

Equine-assisted social education in Finland: The effects of the intervention on participants’ well-being as described by the instructors

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Introduction. Equine-assisted social education is a work orientation based on social pedagogy as well as equine-assisted rehabilitation. It is used by professionals on education, social or health sector in Finland but there is lack of research about the outcomes of the intervention.

Methodology. We wanted to find out how Finnish equine-assisted social education affect the well-being of the participants. The research data was collected 2020 by a qualitative survey to the equine-assisted social educators (n=53). We analyzed the data using theory-driven content analysis method. We used Allardt’s theory of welfare (1993) as a framework for the study.

Main results. We identified instructors' perceptions of the effects on physical, mental and social well-being on three different levels: individual, community and society level. According to instructors’ views, physical effects were seen in increased activity and physical condition, motor skills and coordination.



Key words:

- equine-assisted method
- social education
- physical well-being
- social well-being
- psychological well-being

Main categories	Sub categories	Sub-sub categories	Codes
Individual well-being and agency	Physical outcomes	Psycho-physiological	The regulation of the state of vigor becomes easier, relaxation and calm increases, restlessness decreases, attendance becomes easier, stress decreases
		Physical	Activity increases, physical condition and motor skills improve, body coordination, body awareness and balance improve, tactile sensation develops
	Psychological outcomes	Cognitive	Concentration improves, listening to and following instructions get better, behavioral regulation and self-regulation improve
		Emotional	Mood improves, pleasure increases, positive emotions and thoughts increase, persistence increases, courage increases
	Social outcomes	Social	Social and emotional skills improve, toleration of different emotions becomes easier, emotional locks open, recognition of emotions becomes easier, interaction skills improve, empathy capacity develops, health perception improves, caring for hygiene improves
		Psychosocial	Self-esteem and self-confidence improve, belief in one's own abilities increases, self-image and empathy develop
Attachment to community	Experience of belonging		The experience of belonging to a community, new friendships, finding a hobby, being heard, trust in others grows
	Motivation and meaningfulness		Experiences of success, motivation to work towards one's goals increase, rehabilitation process progresses, structures for life, experiences of meaningfulness increase
	Transition of skills		Interaction skills move into everyday life, meaningful content is found in everyday life, ability to function is maintained or increased, appreciation of others increases
Attachment to society	Effects carry over to everyday life		Schooling becomes easier, drug use decreases, motivation to a life free of crime increases
	Effects do not carry over into everyday life		Effects do not always carry over into everyday life

According to instructors’ perceptions acting with horses facilitated the regulation of the state of vigor and helped participants to relax. The concentration and the cognitive control were improved and the structuring of thoughts became easier. Activities with horses produced joy, increased positive emotions and reduced anxiety. The self-esteem and social skills were improved. Transitions of new skills, behaviors or resources into everyday life were also reported by instructors. Future studies will need to consider measuring these effects on the participants.

Table 1. Theming the data using the classification matrix to identify the effects of the instructor on customers

Principal conclusions and implications for the field. As described by the instructors, the intervention had effects on physical, mental and social well-being. This study provides many perspectives for the future research and awareness of animal-assisted services in Finland.

“Emotional and social skills learned have carried into the everyday life of the participant. For example, school attendance has become easier or possible.”

Allardt, Erik 1993. Having, loving, being: An alternative to the Swedish model of welfare research. In Martha Nussbaum & Amartya Sen (toim.) The quality of life. Clarendon Press, 88–94.