A space of safety: Children's experience of equine-assisted group therapy

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Abstract
Owing to a shift in alcohol and other drug practice towards a more ecological understanding of the impact of problematic parental substance use, children who were previously forgotten by practitioners are increasingly being included in alcohol and other drug service provision. Occurring concurrently with these changes has been a boom in interest in non-talk-based therapies to enhance child well-being. Examples of such therapeutic interventions include adventure-based activities, theatre, yoga, music, and purposeful interaction with animals. The latter approach, increasingly delivered by social workers, is known as animal-assisted therapy and involves the inclusion of animals in a goal-directed intervention. Equine-assisted therapy (EAT) is a specialised branch of animal-assisted therapy in which horses are used to cofacilitate therapeutic interventions. Although EAT practitioners argue horses are uniquely effective therapeutic animals, a strong evidence base has not yet developed. The present study utilised qualitative methods to explore children's individual experiences of an EAT program. Thematic analysis of interview data found that EAT is beneficial to children experiencing problematic parental substance use as it offers an environment in which children can feel safe and secure and are supported to grow, personally and socially, by mastering fears, making new friends, and improving their interpersonal behaviours.

KEYWORDS
child therapy, groupwork, research with children, substance misuse (parental misuse and effects on children)

1 | INTRODUCTION

Recently, social work has experienced a boom in interest in non-talk-based therapies to address trauma sequelae in children. Examples include adventure-based activities (Tucker, 2009), theatre (van der Kolk, 2003), yoga, music (Perry, 2009), and purposeful interaction with animals (Mudaly, 2014). Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is a non-talk-based therapy that involves the inclusion of animals in a goal-directed intervention, delivered by a health or human service professional. Equine-assisted therapy (EAT) is a specialised branch of AAT in which horses are used to cofacilitate therapeutic interventions. EAT practitioners argue horses are uniquely effective therapeutic animals. As prey animals, horses are highly attuned to their environment, responding swiftly to perceived threats as well as to positive interactions (Burgon, 2011; Karol, 2007). Horses have immense symbolic power, representing bravery, healing, and loyalty both in mythology and in popular culture (Evans & Gray, 2012).

This study focuses on EAT as a psychosocial intervention aimed at children experiencing the impacts of problematic parental substance use (PPSU). In particular, this study explores child participants' experience of EAT, with the aim of generating a greater understanding of how psychosocial outcomes occur, or do not occur, as a result of EAT.

1.1 EAT and PPSU: What is the link?

Approximately 13% of children under the age of 12 years are exposed to PPSU (Dawe et al., 2006). Where PPSU is present, parental mental illness and family violence frequently co-occur, resulting in complex and chaotic family routines (Barnard & McKeeganey, 2003) and other compounding problems including homelessness and poverty (Gruenert & Tsantefski, 2012). These children often come to the attention of child protection authorities. Australian data indicate that approximately 50% of substantiated cases of abuse and neglect involve PPSU. PPSU is also implicated in up to 70% of children's entry into
out-of-home care (Jeffreys, Hirte, Rogers, & Wilson, 2009). Into adolescence and adulthood, the cohort of children exposed to PPSU has a higher incidence of diagnosable psychiatric disorders such as depression, oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and substance abuse (Dawe et al., 2007).

### 1.1.1 A new area of practice

Although there is a vast body of literature on parenting and problematic substance use, there is little research documenting interventions with children (Miller, 2003; Johnson, Gryczynski & Moe, 2011). As such, there is no significant evidence base to guide the range of professionals who come into contact with children experiencing PPSU, including social workers. Contemporary approaches to PPSU advocate supporting children through programs that address the impacts of PPSU on the family system, primarily through intervention with parents (Gruenert & Tsantefski, 2012). There is growing consensus that child-specific interventions could form an integral adjunct to whole-of-family service provision (Barnard & McKeganey, 2003; Straussner, 2011).

### 1.1.2 Complementary characteristics

Although there is currently no unified, empirically grounded framework explaining the causal pathway from AAT to psychosocial outcomes for children, the various theories put forward to explain why AAT might be an effective therapeutic approach appear to dovetail with the complex needs of children experiencing PPSU and with recommendations for program development in this area.

