McMillen, & Pollio, 2003). Consequently, they are unlikely to be abreast of the most current literature regarding upcoming therapeutic approaches, particularly if it requires an in-depth search through the literature, which can be time consuming and costly, or if they are not exposed through their personal experience or professional connections.

All of these factors have clear implications for social work education. International standards of social work promoted by the International Association of Schools of Social work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) emphasize social workers’ responsibility to be abreast of, critically evaluate, and utilize research regarding practice in their clinical work (Sewpaul & Jones, 2005). This mandate has global repercussions. In the United States, for example, the Council on Social Work Education’s Commission on Accreditation, which is the overarching accreditation body for schools of social work across the country, requires educational programs teach content and prepare students to be active consumers of research, to critically appraise the evidence about different practices, to use the most effective treatments in their work with clients (Council on Social Work Education, 2015).

In likelihood, there is no more formative period in social workers’ professional development than during their educational years; thus, the onus is upon the educational system to expose students to EAATs, critically evaluate the evidence, and provide information and resources so that students who are working with equines in a therapeutic capacity can receive intensive training.

In an attempt to adhere to international standards of the profession, the purpose of this review is to provide an overview for social workers about the different certification standards available for bringing EAATs into social work practice to address mental health and developmental problems for adults and children. Findings from studies of EAATs suggest
that some benefits may accrue from the human–equine interaction that can affect positive changes in mood, irritability, hyperactivity, social, and communication behaviors. Clinical practice with equines, in conjunction with social work expertise, can make for a promising combination that could enhance the lives of children and families who are personally affected by mental health and developmental problems. A systematic review of certification standards is timely and needed, given the growing interest in EAATs as an alternative or adjunctive therapy.

**Methods**

We undertook a multi-stage process in order to obtain a comprehensive sample of EAAT training and certificate programs. First, we contacted two key experts in the field, who were selected because they oversaw university-level equine therapy programs, regarding existing certification programs. From there, we networked with additional leaders in the field, targeting those with mental health credentials, to identify any certifications for mental health practitioners.

Second, we conducted an online search, using the keywords *equine therapy certification*, to locate certification programs not listed by key experts. Lastly, we searched for programs in studies that were included in a systematic review of animal-assisted therapies (Hoagwood, Acri, Morrissey, & Peth-Pierce, in press).

Programs were included if they offered a structured certification program for providers in the mental health field. Programs were excluded if they were general animal-assisted therapy certifications or if the certification was for the equine, and not the provider.

Two of the authors (MA, SZ) reviewed each of the certification bodies that met eligibility. This list was vetted by a Licensed Social Worker (MM) and a Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH)-Certified Instructor; PATH was formerly The North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NAHRA), the oldest organization involving equines in a therapeutic capacity (Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International [PATH], 2015).

Next, data from each program, including the organization's name, type of certification, program components, cost, whether continuing education units (CEU) were available, and if providers with the certification were able to be reimbursed for services, were extracted.

**Results**

Seven programs met inclusion criteria and are included in this review. Certifying organizations include large, international organizations such as the Equine-Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA, 2010) and PATH (2015), as well as smaller organizations including the O.K. Corral Series (2015) and the Gestalt Equine Institute of the Rockies (2014). There is variability in certifications across organizations, including a certificate as an Equine-Assisted Mental Health Practitioner (University of Denver Institute for Human-Animal Connection, 2015), in Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy and Learning (Human-Equine Alliances for Learning, 2015), and in Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy and Equine-Assisted Learning (O.K. Corral Series, 2015). Each certification has unique principles about how the equine/client relationship is therapeutic; Natural Lifemanship (2010), for example, purports the rhythmic motion of horseback riding is healing to the brain,
which has been disrupted by trauma. Through riding, the individual’s brain heals and reorganizes; eventually, the individual learns to self-regulate, manage stress, and manage their emotional state.

