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Conference Paper · August 2017

DOI: 10.15405/epsbs.2017.08.02.56

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**CORRECTION OF PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP  
THROUGH EQUINE ASSISTED LEARNING «CONTROL AND  
TRUST»**

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***Abstract***

This paper presents the content of the equine assisted growth / learning (EAG/L) program "Control and trust" designed for the exploration and correction of parent-child relationships. The goal of this program is to give parents the opportunity to explore the balance of trust and control in the relationship with their children, based on experience gained of interactions with horses. This program refers to the "Hippovention" technique - personal development, psychotherapy and correction of relations in horse-assisted interactions, accompanied by a psychologist. Mutual communication with a horse in specially organized conditions offers great opportunities for the development of partnership and reflection and for self-discovery. The testing of this program was conducted at the Kazan International Equestrian complex for a period of five weeks. Eight families (parents with children), two psychologists (one of whom is an expert on horses) and five horses participated in the program. The program includes conversation techniques, expressive art therapy techniques, exercises in contact with horses (feeding, tactile and kinesthetic contact, riding the horse, etc.) which allow to gain experience of warm and trusting relationships with horses, and their immediate feedback, allows us to identify the unwitting attitudes in relationships with others (fears and clamps, negative patterns). The horse gives a person a unique experience of immediate feedback in a non-verbal contact. As a result of participating in this program, parents get a unique experience of awareness of themselves, their feelings and relationships with the environment based on experience with horses and art therapy techniques.

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**Keywords:** Parent-child relationship, psychological support, Equine assisted learning, control, trust



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## I. Introduction

Modern enculturation environment of a child is often the source of inharmonious distribution of control and trust in the parent-child relationship, which negatively affects children. The imbalance in the direction of constant control and lack of confidence acts as a major stressor for parents, and violates their harmonious relationship with their children. It also negatively impacts the development of children's personality, not allowing them to develop self-reliance, responsibility, self-confidence, etc. (Bowers et al., 2011; Chand et al., 2013; Corsano et al., 2006). In Kaniušonytė et al. (2014) research, it was shown that parental monitoring, trust, emotional warmth, absence of alienation and communication with parents are strongly positively related with five positive youth development components: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring - the Five C's (Bowers et al., 2010), whereas psychological control and rejection are negatively shown in the components of youth development.

Distortion such as excessive parental control has many causes. The reason of disharmonious relationship and lack of trust can be; anxiety of parents, distorted attitudes in relation to the perception of parental role, lack of confidence in themselves and their feelings, etc. The opposite parents' position in the parent-child relationship - indulgence and indifference - is less common in our time, but can also be the result of "fatigue" of the parent from overprotection, forming a so-called inconsistent style of interaction with a child. Lack of trust in relationships with children can generally be caused by situations of uncertainty, typical for modern life, and lack of conscious experience with trusting relationships. The studies have shown that trust in interpersonal relationships is directly related to the perception of the social situation - familiar and safe (Luhmann, 2000), while uncertainty, ambiguity and unpredictability give rise to a state of distrust and a desire to control. Lewicky et al. (1997), consider trust in interpersonal relations as a latent variable and is distinguished at its core by three components: prevision (when a person's behavior corresponds to expectations), knowledge (often based on experience) and identity (a sense of similarity, community). At the same time, it is clear that true harmonious interactions are based on *trust* in relationships, where *control* is more presented in *contact* with children and parents, and is built on respect, attention and adequate distribution of mutual responsibility and freedom. Such positions facilitate the development of healthy long-term relationships, and a harmonious personality of the child. Many modern parents need to harmonize their relationship with their children. They can get this through exploring and understanding themselves, their feelings and fears, gaining experiences of contact and trust, and transferring it to their relationship with their children. This goal is very difficult to achieve in usual conditions when we use methods of counseling, cognitive-behavioral therapy or even group trainings because parents will peak up their psychological defenses. We suggest that the technique of Hippovention (one of the types of Animal Assisted Therapy), allows us to create appropriate psychotherapeutic and supporting environment for exploring and developing own personality and relations.