Firstly, some proponents of AAT suggest that by offering a nonverbal mode of interaction, and by being removed from usual human-to-human power dynamics, animals contribute to the creation of an accessible and engaging therapeutic environment (Karol, 2007; Maujeen, Kendall, Roquet, Sharp, & Pringle, 2013). In group situations, some AAT proponents suggest that animals have a socialising effect, stimulating interaction, and conversation between children who may otherwise find interaction challenging (Tedeschi, Fitchett, & Molidor, 2005).

Secondly, human–animal bond research suggests that relationships between humans and animals can approximate secure attachment relationships, insofar as animals can offer a target for proximity maintenance, a safe haven, and a secure base (Bachi, Terkel, & Teichman, 2011; Parish-Plass, 2008; Tedeschi et al., 2005). Providing children with the opportunity to develop a sense of secure attachment in their relationship with another being is possibly a useful feature of AAT for children experiencing PPSU. Neonatal abstinence syndrome, patterns of intoxication, withdrawal, and sourcing can all negatively affect parents’ ability to accurately read and respond to their child’s cues or predictably complete parenting tasks such as ensuring children are fed, provided with clean clothes, and offered a safe environment (Barnard & McKeganey, 2003). These factors coalesce to create a hostile environment for the development of secure attachment relationships. Moreover, for many children exposed to PPSU, their capacity to form secure attachments to their caregivers can be hampered by repeated care placements with multiple care providers.

Proponents of AAT suggest that animals provide relationship opportunities in which children can experiment with doing relationships differently to patterns that may have been set up within the family. In relationship with an animal, children can inhabit different social roles that may feel too dangerous or confronting in the human-to-human relational world (Pendry & Roeter, 2012). EAT may offer children a significant therapeutic relationship, one that has the capacity to positively influence their internal working model, the set of expectations and beliefs held about the relationship between the self and others, which may endure beyond any specific relationship or experience.

Finally, neurobiological perspectives on AAT posit that animals provide an enriched environment within which multisensory experiences such as touch, physical, and cognitive challenges and the learning of new tasks support the integration of neural networks inadequately integrated as a result of trauma or neglect (Yorke, 2010), a common experience for children exposed to PPSU.

### 1.2 EAT research

To date, EAT interventions have been developed for adolescents in substance abuse and behavioural treatment facilities (Bachi et al., 2011; Dell et al., 2011); adolescents attending alternative schools (Bowers & MacDonald, 2001; Ewing, MacDonald, Taylor, & Bowers, 2007); adolescents in the foster care system (Burgon, 2011); children and adolescents identified as at risk of academic failure (Trotter et al., 2008). Other documented EAT programs are group interventions, EAT has also been used individually with children experiencing intrafamily violence (Schultz, Remick-Barlow, & Robbins, 2007) and various mental illnesses (Karol, 2007).

Findings from the few studies of EAT are inconclusive regarding the approach’s potential as a beneficial psychosocial intervention. Most published studies utilise quantitative methods to measure participant behaviour, mood, or self-perception changes. Some of these studies show significant participant improvements, suggesting that completion of a program of EAT can result in some psychosocial shifts (Kaiser et al., 2004; Pendry & Roeter, 2012; Trotter et al., 2008). Other quantitative studies show only weak support for EAT, generating results that are not significant but show general trends towards effectiveness (Bachi et al., 2011; Yorke et al., 2012). Some quantitative and mixed methods evaluations suggest EAT is ineffective in catalysing psychosocial change (Bowers & Macdonald, 2001; Ewing et al., 2007). The small group of studies using solely qualitative methods for investigating the impact of EAT on children and adolescents experiencing psychosocial challenges indicate positive changes in participants across a variety of areas such as growth of confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy and empathy (Burgon, 2011; Maujeen et al., 2013), teamwork (Dell et al., 2011), and other transferrable life skills (Dell et al., 2011; Maujeen et al., 2013).

In an emerging field of practice, it is problematic that few qualitative studies exist. By qualitatively delving into participant experience...
of EAT, this study hopefully provides an insight into what might be happening, providing a focus for future quantitative investigation.

