The Use of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy in Co-Parenting Interventions

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Faculty of the Adler Graduate School

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Degree of Master of Arts in

Adlerian Counseling and Psychotherapy

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July 2012
Abstract

Nearly half of all families in the United States will experience the dissolution of their family as they know it. With this dissolution, there is a myriad of reactions and changes in psychological wellbeing. The level of conflict between parents affects how great or how little the impact of divorce is on the wellbeing of the child. In an attempt to reduce the impact of divorce or separation on the wellbeing of children, the answer has been to suggest, and even court order, parents to receive co-parenting education. This co-parenting education is generally conducted in a classroom setting, with no real opportunity to practice the new tools and techniques being taught. The introduction of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy to existing co-parenting education may just be the answer. Equine Assisted Psychotherapy provides parents a hands-on approach to becoming better co-parents.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am especially thankful to my family. To my husband, this accomplishment would have been nearly impossible without your love and support. To my children, thank you for your sacrifices, your patience, your flexibility, and for being you! I love you. To my mom, for my introduction to the field of psychology, your encouragement and support – I am forever grateful. And the rest of the bunch – I cannot thank you enough for the various ways in which you all supported me!

To Acres for Life. Lynn and Heather, you are both amazing women who have helped me to grow in so many ways professionally and personally. Thank you for being incredible mentors, and friends. To the rest of the core team – I am so thankful to have you as a part of my life. To the horses, thank you for allowing me join your herd.

To the faculty of Adler Graduate School, thank you for providing the Adlerian foundation, for your encouragement, and for giving me courage to be imperfect. To Dr. William Premo and Trish Anderson, for your support and guidance with this project. To my supervisor Claire Stuckey and Pillsbury House Integrative Health Clinic, I thank you for the opportunity to grow and define who I am as an Adlerian counselor.
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Statement of the Problem

It is estimated that approximately one half of recently contracted marriages will end in divorce (Kenny, 2000; Wesolowski, Nelson, & Bing, 2008). As a result, many children experience the dissolution of their “family” as they know it. Divorce is a very unsettling experience, for both the adult, and children. According to Ross and Wynne (2010), research has shown that most children interpret their parent’s divorce as a stressful life event.

Research has examined the effects divorce has on children. Children experience grief and loss, and can have a variety of reactions and changes in psychological well-being, and many of the side effects of divorce are exacerbated by the level of conflict between parents (Ross).

A great amount of research has surfaced with regard to the psychological effects of divorce on children. Co-parenting intervention education classes and counseling are available in every state, and even online. Divorce courts are court-ordering parents to receive co-parenting interventions. There appears to be a correlation between the three, but this writer was unable to find any connection through research, and further investigation as to whether or not there is a connection would need to be done.

Most of the education courses offered to parents who seek or are ordered to obtain parenting education are in classroom like settings. They provide a lot of information and instruction, but no real opportunities for parents to practice what they are learning. This method of education poses certain limitations, and leaves many parents frustrated and discouraged. This frustration of the parent, most likely is carried over to into family interactions, and only perpetuates existing stress experienced by the children.
Parents need to have the opportunity to practice the skills learned, and apply the education received from co-parenting instruction in a safe environment, before, or while, putting those skills to practice in real life with their children. Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) may be the answer. Parents can address and alter maladaptive co-parenting strategy and behaviors, in a therapeutically safe environment, using an experiential modality, thus becoming better co-parents.

**Purpose of this Literature Review**

The purpose of this study is to examine the use of EAP in co-parenting interventions and how it affects parental emotional stress. This writer posits that EAP Co-parenting interventions will offer a new approach to assisting parents who struggle with healthy co-parenting skills to better meet their child’s needs and have overall healthier families.

**Definition of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy**

For the purpose of this study, Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) is an experiential therapy done with either groups or individuals, and involves horses. EAP is practiced 100 % on the ground, meaning it does not involve riding.