Five (71%) of the six programs either required a mental health background in order to enroll (e.g. a master’s degree in human services, or a combination of experience a formal education), or encouraged participants to have a mental health background (Gestalt Equine Institute of the Rockies). Of the remaining two programs, one required no pre-requisites to enroll (Natural Lifemanship, 2010), while the second, through Path International, had a minimum age requirement, required that enrollees were current members of the organization, and that they were CPR certified (PATH, 2015). In the case that applicants do not have a mental health background, PATH International requires that a mental health professional co-deliver the psychotherapy session (provided the applicant was a certified therapeutic riding instructor). However, if the provider is both a mental health provider and an equine riding instructor, they are permitted to facilitate the psychotherapy sessions on their own (PATH, 2015).

Trainings are credited in number of hours completed, or offered over a set schedule, and can be completed in as short as 60 days, or over the course of two years. Programmatic components vary, and included readings about the approach (e.g. Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy and Learning), workshops, information about how equines influence brain development and how to facilitate a relationship between horses and clients, horsemanship skills, and supervised sessions with clients. Two programs (EAGALA, PATH International) require a portfolio, one requires a final project (Gestalt Equine Institute of the Rockies), and three require an exam in order to complete certification (Path, Gestalt, OK Corral Series). Program cost ranged from $750 to over $7000. See Table 1 for a description of each program.

Discussion

There has been substantial growth in the field of animal-assisted therapies, and EAAT in particular. For social workers interested in partnering with equines as a therapeutic approach, there are several options, such as a certification as an equine specialist, an equine-assisted counselor, or an equine psychotherapist. Although all involve treatment with equines, each pulls from slightly different perspectives, and there are nuances in approach that should be considered in order to ensure the type of certification is concordant with the provider’s professional orientation and practice objectives.

As shown by this review, there are a variety of factors to consider when choosing which type of certification to pursue, including the program requirements (e.g. an exam, coursework), pre-requisites (i.e. many of the programs require, at a minimum, a degree or state licensure; others, such as the Gestalt Equine Institute of the Rockies, will accept applicants that are in the process of earning a master’s degree in human services), prior or current experience with a horse, cost of the program and ongoing membership, and opportunities for continuing education.