The term «Hippovention», proposed by Bareiss (1996) as part of his model «Therapeutic Man-Horse Interaction (TMHI)», is one of the therapeutic areas based on the psycho-pedagogical foundations of interaction with horses. «Hippovention» is defined as personal development, psychotherapy and correction of relations in horse-assisted interactions, accompanied by a psychologist. Thus, «Hippovention» involves a wide range of modern psychotherapeutic and personality developing models of the man-horse interaction (Equine assisted psychotherapy (EAP), Equine facilitated psychotherapy

(EFP), Equine assisted learning (EAL), Equine assisted growth (EAG) and Equine Assisted Counseling (EAC)), combining them as a common approach. Spectrum of therapeutic interactions with horses is very wide. With horses it is possible to use the following types of psychotherapeutic interactions (both separately and in combination): observation, cleaning, feeding, riding a horse in reins and interacting with a horse without reins (so-called «soft techniques» of working with a horse, «working in hands» «working on the ground», the techniques of «natural horsemanship», «playing with horses»); horseback movement; psychotherapeutic riding training (Scheidhacker et al., 2002); working with the horse image (projective techniques, art-therapeutic (Lac, 2014) and photo-therapeutic techniques). Combined type of interaction with horses presented so-called «stables environment therapy» (Kern-Godal & Arnevik, 2016).

The effectiveness of horse therapies was experimentally established in disorders with depressive symptoms, autism, in rehabilitation after treatment of abuse syndromes, and in the treatment of anxiety and phobic disorders (Cantin & Marshall-Lucette, 2011; Kemp et al., 2014; Kern-Godal & Arnevik, 2016; Lac, 2016; Lentini & Knox, 2009; Ratliffe & Sanekane, 2009; Scheidhacker et al., 2002; Signal et al., 2013). Therapy with horses is also effective for the development of confidence, psychological well-being in children and adults from "risk groups" (Bachi et al., 2012; Chardonnens, 2009; Trotter et al., 2008). Russel-Martin (2006) showed that therapy with horses is more effective in correcting interpersonal relationships than traditional training techniques in an office setting.

Mutual communication with a horse in specially organized conditions offers great opportunities for the development of partnerships, reflection, and self-discovery. The horse gives a person unique experiences of immediacy in feedback in a non-verbal contact. Hippovention is characterized by the focus on the psychological aspects of human-horse communication (states, thoughts, images, sensations, experiences, associations) that are the subject of discussion and analysis. Provision of reflection, understanding, analyzing and comparing the experience that the client receives in all the exercises and forms of contact with the horse with intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships in real life is the most important condition for hippovention.

Many studies have shown that developing the ability to control a large and powerful animal allows people to explore and understand the feelings of power, control, and success (Brandt, 2013; Kemp et al., 2014; Trotter et al., 2008). A unique experience of interaction with a large animal helps people to overcome fear, to develop empathy, and to develop self-confidence, which allows to create harmonious relations with other people (Ratliffe & Sanekane, 2009). The size of the horse makes a special impression on the person, which represents an opportunity to investigate the personality problems associated with vulnerability, strength, and control (Lentini & Knox, 2009). Being in relationships with horses can provide self-reflection, and can offer powerful healing to relationships. The therapeutic interaction with horses is based on the principles of awareness and contact, the phenomenological approach and the concept of subject-subject relations. The concept of subject-subject relations is based on the notions of interdependence and dialogue, and focuses on authentic coherence and co-creation, which promote favorable and healing relationships and the development of self-awareness. Such positions develop a relationship of mutual respect where there is acceptance of others as they are without imposing their expectations on them, and thanks to this, the therapeutic interaction with horses changes a person (Kirby, 2010). In addition, Pendry et al. (2014) showed that interaction with horses helps to lower the level of stress hormone - cortisol, which is associated with anxiety and tension reactions.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The theoretical analysis allows us to single out the problem of our research. On the one hand, in today's conditions of uncertainty, anxiety and insecurity, many parents have distorted styles of relationships with children for example, problems with supervision. These parents need special help to harmonize the child-parent relationship. This assistance is quite difficult to provide in direct verbal techniques of counseling and training, because parents also have a strong tendency to psychologically defend themselves, poorly assimilate their problems and fears, and create inadequate perception of relationships with their children. On the other hand, in the practice of psychotherapy with horses, there is a lot of convincing evidence that, in interaction with horses, it is possible to uncover, realize and work out many psychological problems (often very deep and severe) bypassing psychological defenses at a non-verbal level. This allows us to assume that a specially developed program based on interaction with horses should show high efficiency in solving problems of parent-child relations correction. We believe that the key problem in the distorted parent-child relationship is the lack of basic trust. The sense of basic trust can be restored by experiencing a direct sense of trust and confidence in one's self and in the child when interacting with horses, as well as the experience of inefficiency and the impossibility of total control. Thus, we have developed Equine assisted growth / learning (EAG/L) program «Control and trust», which allows parents to obtain an experience of contact and trust, and transfer it to their relationship with their children. The goal of this program is to give parents the opportunity to explore the balance of trust and control in the relationship with their children based on experiences gained from interactions with horses. We expect that the experience gained in interaction with horses would allow parents to realize their basic problems in relations with children and correct them.