## 2 | METHOD

The present study examines child participant perspectives on Horse Club, an EAT intervention delivered by Odyssey House Victoria (OHV), a Melbourne-based alcohol and other drug (AOD) treatment service. Horse Club is one of few AOD sector interventions specifically for children experiencing PPSU and is unique in its attempt to utilise human-animal relationship as the basis for therapeutic change with this population. The present study aims to offer narrative insight into the processes through which psychosocial outcomes occurred, or failed to occur. The question guiding this study was *How do children living with PPSU experience an EAT program?*

### 2.1 | Treatment

Horse Club is an initiative of OHV’s Kids in Focus program (KIF). KIF offers specialist parenting and family support including counselling, case management, parenting education, and therapeutic and recreational support for children. Referrals to KIF come from within OHV and can also be made by other family services, AOD agencies, child protection, and by self-referral.

Horse Club was developed by KIF with the twofold aim of improving participants’ social skills and sense of self-efficacy and providing participants with an enjoyable respite experience. Referrals to Horse Club were sourced from within KIF and from local family service agencies and schools. The inclusion criteria for the group were broad: children of primary school age, residing within the local area, and who experienced past or present PPSU. Although some children remained in the care of their biological parents, others were in kinship care. As outlined in Table 1, referrals to the program revealed that in addition to present or historical PPSU, participants had been exposed to a range of adverse family events and experienced a range of individual issues consistent with living in a disruptive family environment.

Horse Club consisted of one 2-hr session per week over a 9-week period. Sessions were led by an Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) trained EAT practitioner, together with staff from OHV and partnering family service organisations, whose qualifications included social work, psychology, AOD treatment, and community welfare. As noted in Table 2, sessions focused on ground-based horsemanship activities. These activities generally progressed in degree of difficulty and were combined with education on equine behaviour and building participants’ somatic awareness and capacity for mindfulness. In addition to these key activities, each Horse Club session began with a group check-in where children were invited to discuss how they felt that week, followed by time spent grooming the horses, a rhythmic, repetitive activity designed to calm and focus participants.

Four Horse Club groups were involved in this study, ranging in size from five to 10 participants. The groups occurred at four different equestrian venues across metropolitan Melbourne and regional Geelong, Victoria. The University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee provided approval for the study.

### TABLE 2 | Horse Club key activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Key activities</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction to horse behaviour (facial expressions, blind spots, fight/flight, and herd behaviour). Children spend time with horses, grooming them, and distributing the team. They learn how horses communicate and observe the horse's body language. Children also learn about horse safety and how to approach and interact with horses.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Children spend time with horses and learn to understand their body language. They practice leading horses on their own, gaining confidence and making connections with the animals. The focus is on creating a safe and caring environment for both the child and the horse. Children are encouraged to be mindful of their actions and feelings, promoting self-awareness and self-efficacy.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Children split into pairs to lead horses in arena. Children take turns being group leader, instructing peers on how to lead the horses. Every 5 min, children switch partners and lead the horses. The focus is on communication and leadership skills, as children learn to guide the horses while being mindful of their surroundings and the needs of the other group member.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Children split into groups of four. Children are given an obstacle course for the horses. Each group leads the horses through the course, using only what is in the area. Children discuss their choices and make eye contact with the horses. The focus is on cooperation, problem-solving, and trust-building with the horses.</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Children lead horses on paper. Children are given an outline of the obstacles, and they are asked to draw directly on to the paper. The focus is on connecting with the horse and conveying their thoughts and feelings through the horse's body language. Children are encouraged to communicate their intentions to the horses.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Children lead horses through obstacle course in pairs. Children are given an obstacle course and asked to lead the horses through the course. The focus is on developing trust and rapport with the horses, as well as building communication and leadership skills. Children are encouraged to focus on the horses' body language, and they learn to lead the horses through obstacles in a safe and effective manner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Children split into pairs and are asked to lead horses through an obstacle course. They are encouraged to use the obstacles to their advantage, facilitating the horse's movement. The focus is on developing trust and rapport with the horses, as well as building communication and leadership skills. Children are encouraged to focus on the horses' body language, and they learn to lead the horses through obstacles in a safe and effective manner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Each child rides a horse through obstacle course in arena while supported by two workers. Celebration of each child's achievements in the group. Small gift of photos/horse shoe given to participants. The focus is on celebrating each child's accomplishments, fostering a sense of belonging and belonging, and reinforcing the importance of teamwork and collaboration. Children are encouraged to acknowledge and celebrate each other's successes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Pizza celebration dinner with children and their caregivers. Children and program staff tell caregivers about children's achievements during the program. Children provided with opportunity to introduce their caregivers to the horses. The focus is on celebrating each child's accomplishments, fostering a sense of belonging and belonging, and reinforcing the importance of teamwork and collaboration. Children are encouraged to acknowledge and celebrate each other's successes.</td>
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2.2 | Participant recruitment