**Definition of Emotional Stress**

Stress is a multifaceted word, with a definition unique to each individual. It has both an emotional and physical component, which often co-occur. For the purpose of this paper, Emotional Stress will primarily be defined as anger and depression, which are a direct result of separation or divorce. It includes anger and stress of both parents and children.
Definition of Co-Parenting Styles

There are three forms of co-parenting styles: cooperative, conflicted and parallel (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Co-operative parenting is characterized by, frequent communication, uniform rules and expectations, flexible boundaries, and flexible scheduling. Conflicted co-parenting is characterized by, continued parental hostility, concern with the other parent’s ability to parent, different perceptions of child rearing and household rules, and contested legal custody issues. Parallel co-parenting is when parents simply ignore each other.

Equine Assisted Psychotherapy

Animals in general have been put to use in therapeutic settings for some time now. Many people have a special bond to animals, and horses are no exception. It is this bond that has become the focus of the healing arts and therapeutic community (Russell-Martin, 2006).

Equines Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) is an experiential therapy that incorporates horses to help facilitate the therapy session. EAP tends to have a fewer number of sessions due to its intensity and solution focused approach.

Horses in Therapy

Horses are unique in several ways as compared to other therapeutic animals. Both people and horses are greatly impacted by social relationships. The horse is a large, sensitive being, and has great awareness of its surroundings. Horses have the ability to recognize incongruence between behavior and emotion. They are authentic by nature, therefore are able to sense a lack of authenticity displayed by the human. Their sensitivity to nonverbal stimulus gives them an amazing ability to read people (Henderson, 2006).
Essentially, the horse is a 1200-pound fuzzy mirror that reflects the emotional states expressed by the human in contact with them.

Horses give almost immediate, and honest feedback, necessary for the clients working with them. This feedback allows for the client to see what they need to change in order to achieve a partnership with the horse and accomplish the task at hand (Henderson).

Due to the experiential nature of EAP, clients have the opportunity to learn more about themselves by participating in activities with horses and then experimenting with changing those behaviors, thoughts, and feelings that were not conducive to the activity. Horse knowledge, or horsemanship, are neither required, nor the focus of EAP (Suarez, 2005). All activities are ground work activities, meaning that no riding is involved. It is believed that clients are better able to formulate solutions to their problems when the horse becomes a part of the solution, and is an instrument in the process, not the focus (Suarez). Even those who dread working with horses will learn something (Christian, 2005; Schneider, 2005).

Another reason for ground-work activities is that the client and the horse are on an equal level. When being ridden, the horse is responding to cues that it has been trained to respond to. There is also more emphasis on instruction and direction. With riding, there is more of a sense of security and predictability, and some element of control on behalf of the rider (Suarez). Horses for many are unpredictable, and often intimidating. As with all therapy, change does not occur when the client is secure and the environment is predictable. EAP activities for many clients are frustrating and challenging, which allows
for the client’s real emotions and typical behaviors to surface in a way that traditional talk therapy does not.

Horses and the props used in EAP provide excellent metaphors for life as it seen from the client’s perspective. Using the horse-human metaphors created by the client, the therapist can then find common narrative patterns, and can then discuss those issues with the client (Russell-Martin). For example, a client may be asked to lead a horse from “Point A” to “Point B”. The client may find themselves ineffectively moving the horse, while holding on to the end of the lead. They may describe this experience as “chaotic” and “being at the end of their rope”. The therapist may at this time inquire about other times the client felt chaotic and at the end of their rope, and how they resolved that experience in the past. This conversation then possibly opens up to new methods of conflict resolution or encouragement of past successes.

**Traditional Therapy**

Traditional therapy can be as vast in style and effectiveness as the therapist being hired. According to LaCombe (2011), there are over 300 counseling treatments and techniques, and most are tied to a specific counseling theory. In traditional therapy, there are several aspects to whether or not a particular therapy works for each individual client. There must be some element of rapport and trust between the client and therapist. Depending on the therapist, the client, and their chemistry together, will determine how quickly that rapport and trust is developed. Some theories and techniques that work well for one client will not work well for others. Some therapies can be effective in relatively little time depending on the issue presented, while other therapies can go on for years.
The writer’s purpose for including this section in this paper is not to discuss the various types of therapies, theories, and techniques, but to make note of the vast array of services available in the counseling world. The writer would also like to note a few of the similarities across the span of traditional therapy.

Most therapy occurs in an office, face to face with the therapist and is recognized as “talk therapy”. The therapeutic environment, again, varies with the therapist. Some offices may be more warm and inviting, some busy and chaotic, and others are more sterile. Regardless of the environment, the client is one on one with the therapist.