## **3. Research Questions**

In this study, EAG/L program «Control and trust» held its approbation. This was the first, pilot phase, during which the following questions were examined:

- What kinds of interaction with horses are most effective for the analysis and harmonization of child-parent relations?
- How to measure or evaluate the ongoing personality changes among participants EAG/L program «Control and trust» most effectively and naturally?
- What psychotherapeutic approaches are most appropriate for accompanying the EAG/L program «Control and trust» by a psychologist?

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The study had a practice-oriented focus and the main purpose was to test the effectiveness of the proposed EAG/L program «Control and trust» and to define the optimal model of its sessions, so that in the future they could be offered as a technique of psychological work in horse farms and clubs.

## 5. Research Methods

The program includes conversation techniques, expressive art therapy techniques, exercises in contact with horses (feeding, tactile and kinesthetic contact, driving the horse, etc.). Art-therapeutic techniques were used to establish tactile contact and closeness to the horse (horse decoration), to strengthen the reflection of psychological states, and provide feedback (associative metaphorical photo cards «Horse image» were used).

Approbation of EAG/L program «Control and trust» was conducted at the Kazan International Equestrian complex during five weeks. Eight families (parents with children), two psychologists (one of whom is an expert on horses) and five horses took part in the program. We conducted sessions in groups consisting of one or more families (parents and children). The program included five sessions, 1-2 times a week (by arrangement). The duration of one session was 1.5 -2 hours.

The study was based on the phenomenological approach and the methodology of qualitative analysis. During the approbation of the program, we recorded oral interviews of participants at each session and after passing the entire program. Each participant answered in a free forms on the questions: «What experience of interaction with the horse made you most impressed?»; «What kind of feelings were new for you in this session?»; «What is your behavior in interaction with horses, which you can describe as “effective”, and as “ineffective”?». We intentionally did not ask direct questions about the relationship of parents with their children, so as not to provoke reactions of psychological defense. As a result, parents themselves found analogies between their experience with horses and typical patterns of relationships with children, realizing that they can be adjusted.

## 6. Findings

Based on the result of the first stage of the program approbation, on a qualitative analysis of the feedback content of participants (mostly parents), we identified the types of exercises with horses that were most effective for achieving the goals of awareness and correction of non-harmonious parent-child relations, and also revealed typical manifestations of the participants' psychological dynamics during the course of this program. Examples of feedback received in an interview, which best illustrate our findings, are presented below. The names of the participants in these examples are not given due to the principle of confidentiality.

At the first sessions, it was found out that the parents who are characterized by a hyper-protective style of relations with children showed the greatest anxiety and nervousness in carrying out tasks with horses. Horses in interaction with them immediately began to demonstrate tension, disobedience, which was immediately discussed by the psychologist. Participants were asked to change their condition and again contact the horse in a more relaxed and trusting state. The horse thus gives immediate feedback on the successful completion of the task, changing his behavior, becoming more welcoming and friendly. Such changes made great impressions on the participants, forcing them to realize their basic patterns in their relationships with their children.

Examples of feedback:

*«... At first I was very afraid of horses, and worried that they could cause some harm to my daughter. The horse, as it seemed to me, moved unpredictably and could step on someone's foot, push or*

*bite. But when cleaning the horse, I realized that nothing bad was happening, my daughter quietly cleaned the horse's legs and brushed her bangs and the tail. I calmed down a bit. I was a little uncomfortable, that my daughter was more courageous in dealing with a horse (or careless?). After I tried to calmly approach the horse and relax her by stroking, I completely stopped being afraid. Now I'm sure that this horse loves me, when my daughter and I comb her tail or mane, she is very calm and never tries to offend us ...» (M.K., 35 years old, the mother of a ten-year-old daughter).*

*«...I remember very well how I felt when the horse finally allowed us to hug her head and stroke her forehead. At first, it was not possible for me: she took her head off and walked away. It was useless to insist. When I changed my condition, and relaxed and stopped pestering her with embraces, she came up to me and let me to caress her. It reminded me of the relationship with my daughter: I think that it goes from communicating with me... Maybe I impose my communication too much on her and I must “loosen my grip” a little?...» (A.B., 40 years old, the father of a thirteen-year-old daughter).*

We also found that the important effect is overcoming the fear of the horse among those participants who at the beginning of the sessions were afraid and distrustful. Overcoming the fear of a horse was experienced as a key moment in the formation of a sense of basic trust in the broad context of the relationship, both to itself and to others. The key exercises were «horse cleaning», «horse decoration», and «horse feeding from the palm». With these, participants received tactile experiences in contact with the horse, and felt the possibility of the influence of their personality on such a large and powerful animal and experienced trust from the horse to them. The psychologists accompanying the classes paid special attention to manifestations of trust or mistrust of the horse to a person in these and other exercises.