Thirty-three children (18 girls and 15 boys) participated in Horse Club. Participant age ranged from 7 to 13 years with a median age of 10 years. Parents were asked to consent to their child’s participation prior to staff approaching children. Parents were provided with a plain language statement and consent form. Children whose parents consented to their participation were given a child version of the plain language statement and consent form. Staff explained that although their parents had provided consent, children were free to decline participating in the research and that this would not affect their inclusion in the program. Although all children and their parents or guardians provided written consent, five children did not participate in interviews due to early withdrawal from the program or lack of availability on days interviews were scheduled.

2.3 | Semistructured interviews

Semistructured individual interviews were conducted at the conclusion of each program. Open-ended questions (Thomas & O’Kane, 2000) were developed to guide the interviews, focusing on children’s feelings about the horses, their experience of being amongst the other children and program staff, any changes they noticed in themselves as a result of the group, and their suggestions for how the group could be improved (Table 3).

Interviews lasted between 5 and 10 min, depending on the individual child’s level of engagement, as monitored by the researcher. A median analysis of transcribed interview data shows that girls (382 words) and boys (234 words) aged 10–13 years contributed more words than girls (134 words) and boys (227 words) aged 7–9 years, suggesting that age had some small influence on children’s capacity to engage in the interview.

Although there were 28 child participants in the research, 29 semistructured interviews with children were conducted. This was because two children, who had become close friends during the program, requested to do an additional interview as a pair.

| TABLE 3 | Semistructured interview questions |
| Guiding questions | |
| Can you tell me a bit about yourself? | |
| What was it like being around the horses? What did you like/dislike about the horses? | |
| How do you feel about yourself when you are with the horses/in the group? How do you feel about yourself at other times? | |
| How did you feel about the horses when you started in the group? Do you feel the same now about the horses or do you feel differently? | |
| Is there anything else you can tell me about being with the horses? | |
| Can you tell me about being with the other children? What did you like/dislike about the children? | |
| Can you tell about being with the workers? What did you like/dislike about the workers? | |
| Is there anything else you’d like to tell me about your experience of being in the group? | |
| What did you like best about coming to the group? | |
| What did you like the least about coming to the group? | |
| How could the group be better? | |

2.4 | Taking a child-sensitive approach

In light of the power imbalance between the researcher and children, special measures were taken to accommodate children’s needs. The researcher attended each group at least once as an observer and informal assistant prior to engaging children in the interviews, with the purpose of becoming a familiar, nonthreatening figure. As a way of sharing power and building rapport, the researcher encouraged children to decide the space in which the interview took place (Irwin & Johnson, 2005). Settings varied and included sheds, kitchens, paddocks, front yards, canteens, and riding arenas.

Interviews were recorded using digital MP3 recording devices and cassette tapes. Where children showed particular interest or wariness of the recording equipment, the researcher spent time showing the child how the device worked, allowing them to make funny voices into it and listen to the playback. Children were offered the opportunity to control the recording device during the interview (Irwin & Johnson, 2005). On the two occasions where a child did not wish to be audio recorded, the researcher made handwritten notes during the interview.

The question sheet was shown to children before the interview. During the interview, it was placed where the child could see it. To build children’s confidence to respond as they wished, and to minimise fears about saying the wrong thing, the researcher encouraged and praised children for their responses. When children looked to the researcher for help when formulating their answer, the researcher did not offer leading suggestions (Irwin & Johnson, 2005) but instead offered children time to think or the option of coming back to the question later.

2.5 | Data analysis

A thematic analysis procedure was used to identify, analyse, and report themes within the data. Interviews and data analysis were performed by a single student researcher under the guidance of the lead researcher who provides research and consultancy services to OHV. The student researcher was independent, insofar as she was not embedded within OHV or any of the referring or partner agencies.

Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis procedure was followed, beginning with immersion in the data through the process of listening, transcribing, and repeated reading, a process that began following the collection of all interview data. During the transcribing process, all children were assigned a gender appropriate pseudonym to maintain anonymity. The immersion process was followed by manually generating initial codes; searching for, reviewing, and naming themes; and, finally, writing up the results. Rather than searching for examples of particular theories or phenomena within the data, an inductive approach was taken whereby codes and themes were sought from the data with the aim of privileging the voices of participants above existing theories and researcher preconceptions. Accounts that departed from the dominant story were retained and highlighted in the findings to demonstrate the full range of perceptions about the program (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Saturation of coded themes occurred at the end of the second group’s data. Although no secondary coding process occurred, codes were reviewed by the lead researcher. Following data analysis, the student researcher sought program staff’s perceptions of children’s
experiences of the group. Although this process was not sufficient to establish reliability of the findings in a formal sense, consistency between the themes generated by the researcher and staff perceptions of children's experiences emerged.

In order to maximise the extent to which children’s voices are accurately represented, a variety of source quotes are incorporated in the results (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3 | FINDINGS

Thematic analysis generated two key themes: “safety and security” and “personal and social development.” These themes can be understood as interrelated: one as a description of the program environment; the other as a description of the outcomes generated within it.

3.1 | Safety and security

Children participating in Horse Club described a sense of emotional, as well as physical, safety, and security, in their interactions with the horses, and within the wider program environment. Children spoke about feeling a sense of safety with the horses, feeling understood by the horses, feeling important, valuing touch and affection with them, and having a sense of the horses' behaviour as predictable and therefore manageable. For many children, this sense of safety in relationship to horses and staff opened up opportunities of enjoyment.

3.1.1 | The horse as resembling the qualities of a secure attachment figure

Children described feeling secure around the horses, mentioning features of their interactions similar to those that characterise ideal-type secure attachment relationships between human beings. As expressed by the children, feeling safe was often accompanied by an impression of the horses as truly benevolent beings, able to have a calming influence on them.

I liked that they were really nice and that they were really soft and they were really kind to us and didn’t try to hurt us (Charlotte, 8yo).

More than a quarter of children spoke of appreciating what they saw as the horses’ ability to understand their emotions and, in some cases, respond soothingly. For some, having a sense that the horse understood them led to a feeling of similarity or connection with the horse. By using the language of attachment theory, this could be described as a form of attunement.

Horses like, they know when you’re sad ‘n that and they, like, help ya (Matt, 12yo).

The idea of being important or special to the horse was present in many children’s reflections. Seven of the children spoke specifically about feeling the horses trusted and actively accepted them. Some children also came to feel that their presence elicited special responses from the horse, providing them with a sense of being important in the relationship. Others felt the horses listened to them, allowing them to talk about what mattered to them.

I tell the horses about each [video] game I get and how high I score (James, 12yo).

Most commonly, children identified touching the horses or offering them some sort of physical comfort or care as their favourite activities in the group. As the comment below demonstrates, the horses provided opportunities for affection such as cuddles, hugs, and kisses.

We pat them and cuddle them and see their cute eye showing out (Ava, 8yo).

Enjoying affection and safety with the horses did not mean the children were unaware of potential dangers associated with close contact with such a large animal. Many of the children spoke about the danger of being stepped on by the horse or causing the horse to fright. Interestingly, these dangers, while disliked by the children, were rarely couched in terms of fear or anxiety. Instead, children indicated that dangers were often predictable and resulted from the horse being clumsy or scared, not malicious. A number of children’s comments indicated they had an understanding of how to manage the horses’ and their own behaviour to ensure they remained safe.

They can’t be mean to you but they can accidentally step on your foot (Ella, 7yo).

I learned a lot about horses, like about how you react and have bad spots and all that stuff (Ethan, 9yo).

For a very small number of children, the horses continued to elicit feelings of discomfort and fear. As Stella (9 years old) explained, the horses are

...big and scary and their eyes are really big and scary.
One of the horse’s eyes are red.

This sentiment was an exception to the otherwise dominant account of the horses as sources of predictable safety and calm.

3.1.2 | A safe space for children to be themselves

Children’s interview data suggested an important part of the program’s value lay in the safe space it created for them, providing them with the freedom to engage in genuine identity expression and to release previously bottled-up emotions.

I used to hide most of the stuff that was in me. Now I can actually let it out (Abigail, 10yo).

Children commonly identified the availability of kind and compassionate staff as a contributor to emotional safety. The uniqueness of having such adults in their life was confirmed by some of the older children:

[Staff members] are better than my teachers. They aren’t mean. They care about me and stuff (Justin, 13yo).