Traditional therapy generally requires talking and self-disclosure. The amount of disclosure, and when the client discloses, again depends on many factors. Clients can be intimidated, and feel judged when asked to disclose personal information. It is not uncommon for clients to take the first few sessions to get to know their counselor before getting to the heart of why they sought out counseling.

Summary

No single theory is comprehensive enough to account for the complexities of human behavior (Suarez). EAP, however differs in one major way from traditional therapies. EAP focuses on using the social dynamics of equine social behaviors to help individuals solve their own issues while focusing on an external object, the horse (Russell-Martin). Both the client’s body and mind are engaged in the process of EAP. Clients may also be more comfortable discussing issues of emotion when involved in an equine activity verses being directly in front of a therapist. Or, if the client chooses not to speak, therapy can still be successful when done with horses.
Emotional Stress

Divorce is a major life change for the people who experience it. Those who experience divorce have higher rates of psychological stress than that of married couples (Portnoy, 2006). There is strong clinical and empirical support to show that divorce is considered a severe stressor that influences mental and physical health, as well as economic and social factors (Rohde-Brown & Rudestam, 2011). An array of feelings and emotions are felt during and after divorce or separation. These emotions negatively affect both, parents and their children. This study will look at Emotional Stress as it relates to two main emotions: anger and depression.

Anger

According to Rohde-Brown and Rudestam, at least 56% to 62% of first marriages will end in divorce. Many divorced couples experience negative feelings toward their ex-spouse long after the divorce has been finalized (Rye, Flock, Heim, Olszewski, & Traina, 2004). One of those feelings is anger. Experiencing anger toward an ex-spouse in not entirely harmful. Research has shown that when appropriately expressed, can be beneficial (Rye, et al.). There is, however, evidence that also shows anger as being harmful, and has been linked to physical and mental health problems (Rye, et al.). Anger, is generally a destructive entity that brings many individuals and families into the clinician’s office (Anthony, 2002).

Portnoy (2010) reports half of all divorced couples with children are amicable divorces, with the other 50% being hostile. The parents of the later group are unable to express their emotions, primarily anger, in ways that are healthy for their children. Also
in this group are couples so enraged with one another, that they seek revenge and post litigation for years, dragging their children with them.

Children then, become victims of their parent’s anger. According to Roseman (2007), children become victims in the follow ways:

[Children] are usually least empowered in family change, are easily manipulated by one or both parents, lack the sophistication to understand their emotions and complexities of divorce, are unable to access the emotional language required to express themselves effectively, and are often forced to exercise painful loyalties by choosing one parent over the other. (p. 290)

Anger greatly impacts both the parents and children of divorce.

**Depression**

Another commonly associated feeling with divorce is depression. This is likely attributed to the high levels of grief and loss experienced by both the parents and children of divorced families. Loss in divorce can be great.

Depression as a result of divorce appears to be greater for women. Research has shown that negative life events and depression in women are strongly connected (Cano & O’Leary, 2000). A woman’s standard of living usually declines more than that of men. This results in more moves to new residences, generally in poorer neighborhoods (Portnoy, 2010).

A loss of identity during divorce is also a common experience (Roseman, 2007). This loss of identity creates confusion as to what it means to be a divorced man or woman, a single mother or father, or even the definition of family.
Research demonstrates that a child’s mental health is influenced by parental psychopathology and parental divorce (Ross & Wynne, 2010). Pilowsky, Wickramaratne, and Weissman (2006) found that children with depression and anxiety are linked more strongly to maternal rather than paternal depression. Not surprising considering 85% of children of divorced parents live with their mothers (Roseman, 2007).

Research also shows that children of divorce display higher levels of depression and anxiety, lower self-esteem, and seek counseling services more frequently. Girls from divorced families have been found to be significantly more depressed than girls from intact families, while boys tend are more hopeless and discouraged. Portnoy also reports that these children have greater levels of depression that continue into adulthood, with both men and women reporting lower levels of psychological well-being (Portnoy, 2010).

Summary

While there is a spectrum of feelings felt during and post divorce, two common emotional stressors faced by parents and children alike, are anger and depression. The correlation is simple, depressed and angry parents are highly likely to have angry and depressed children. Parents cannot effectively parent, and help their children through their emotions if they are consumed with their own anger and depression.

