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Horses and Youth (H.A.Y.): A Not-So-Typical Approach to At-Risk Programming

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Horses and Youth (H.A.Y.): A Not-So-Typical Approach to At-Risk Programming

Abstract

Life skills development is essential in helping young people acquire the necessary skills that enable them to reach their fullest potential. At-risk youth especially are in need of developing these skills. But what is the best method for improving life skills of at-risk audiences? The study described here examined providing life skills learning through the 4-H horse program, typically a non-traditional program for urban youth, over an extended period of time rather than as a short-term interest project. The study included a comparison group that received life skills development training over a short-term.

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Background

The four major categories of risk behavior in adolescence are identified as drug and alcohol abuse; teen pregnancy and unsafe sexual practices; school under achievement and/or drop out; and delinquency, crime, and violence (Lerner, 1995). The "New Jersey Report Card" education data from 2000 indicates that Atlantic County at-risk communities have a significant rate of high school dropouts and poor attendance--Atlantic City had an 18.9% drop out rate, and Pleasantville had an 11.5% rate compared to the state average of 3%. Though Atlantic County has improved its ranking for juvenile arrests, it still ranks 13th out of 21 counties, and the juvenile commitment rates account for 7.1% of the state average.

Youth problem behaviors and poverty are interrelated; this "comorbidity" is of historic proportions (Lerner, 1995). Child poverty leads to early school drop out, lack of job preparedness, and arrests for crimes, often of a violent nature (Schorr, 1997). In Atlantic County, an estimated 15.4% of children (2000 Kids Count, New Jersey) live below the poverty level, and there has been a 40% increase in juvenile assaults and misdemeanors since 1999.

Introduction

The goal of the H.A.Y. (Horses and Youth program) was to provide prevention strategies for young people by helping them gain competencies, self-confidence, group interaction capabilities, leadership skills, and opportunities to explore non-traditional vocations. Juvenile offenders and at-risk youth, ages 12 ? 18 took part in the four phases that make up H.A.Y.--life skills development, horse care and management, horsemanship, and aftercare.

Exposing at-risk youth to horses and horsemanship may seem naïve until one realizes that the horse industry in New Jersey is valued at over \$6.5 billion. Future careers are not the only possible outcomes. By learning responsibility and respect for a 1,000-pound horse, youth will also learn responsibility for their own actions and self-respect. In addition, the horse may provide the initial factor of trust for at-risk youth. The uniqueness and curiosity of working with horses are used to develop competencies in both life and project skills.

The main objectives of H.A.Y. are:

- To gain a better understanding of whether long-term involvement in a non-traditional project for urban youth made a significant impact on developing life skills.
- To improve anger management and conflict resolution skills.
- To increase self-awareness and self-worth.
- To increase knowledge of horses, their care and management, and to develop horsemanship skills.
- To improve problem-solving and leadership skills.
- To improve skills in working with and relating to others.
- To reduce recidivism (offenses of equal or greater extent) by those involved in all four components of H.A.Y.

Materials and Methods

The H.A.Y. participants received 6 weeks of life skills lessons, in addition to 26 weeks of horse care and knowledge lessons, group building activities, and horseback riding. By offering only the life skills component to a comparison group of youth, we attempted to assess whether or not long-term involvement in a non-traditional project for urban youth could make a significant impact on developing life skills above and beyond what could be learned through a life skills curriculum.

Strategies for the development and implementing of H.A.Y. focused on the three general characteristics of effective programs identified by Roth (1997). These characteristics are: 1) the more features of the framework, the more likely to promote positive youth outcomes; 2) caring adult-youth relations are central to program effectiveness; and 3) program sustainability is related to program effectiveness.

Life Skills Development--Component 1

This component provided action-oriented activities that address the areas of understanding self, increasing self-esteem, character development, communication skills, interpersonal relationships, and critical thinking skills. 4-H SPACES (Barker, McEwan, Mather, & Warner, 1991) and Talking with TJ (Halper & Richardson, 1993) curricula lessons and Character CountsSM (Josephson, 1993) materials were implemented or adapted to teach this component.

Horse Knowledge, Care, and Management--Component 2

Basic knowledge of horse breeds and characteristics, horse terminology, and equipment were initially taught. Building on the basics, participants learned proper selection and uses of horses, nutrient requirements, and management skills needed to care for a horse. 4-H Cooperative Curriculum System (4-HCCS Horse Design Team, 1998) project manuals from the 4-H Skills for Life: Animal Science Series for the horse project were used for developing lesson plans and activities.

Horsemanship--Component 3

This phase of the program consisted of activities that include grooming and saddling, equipment selection and care, and riding. Certified riding instructors experienced in teaching riding lessons to youth provided this component of the program.