3.1.3 | Experiencing happiness

In the context of a safe and secure environment, children were provided with the opportunity to just have fun. The idea that the group offered children the experience of happiness arose in the majority of interviews, most commonly in reference to contact with the horses.
When I leave I don't want to go 'cos I love the horses. And when the program finishes I don't want it to finish. Because the horse makes me feel happy...Happy, loveable, loved from the horses (Matt, 12yo).

### 3.2 | Personal and social development

The theme of personal and social development was evident in children's comments about new friendships and reports of improved confidence and interpersonal behaviour. Children felt Horse Club helped them develop mastery over fears, including initial fears they had about interacting with others. Children spoke about feeling good about their new ways of treating others and of deriving pleasure from collaborative work with their peers. For some of these children, this represents new insight to their capacities.

#### 3.2.1 | Making new friends

In half of the interviews, children specifically reported making new friends in the group, and a number of children referred to these new friends as "best" friends. Many children framed their new relationships as a highlight of their experience in the program, recounting moments of humour and joy with their new friends.

I think I made sort of like a best friend in the group (Emily, 9yo).

Emerging from the children's descriptions of their new friendships was the idea that the connection between themselves and their new friend was underpinned by an understanding of shared qualities. Some children contrasted their experience at school and in the program.

I don't have that much friends at school. And Abigail and Emily are my two best friends now. We were talking to each other and we had stuff in common (Mia, 10 yo).

A small group of children also suggested that their participation in the group enhanced relationships outside of the group, including ones that existed prior to their commencing Horse Club.

I make more friends when I tell them about this group. Most of them want to do it now (Hannah, 10 yo).

For one child, however, the opportunity to make friends did not generate satisfactory results. Stella explained that not making many friends left her feeling "a bit sad."

In the eight days here I only made one friend (Stella, 9yo).

#### 3.2.2 | A compatible exception: Peer behaviour eliciting uncomfortable emotions

Although the dominant narrative about peers was undoubtedly one of taking delight in new relationships, over a quarter of children also reported feeling uncomfortable emotions in response to some peer behaviours. In particular, disruptive externalising behaviours such as yelling and swearing. For all of these children, this discomfort was balanced by positive experiences with new friends and positive impressions of the group overall.

I don't dislike anyone. Except for one person. I don't dislike them, I just don't like them because they were talking to me disrespectfully. And to the workers. So I got angry (Matt, 12yo).

As well as feeling angry, scared, and annoyed because of the externalising behaviours of others, some children reported empathic discomfort for children in the group.

Sarah looks like she is really sad a lot and I just want her to be happy. I feel sad if someone else looks sad (Emily, 9yo).

#### 3.2.3 | Improving interpersonal behaviour

Many children spoke about improvements they felt they had made to their interpersonal behaviour during the course of the program. Ella (7 years old) explained that she "used to be mean: angry, violent, hurtable." When asked what had changed for her, she replied,

My anger. Um, since I started [the program] I didn't hardly hurt anyone anymore.

Other children noted similar changes in their behaviour, some suggesting a direct link with things they learnt in the group. Children referenced both the content of Horse Club sessions, such as learning to identify horses' behavioural cues, as well as Horse Club group processes such as turn-taking and the sharing of favourite horses.

Mostly I didn't really treat people all that nicely and at the group, like, I found out that horses have the same feelings usually as humans, yeah (Claire, 11yo).

Some children commented on the value they placed on working collaboratively with the others and experiencing themselves as successful social participants.

Some sessions we would do things like, um, things like stuff you have to help each other with. Like, last session we had to, um, there was no halter or rope and we had to get the horse all the way to the other end of the arena. We helped each other (Lucy, 8yo).

#### 3.2.4 | Overcoming fears

As explored above, the overwhelming majority of children came to see the horses as sources of safety, predictability, and affection. However, at the beginning of the group, the majority felt the horses caused them to be nervous or scared. During interview, many of the children spoke about overcoming initial nerves.

[At the beginning of the group I was] kind of nervous but then when I got used to it, I’m like, "wow, I want to be with horses all of the time!" (Hannah, 10yo).