A range of certification programs currently exist to inform social work practice. Despite our attempts to be comprehensive, one limitation of this effort is that there may be existing programs that were not included, either because they were not identified by our experts or because they were not captured in our online search. The field has been faulted for lacking standardization in nomenclature, which in turn may have impeded our efforts. Furthermore,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization name</th>
<th>Type of certification</th>
<th>Cost</th>
<th>Pre-requisites</th>
<th>Level of horse experience required</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **1. EAGALA**     | EAGALA Certified Mental Health Professional or EAGALA Advanced Certified Mental Health Professional | • Part I: $600 (2-year membership fee is included) & Part II: $650
• $100 student discount on both parts
• Once certified: membership & certification renewal fee needs to be renewed for $155
• CEUs: $15/hour | • College-level educational training
• Degree in a mental health field (e.g. social work, psychology, marriage and family therapy) | None required; person works in conjunction with an Equine Specialist Professional |
| **2. PATH International** | Equine Specialist in Mental Health and Learning Certification | • Annual membership Fee: $65
• Portfolio Processing Fee: $95
• Attending workshop & skills test (3 day practical and 4th day evaluation) ~$500–$800 for workshops
• CEUs: varies from $0 to $20/hour
• No membership fee currently
• Application fee: $75
• Deposit: $600 non-refundable, counted towards tuition
• Total tuition: $7200
• CEUs cost is included | • 21 years of age or older
• Current PATH Intl. Member
• Current Adult + Child CPR and First Aid certifications (online courses not accepted) | Beneficial to have horse-manship skills and experience when attending the workshop but it is not required |
| **3. Human–Equine Alliances for Learning (HEAL)** | Certification in Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy & Learning (EFPL) | • No membership fee currently
• Basic training: $500
• Advanced training: $110
• Consulting: $150/hour
• CEUs cost vary state by state | • Masters Degree in field directly related to counseling, therapy or education, or demonstrate equivalent of relevant formal education and experience related to human development and mental/emotional wellness
• 2 years experience in the field of human services | Three years of recent and regular horse interactions and activities recommended |
| **4. Natural Lifemanship** | Trauma-Focused Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (TF-EAP™) | • No membership fee currently
• Basic training: $500
• Advanced training: $110
• Consulting: $150/hour
• CEUs cost is included | None | None |
| **5. Gestalt Equine Institute of the Rockies** | Gestalt Equine Psychotherapist (GEP) | • No membership fee currently
• Eight Training Intensives: $7600, 16 Supervision hours: $1520
• CEUs: Not stated | • Are or want to work in a human services field. Encouraged to have a Masters Degree or in the process of getting one | None |
| **6. O.K. Corral Series** | Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) and Equine-Assisted Learning (EAL) Certificate | • One-year membership: $75
• Two-year membership: $110
• Lifetime membership: $550
• Standard Certification Rate: $1075
• Early Registration Rate: $875
• CEU Certification: $35
• Application Fee: $25
• Tuition: $4800 | • Licensed mental health therapists or licensed therapists | None |
<p>| <strong>7. University of Denver: Institute for Human–Animal Interaction</strong> | Equine-Assisted Mental Health Practitioner Certificate (EAMH) | • Master or a doctoral degree from a mental health related program, or are currently a graduate student in such a program | Prior equine experience is necessary for admission. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization name</th>
<th>Program components</th>
<th>Exam (Y/N)</th>
<th>Other considerations</th>
<th>CEU (Y/N)</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. EAGALA         | (1) Part 1 (3-day EAGALA Training)  
(2) Part 2 (3-day EAGALA Training)  
(3) Part 1 & 2 are taken within 6 months of each other  
(4) Submit a Professional Development Portfolio | N          | • EAGALA Certifications expire every two years and can be renewed with EAGALA approved CEU  
• Completion of 20 continuing education hours is required after two years  
• Certification only for un-mounted mental health or learning session  
• Equine-facilitated psychotherapy sessions can only be facilitated by a licensed mental health professional and a credentialed equine professional partner (can be the same person) | Y          | http://www.eagala.org/sites/default/files/attachment/EAGALA%20Certification%20Program_0.pdf                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| 2. PATH International | (1) Application Phase (complete an on-site Equine Specialist in Mental Health and Learning Workshop & Horsemanship Skills Test)  
(2) Submit portfolio  
(3) Online Exams: Equine Specialist in Mental Health and Learning Exam & Certification and Accreditation Training (CAT) Course and Exam  
(4) 60 Days to complete both Online Exams (ESMHL Exam and CAT Exam) | Y          | • Certification only for un-mounted mental health or learning session  
• Equine-facilitated psychotherapy sessions can only be facilitated by a licensed mental health professional and a credentialed equine professional partner (can be the same person) | Y          | http://www.pathintl.org/images/pdf/resources/certifications/PATH-intl-ES-MHL-Certification-Booklet-07-15.pdf                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| 3. Human–Equine Alliances for Learning (HEAL) | (1) Distance learning from home and includes a requirement to conduct some practice sessions, scholarly readings related to EFPL  
(2) Group conferences and written assignment with your cohort and mentoring sessions with the HEAL instructors  
(3) Completion of program assignments including supervised session of EFPL with an actual client, is conducted during the on-site week just prior to graduation  
(4) 5 months long, includes two separate, weeklong site trainings: one at the beginning (May) and the final week (September). | N          | • Some HEAL FTP applicants may use, or plan to use, a team approach to EFPL practice—i.e. the clinician or educator supported by a horse specialist as their practice partner. Practice partners are encouraged to attend HEAL FTP together when possible, which amplifies the learning and effectiveness for the team.  
• Accepted teams are eligible for a 15% registration discount. | Y          | http://humanequinealliance.com/the-heal-model/efpl-certification/                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| 4. Natural Lifemanship | (1) 3-day basic training; understanding brain development, using horses to influence brain development & building relationships between clients and horses  
(2) Between basic & advanced trainings: Conduct individual and group consultation, complete online learning component and subscription-based video program  
(3) 3-day advanced training: in-depth development of facilitation skills and horse-training | N          | • CEUs depend on which state you are in.  
• Natural Lifemanship will begin to offer national accreditation starting in January 1st, 2016 | Y          | http://naturallifemanship.com/                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| 5. Gestalt Equine Institute of the Rockies | (1) Two-year training period with eight training intensives (each intensive is 4 days long)  
(2) Meet with Duey Freeman, co-founder of the Gestalt Equine Institute of the Rockies, a minimum of three times over the eight intensives to assess equine skills  
(3) 16 supervision hours  
(4) Complete assessments for being a Gestalt Equine Psychotherapist  
(5) Complete a final project on a topic of your choice and give a presentation | Y          | About 75% of the program is hands-on, working with horses and working with each other | Y          | http://www.gestaltequineinstitute.com/                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
Table 1. *(Continued)*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization name</th>
<th>Program components</th>
<th>Exam (Y/N)</th>
<th>Other considerations</th>
<th>CEU (Y/N)</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 6. O.K. Corral Series | (1) One 3-day seminar course  
(2) Variety of seminars including focus on emotion health and growth, crisis management, teambuilding and leadership activities and working with different populations such as families, children, returning veterans, mental health clients, individuals, and corporations | Y | Some seminars are led by the Greg Kersten, Founder of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP), Equine Services, Inc., EAGALA | Y | [http://okcorralseries.com/ceus-certificates](http://okcorralseries.com/ceus-certificates) |
| 7. University of Denver: Institute for Human–Animal Interaction | (1) Three online courses (12-week, 12-week, 10-week)  
(2) Three 4-day workshops  
(3) 50 h of supervised client work  
(4) 50 h of additional trainings | N | Weekly participation in academic activities is required via distance learning. Assignments are graded. | Not stated | [http://www.du.edu/humananimalconnection/programs-education/eamh.html](http://www.du.edu/humananimalconnection/programs-education/eamh.html) |
that many certifications are proprietary threatens collaborators in the field, and prevents
development of unifying terms.