Aftercare--Component 4

A personal growth plan was developed based on individual Life Skill Accomplishment Summary Reports that reflected personal characteristics, skills and aptitudes, and career considerations. The personal growth plan was used for assessing continued progress in life skills development.

Participants were recruited from Atlantic City and Pleasantville through Vision 2000, the Ministers' Home Detention Program, and the Atlantic City Housing Authority's afterschool programs. A comparison group of youth involved in the Boys and Girls Club Summer Day Camp program took part in the life skills component for 6 weeks.

H.A.Y. began with 36 participants. The group met 2 days a week for the first 6 weeks. Saturdays they met on the farm working directly with the horses. On Thursdays, the group met for the Life Skills. For the final 20 weeks, they met only on the farm.

Thirty youth began the 6-week program consisting only of the Life Skills Component of the project. The group met as part of the Boys and Girls Club Summer Day Camp. The life skills component was equal in duration and utilized the same lesson plans that were used with the H.A.Y. group.

Participants completed a Horses and Youth Life Skills Evaluation Record at the beginning and end of the program. The self-evaluation instrument was adapted from Penn State's Life Skill Evaluation Record based on the targeted objectives of H.A.Y. The Life Skills Evaluation Record asked each

participant to rate themselves on six life skills based on the objectives of the program. The Likert scale of measurement was 1=None, 2=A Little, 3=Some, 4=A Lot. They were also asked to select three out of six life skills they would like to improve on or learn how to develop.

At the completion of each program, they were then asked to evaluate themselves again on how they performed the skills. The H.A.Y. group did not complete the Life Skills Evaluation Record until the completion of the 26 weeks, even though the life skills component ended earlier in the program.

The self-evaluations were analyzed using the H.A.Y. Life Skills Accomplishment Records Summary Report Form, which was adapted from Penn State's materials on Targeting Life Skills.

Adult and teen volunteers were recruited to assist with implementation of the activities and to serve as positive role models for the participants identified by collaborating agencies. It was a goal of the project to have the group form a 4-H club, with the volunteers serving as leaders at the completion of H.A.Y.

Results

After the first 4 weeks of H.A.Y., five youth dropped out, and after 11 weeks, eight more dropped the program. A total of 23 youth--seven female, 16 male, grades 4 to 8--completed the 26-week program. Only 21 youth, 12 female, nine male, grades 4 to 8, completed the 6-week comparison program, and results were tabulated only on those 21 individuals. There was a 36% dropout rate for the H.A.Y. group and a 30% dropout rate for the comparison group. These dropout rates are not atypical for youth in this at-risk community. The H.A.Y. participants who dropped out attributed the requirement for general horse care and management as a major factor, which could account for the slighter higher dropout rate for this group.

After 6 months, 21% of the H.A.Y. participants were still actively involved with horses, and 100% participants remained in school.

H.A.Y. Group

Nineteen participants (83%) listed Leadership as one of the three skills for improvement and/or development. Out of the group, 12 participants (52%) listed Anger Management/Conflict Resolution and Self-Awareness as one of the three skills for improvement. Problem Solving was selected by 11 of the participants (48%) as a targeted life skill.

Comparison Group

A total of 18 youth (86%) were most interested in Self-Awareness/Worth development, and 67% were concerned about Anger Management/Conflict Resolution. Problem Solving ranked third overall with 52% of the participants interested in increased development.

Both the H.A.Y. group and Comparison group participants were similar in the selections of Self-Awareness, Anger Management/Conflict Resolution, and Problem Solving as the skills most wanted to improve or learn. The H.A.Y. group differed in that the number-one selected skill was Leadership, which was not a highly rated skill selection for the Comparison group.

Tabulation of the H.A.Y. participants' mean pre and post Life Skills Records rating showed significant increase in anger management, leadership, self-awareness, problem solving, interpersonal skills, and workplace skills ($p < .05$).

Table 1.
Pre-Post Ratings of HAY Group

	Pre Rating Mean	Post Rating Mean	Skills Gained Mean
Anger Management/ Conflict Resolution	2	2.8	0.8*
Leadership	2.6	3.5	0.7*
Self-Awareness/Worth	2.9	3.9	1.0*
Problem Solving	2.7	3.7	1.0*

Interpersonal Skills	2.4	3.7	0.7*
Workplace/Marketable Skills	1.9	3.8	1.8*
Note: Self-Ratings on a scale of 1 to 4; 1= None; 2=A little; 3=Some; 4=A Lot. SD = standard deviation, <i>t</i> = distribution. * <i>t</i> (22) = 1.717, <i>p</i> < .05, two-tailed.			

In the comparison group, tabulation of mean pre and post ratings showed a significant increase in the areas of leadership and anger management ($p < .05$).