Developing confidence around others and within themselves was a process for children. Although the overwhelming majority eventually expressed appreciation for the relationships they developed with other children and staff, the initial prospect of being with or trusting others was challenging.
[Before the program] I wasn’t used to being with other people lots. I couldn’t trust lots of other people and stuff (Noah, 8yo).

A number of children felt that overcoming fears was something they achieved with the support of other people in the group.

When I first came I was a tiny bit nervous. I was, like, I just ran to the toilet, and they [staff] calmed me down and they took me to the petting zoo and showed me the other tiny little horses and they got me used to the horses at the start and that’s how I’m comfortable, really comfortable now (Amelia, 10yo).

Some children also showed an appreciation of the personal capabilities that led them to successfully complete a task that was difficult or frightening to begin with.

I was really strong when two horses was on my foot. Yeah, one was pregnant and had a horse in it and it stepped on my foot on my new shoes and I was brave as (Will, 10yo).

It is important to note that not all children felt that the horses offered them the opportunity to challenge themselves. Justin (13 years old), one of the older boys in the program, spoke about the Shetland ponies in the program being too small to for him.

They’re miniature. They’re about the size of my sister, my little sister.

4 | DISCUSSION

On fostering resilience in young people, Gilligan suggests that

Helping is something about creating a space where good things may happen. We may not be able to script or dictate what happens in that space, but maybe we can give things a favourable nudge in the right direction (2006, p.41).

This idea provides a useful framework within which Horse Club and the findings from this study can be conceptualised. Through this lens, the horses and program staff, with their gentleness, availability, and capacity to encourage joy, “helped” by creating an environment of safety and security in which children were “nudged” towards positive personal and social development. The data indicated that the horses were primarily responsible for children’s experience of Horse Club’s calm, joyful dynamic. The capacity of the horse to meaningfully influence the therapeutic environment by creating opportunities for security, touch, and by offering a relationship rich in nonverbal communication is present in other qualitative accounts of EAT (Burgon, 2011; Maujean et al., 2013) and more general explorations of human–horse (Yorke et al., 2008) and human–animal relationships (Bowers & Macdonald, 2001). The confluence of these findings with those of the present study suggests a promising and potentially powerful equine characteristic for use in therapeutic interventions with children, particularly those experiencing PPSU, for whom the opportunity for relaxed enjoyment can be extremely limited (Emshoff & Valentine, 2006).

That children overwhelmingly described feeling welcomed and loved by the horses, as well as understood, trusted, and calmed by them, suggests that animals in therapy may be able to offer the experience of a quasi-secure attachment relationship. Since the work of John Bowlby (1988), the availability of secure attachment relationships has been understood as crucial to infant and child development, as well as to social and emotional well-being into adulthood. As the findings indicate, horses offered a relationship in which children felt safe, could experiment with extending themselves, and return for comfort and reassurance when their capacity was overwhelmed (Parish-Plass, 2008). In this way, horses arguably facilitated children’s capacity to achieve personal and social growth.

That children referenced horses much more than staff when describing feelings of security in the group fits with the wider AAT literature suggesting animals are effective therapeutic agents with children who have experienced abuse or neglect due to the animal’s ability to be accepting and nonjudgemental (Ewing et al., 2007) and the fact that, simply by not being human, animals are removed from the negative experiences that might characterise a child’s typical social interactions (Bowers & Macdonald, 2001). Although relationships with program staff were not reported to be as significant as those with horses, some children nevertheless reported feeling “cared about,” suggesting an important secondary relationship in the group. These opportunities to experience relationships that approximate ideal-type secure attachment relationships are more than usually important for Horse Club participants, given that PPSU and the complex environment in which it occurs poses a threat to the development of a secure attachment relationship between the parent and child, the most significant dyad in any child’s world (Kroll & Taylor, 2003).

The analysis of the data from this study also suggests that Horse Club had the simple yet powerful benefit of offering children moments of genuine happiness, a feeling not always open to children experiencing PPSU who are faced with significant responsibilities and worries as part of their daily home life (Barnard & McKeganey, 2003). This finding fits with recommendations from Emshoff and Valentine (2006) that interventions with children experiencing PPSU should include fun and play.