Another potential limitation is that despite multiple attempts, we either could not estab-
lish the legitimacy of several programs, or provide greater details about its components. As
AATs continue to grow in popularity, it will be essential to standardize terminology, and
delineate credible programs from efforts that may be less rigorous and/or reputable. For
example, instructors may vary significant and may or may not have mental health training.

Although there are multiple options for the social worker intending to become certified
in equine-assisted activities and therapy, a major factor hindering certification is that cur-
rently, no mental health current procedural terminology (CPT) codes for animal-assisted
therapy exist: Thus, when an insurance-approved mental health provider conducts a session,
there is no reimbursable mechanism for treatment including an animal. Of course, this will
not happen until rigorous research supports the efficacy of EAATs in improving specifiable
outcomes. Until then, reimbursement options will vary. Additionally, cost will likely vary
by country and their method of reimbursement for alternative therapies.

Limitations notwithstanding, EAATs appear to be a promising therapeutic approach for
a range of mental health and developmental problems. For social work educators, there are
multiple venues in which to incorporate current research on and certification standards for
EAATs into students’ educational activities. As mentioned previously, engaging in a dis-
cussion about EAATs and evaluating the evidence serves to both gain awareness about this
practice and build students’ skills as active consumers of research. However, educators may
also include EAATs in the practice curricula through specialized, abbreviated courses during
the school year or breaks (e.g. two-week courses offered over winter recess), and/or through
training programs and continuing education opportunities offered through universities that
are open to alumni and current students. Exposure to EAATs and to current research and
practice standards could facilitate future work in developing new and innovative practice
models, and enhance the skill set of emerging social workers.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Kimberly Hoagwood http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9920-9896

References

Retrieved from https://www.avma.org/KB/Policies/Pages/Animal-Assisted-Interventions-
Definitions.aspx

Amiot, C. E., & Bastian, B. (2015). Toward a psychology of human-animal relations. Psychology
Bulletin, 141, 6–47.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10803-009-0734-3