Table 2.
Pre-Post Ratings of Comparison Group

	Pre Rating Mean	Post Rating Mean	Skills Gained Mean
Anger Management/ Conflict Resolution	2.6	2.8	0.2*
Leadership	3	3.4	0.4*
Self-Awareness/Worth	2	3.4	1.2
Problem Solving	3.2	2.7	-0.5
Interpersonal Skills	3	2.7	-0.3
Workplace/Marketable Skills	3.2	2.8	-0.4
Note: Self-Ratings on a scale of 1 to 4; 1= None; 2=A little; 3=Some; 4=A Lot. SD = standard deviation, <i>t</i> = distribution. * <i>t</i> (17) = 2.110, <i>p</i> < .05, two-tailed.			

A comparison of the average means of skills gained for the two groups showed a significant difference between the H.A.Y. group and Comparison group means for anger management, problem solving, interpersonal skills, and workplace/marketable skills ($p < .05$).

Table 3.
Gained Skills Paired Differences--H.A.Y.: Comparison

Variable	Mean	SD	<i>t</i>
Anger Management/Conflict Resolution	.39	.61	2.715*
Leadership	.56	1.29	1.822
Self-Awareness/Worth	- .11	1.49	- .316
Problem Solving	1.28	1.78	3.053*
Interpersonal Skills	2.11	1.13	7.913*
Workplace/Marketable Skills	3.17	1.04	12.879*

Note: Self-Ratings on a scale of 1 to 4; 1= None; 2=A little; 3=Some; 4=A Lot. SD = standard deviation, t = distribution. $*t(17) = 2.110, p < .05, two-tailed.$

Demonstrated improvement in anger management and interpersonal skills in one young man who participated in H.A.Y. was noted by volunteer and paid staff. His teacher, the Housing Authority, and Vision 2000 recommended this young man based on his previous trouble in these areas. His grandmother, who is his legal guardian, commented on his ability to concentrate more at home and noted that he no longer seemed to need to have everything go his way. Today, this young man is a registered 4-H horse project member and actively involved in the county's teen group. Recently, he gave a presentation to New Jersey's professional 4-H association.

One Saturday an adult male volunteer asked if he could have a few moments with the participants. He brought out two horses with very obvious different characteristics in color, size, and conformation. He asked the group to describe the horses, which they did. He then asked if they were both horses and deserved the same treatment. The group agreed they did. He then briefly, but very effectively, stated that each of the participants was different, too, and like horses, they all needed to be treated with equal respect. This act by the volunteer was an indication he had taken ownership in the program and also helped with the problem of the participants teasing one another.

Two volunteers and a paid student assistant started a 4-H horse club for the interested participants at the close of the project. The club is still operational, two members participated in their first 4-H Fair in 2002, and one is still actively involved.

Conclusion

In comparing the two groups, the group that participated in the entire 26 week H.A.Y. project did show increases in all life skills areas as indicated through evaluation of pre and post Life Skill Record data. Those in the Comparison group had significant increases in two categories, anger management and self-awareness.

Often, pre and post self-evaluations do result in lowered ratings. This is usually attributed to participants having limited knowledge at the beginning of the program that prevents them from assessing their baseline knowledge accurately (Kohn & Rockwell, 1989). This could be a possible explanation for the decreased level of knowledge noted in three of the six areas for the comparison group. Other possible causes could be the difference in environments and opportunities to travel out of the city or negative attitudes toward the leader or the program.

One possible explanation for the greater improvement of the H.A.Y. group over the Comparison group was that they had more time to use the new skills. At the end of the 26 weeks, they really felt they had improved in these areas of life skill development, having time to actual use the skills and be reinforced for demonstrating use of these skills. In retrospect, having the H.A.Y. group complete post self-evaluations at the end of the 6-week lessons on life skills and at the conclusion of the entire program would have provided additional data on whether the opportunity to continue with activities that required using the skills had an impact on the increased in reported knowledge.

Though interpersonal and workplace skills were not selected as desired skills for improvement by the H.A.Y. participants, they showed significant increased ratings at the conclusion of the program. The weekly farm sessions that stressed teamwork due to sharing of equipment and horses can be considered a relevant factor in this result. In addition, the youth were exposed to numerous careers within the horse industry through the variety of guest presenters.

The combination of non-traditional experiential learning over an extended period with opportunities to put those skills into practical situations may be an effective method for improved learning of essential life skills. The key seems to be including life skills development in project-related experiential activities rather than simply providing lessons specifically focusing on life skills. The ability to relate or incorporate life skills learning in ongoing project work seems to have a marked positive impact on targeted life skills. Further study utilizing different 4-H project areas incorporating life skills training over extended periods could prove beneficial in determining if it was the impact of working with horses for this audience that was the deciding factor or the method of implementation.

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