Example of feedback:

*«...At first I was very afraid of the horse: I was afraid that she would bite me or hit me. Now this fear has completely passed. I really like to feed her with my hands and feel how gently she takes little pieces from my palm. This careful attitude of the horse to me gives rise to the same cherished feelings for her. I really like to scratch her neck and see her pleasure. I am now much more affectionate and caring towards my children. Now we began to embrace more often. The previous tension in relations with relatives disappeared...» (B.D., 30 years old, mother of 8 and 11-year-old sons).*

The movement - lying on the back of the horse (the exercise «Let the horse carry you»), provided a strong influence on the formation of a basic sense of trust. This exercise involved a strong, calm, phlegmatic horse of the Russian Arden breed with a broad back and slow movements. Participants were supposed to lie in a relaxed state on the back of a horse, which was slowly led by the reins. In addition, participants in this exercise were asked to close their eyes. According to feedback, this exercise profoundly changed the attitudes of people to themselves and towards the assessments of other people, and showed different life situations among the majority of participants, especially among parents and children with tendencies of perfectionism, control over the situation.

Example of feedback:

*«... Unusual feelings. At first, it was very strange and scary, but then I was able to relax completely and I seemed to fuse with this horse. It is difficult to explain my feelings in words ... they were somehow fabulous. It seems to me that this experience has greatly influenced me, and I now easily accept what has previously hurt or irritated me. For example, before I was very upset that my daughter is not*

*slim, not pretty, but now I see her individual attractiveness. I really like my new state, it is freer ...»*  
(E.M., 40 years old, mother of 16-year-old daughter).

Exercises consisting in tasks to lead a horse in reins along a certain predetermined way, stop and again move forward or backward, were directed to work with the awareness of the tendencies to control and contact. Horses refused to perform movements with too intense and excessive control and they could not be moved even when a person applied very great physical strength. In addition, the horse could go on its own route. In these cases, the issues of strength control and its necessity, as well as balance of control and trust, were discussed with the participants. If the participant adequately perceived his mistakes and corrected his attitude to the situation, the exercise with driving the horse in the reins was performed well by him. Some parents needed several sessions to master this experience. It is also interesting to single out an exercise in which the parents sat on the back of a horse that the child was leading in the reins. This exercise was proposed at latest sessions, and it allowed parents to build a sense of trust in their child, reduce feelings of anxiety for him and reduce the constant tight control. This was a powerful metaphor of trust in relation to his child and contributed to a sense of confidence in him.

Examples of feedback:

*«...I was able to feel for the first time how much I have a tendency to control. I could not loosen the reins, although I already saw that it was useless to restrain and pull. Wherein my son very easily coped with this task. He just walked a little ahead of the horse, very calm and confident. I can learn from him ...»* (B.T., 35 years old, the father of an eight-year-old son).

*«...The most striking impression for me was when my daughter was driving a big horse in the reins, on whose back I was sitting astride. At first, I was a little tense, but then I was seized by completely unusual feelings. This is so impressive when your well-being is in the hands of your child, because usually in life it is on the contrary. My daughter very confidently and carefully fulfilled this task, and I realized that she is a very responsible and reliable person ...»* (C.P., 42 years old, the mother of a ten-year-old daughter).

Associative metaphorical photo cards «Horse image» showed high efficiency in the activation of reflection and awareness of feelings in the obtained experience of interaction with horses. Prior to the session and after the completion of the training sessions with horses, participants were asked to choose from the set of photographs the image of the horses, which were associated to their current psychological state. Comparison of the two images - before and after classes - gave a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the changes that have taken place, and greatly facilitated the verbalization of experience and mental states.

## **7. Conclusion**

Approbation showed that EAG/L program «Control and trust» allow participants to gain experience of warm and trusting relationship with horses and, thanks to their immediate feedback, we can identify the unwitting attitudes in relationships with others, fears and clamps, and negative patterns. Through participation in the program, parents received a unique experience of self-awareness, their feelings and relationships with the environment on the basis of experience with horses and methods of art therapy that acted as a metaphor for their parental feelings and relationships.



In addition, it is a great way to spend time with the family, get positive emotion and stress reduction, but most importantly - the opportunity for parents to learn more about themselves and their children and understand their relationships.

In the following stages of testing program, we plan to increase the sample and included psychological questionnaires in the study, to measure parent-child relationship, trust and other parameters of interpersonal relations in order to realize the quantitative analysis of this program's effectiveness.

## Acknowledgements

The work is performed according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.

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