

Mobilizing Community Resources to Measure Impacts of Equine Assisted Learning on At-Risk Adolescents in Rural Montana

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Lauren Davis, Christine Rogers-Stanton (*Montana State University, USA*)

The overall well-being of today's youth are of concern due to chronic stress and related mental and physical health issues (Cook-Cottone, 2017). In Montana, risk factors associated with chronic stress and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) most commonly stem from issues surrounding poverty and rurality, such as substance abuse, neglect, physical and emotional abuse, and lack of access to quality resources intended to mitigate these risk factors (Burke-Harris, 2018; Lukens, 2017; Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, 2017). Improved perceptions of self-efficacy have been shown to mitigate the risk factors of ACEs and chronic stress through increases in educational attainment, which often serves as a proxy for student wellness (Cooper, 2015). However, little research exists to connect measures of self-efficacy to at-risk youth, and even less empirical evidence is present regarding the outcomes and efficacy of equine assisted learning (EAL) with at-risk adolescents; EAL, however, has been shown to decrease stress hormone levels in youth (Pendry et al., 2014). Therefore, this research is significant in that it aims to measure at-risk adolescent perceptions of self-efficacy and other measures of mental health and wellness through equine assisted learning; in this way, this study seeks to mitigate chronic stress-related outcomes that perpetuate risk factors for youth in Montana. By mobilizing resources from a rural at-risk youth advocacy agency and equine learning non-profit agency, the researchers aim to create long-term, sustainable relationships that utilize equine assisted learning to support the needs of rural Montana youth.