Although, to date, quantitative studies have found no impact of EAT on children’s sense of self-efficacy (Ewing et al., 2007; Kaiser et al., 2004; Trotter et al., 2008), the findings of the present study are consistent with Burgon’s (2011) qualitative evaluation of EAT that found self-efficacy and mastery of fears to be a key theme. Children reported that although they may have harboured fears about interacting with the horses and their peers when they began the program, they utilised a combination of social support and their own existing strengths to overcome their fears and participate meaningfully in the increasingly difficult activities. This is an important finding as the literature suggests the experience of mastering a challenge strengthens an individual’s capacity to cope with future difficulties (Gilligan, 2006). Challenging experiences, such as having to manage the difficult behaviour of others in an otherwise safe environment, have also been recognised as a crucial element of enriched therapeutic environments, offering opportunities for neural repair and
development within parts of the brain damaged by trauma and neglect (Perry, 2009).

Social competence, a recognised contributor to childhood resilience (Kroll & Taylor, 2003), was a significant aspect of children's growth through Horse Club. Given known barriers to establishing social networks for children living with PPSU, that the majority of children were able to make friends is arguably the most moving of the findings. Improved social competence resulting from EAT has been found elsewhere in the literature (Burgon, 2011; Maujeen et al., 2013; Pendry & Roeter, 2012; Trotter et al., 2008) and aligns with suggestions that animals have a socialising influence (Tedeschi et al., 2005) and can successfully model appropriate interpersonal behaviour (Parish-Plass, 2008).

Changes in participants' social competence and their references to secure-base characteristics they appreciated in the horses raise the question: Can relationships with horses somehow influence humans' internal working models? Other researchers in this field suggest they can, citing animals' capacity to activate our attachment systems in the same way people do, resulting in the same attachment variances being observed in the way individuals relate to both people and animals. Parish-Plass (2008) suggests that in the case of children who have experienced emotional abuse and neglect, animals may be the ideal therapeutic agent, existing somewhere "in that twilight area between reality and play" (Parish-Plass, 2008, p. 27).

Although it is not possible to determine if children's relationships with horses in Horse Club caused any enduring change, results of this study indicate the capacity for children's internal working models to shift at least in some way, for a discrete moment in time, in a special environment.

4.1 Understanding the exceptions

The experience of Stella, who found the horses scary, reminds us that not all children benefit from EAT. As one of the youngest of the group, the horses presented a challenge to her confidence. Stella's experience contrasts with Justin's, the oldest child in the program, who expressed frustration with the small size of the horses. These exceptions from the dominant narrative suggest, firstly, that no intervention is likely to reflect the double identity of participants. Secondly, these exceptions suggest it may be beneficial to "match" children to the program, giving consideration to children's interests in horses generally and factors such as relative size.

The finding that negative as well as positive emotions were elicited by interactions with peers can be understood from different perspectives. Firstly, the conflicting emotions stirred by bringing together a group of children who have experienced PPSU may simply reflect the double-edged sword inherent in this activity in which children find others who understand what they are going through versus being with a group of children who, because of their similar background, also have some of the same social and behavioural issues, the witnessing of which can be triggering. That some children were able to articulate their triggers and preferences in social interaction is undoubtedly a pro-social skill that complements children's reported positive social interactions.

5 Conclusion

This research suffers from some of the pitfalls associated with having a single primary researcher and studying a particularly vulnerable cohort. Data from the five children who did not continue the program and those who were unavailable when interviews were scheduled are important as they may have had less positive experiences of Horse Club. Moreover, due to the difficulties associated with gaining access to children for a second time (e.g., chaotic family lives), participant validation of findings, which would have further ensured the credibility of the research, was not possible. Although staff confirmation of the research themes was reassuring, participant feedback would have further amplified children's voices and may have yielded a different interpretation of the data. Other limitations are that the study examined a single program intervention and involved a small sample size.

Despite these limitations, this study offers unique insight into a vulnerable population of children's experience of EAT. Given that social work's understanding of EAT interventions remains in its infancy, qualitative studies such as this contribute towards an understanding of just what might be occurring for participants during EAT, supporting the development of stronger hypotheses about the causal pathway between EAT and outcomes for specific populations. The present study has found that, for children experiencing PPSU, horses can assist in providing a safe and secure environment, one filled with enjoyment, in which children are able to make social and personal developmental gains. This information could provide the basis for future, possibly quantitative, evaluation. Future research in this area, exploring the impact of EAT on other vulnerable populations, and measuring the endurance and scale of indicated child outcomes, will further develop our understanding of this increasingly popular intervention.

REFERENCES