Co-Parenting

It is widely agreed upon that the two years following a divorce have the greatest adjustment period, and are most difficult in terms of acute reactions. The two years post-divorce can have the most intense challenges, but is also the window of opportunity for positive change (Portnoy 2008).
Conflict between parents is often a contributing factor in divorce. If conflict was a factor prior to divorce, it is almost an inevitable factor post divorce. Kenny reports that in some families, conflict lessens after the divorce as the anger between parents subsides. For some families, the conflict never goes away. Parents may use their children as a way to continue to display their hostility toward one another in ways such as asking them to deliver messages to the other parent, asking intrusive questions, inappropriate questions about the other parent, and creating an environment in which it is not safe for the child to have loving emotions of the other parent (Kenny, 2010).

As more research has been conducted on the impacts of divorce on children, more interventions have been put in place to help negate some of the negative impacts caused by divorce. Stressors commonly associated with divorce put children at risk for experiencing depression, anxiety, academic difficulties, conduct problems, psychological maladjustment, low self esteem, and problems in social relations (Macie & Stolberg, 2003).

There is much diversity in the nature of divorce, and thus much diversity in how children experience divorce. According to Macie and Stolberg (2003):

- Healthy adjustment for children of divorce has been associated with effective and cooperative co-parenting and minimal inter-parent conflict.
- The quality of the post-divorce parenting relationship and the parenting skills of each parent have been identified as the most significant contributors to child adjustment and are among the factors that clinicians can reasonably hope to impact. (p.90)
One way to intervene in those environments that are not conducive to healthy adjustment for a child is Co-Parenting Counseling. Three models of co-parenting have been identified: conflicted, cooperative, and parallel (Hetherington).

**Conflicted Parenting Model**

Hetherington and Kelly (2002) defined conflicted co-parenting as when separated couples and ex-spouses make hateful comments about each other, seek to undermine each other’s relationship with the child, and fight openly in front of the child. Aside from being damaging, constant put-downs of the other parent may backfire, producing resentment and a spirited defense of the criticized parent by the child (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Conflicted co-parents are the most damaging to the child. When co-parents are conflicted, the child is at risk of serious and lasting emotional harm. This risk is increased exponentially when the child is triangulated between their parent’s conflict (Garber, 2004). Conflicted co-parents may unknowingly force children to take sides in their disagreements, resulting in the child feeling triangulated. It is not uncommon for this child to feel “caught in the middle”. Adolescents who feel triangulated have higher levels of parental conflict and lower levels of cooperation and communication between parents (Macie & Stolberg, 2003).

**Cooperative Co-Parenting**

Cooperative co-parenting arrangements are where parents put the well-being of their children first. These parents talk over the children’s problems, coordinate household rules and child-rearing practices, and adapted their schedules to fit their children’s needs (Macie & Stolberg, 2003).
Macie and Stolberg (2003) note that higher levels of monitoring, warmth, parent-child communication, and consistent discipline have been associated with fewer psychological and behavioral problems for children. Children are more healthy in general when they have a positive relationship with two parents who have good parenting skills and who work together cooperatively for the good of their children.

Cooperative co-parenting can be difficult to obtain, but is believed to best support the needs of children. Macie’s study states:

A strong co-parenting relationship requires mutual respect and support between the parents and a healthy pattern of communication and cooperation. It has been suggested that when parents can manage their conflicts in a non-hostile way and communicate effectively regarding parenting, children are more likely to recover from the stress and pain that their parent’s divorce inevitable presents (Macie & Stolberg, 2003, p. 92).

Co-parenting interventions can help to move co-parents closer to this model of co-parenting.

Parallel Co-Parenting

Parallel co-parenting is the most common form of co-parenting and is the easiest to implement (Macie & Stolberg, 2003). In parallel co-parenting, parents ignore each other. They do not interfere with each other’s parenting, nor do they make any coordinated parenting strategies. Parents usually communicate with one another through their children.

This style of co-parenting however, is not without problems. The lack of parenting communication opens the door to issues and complications, and as children get
older monitoring can be difficult. Children may manipulate or play one parent against the other when they are the messenger between their parents.

Communication is one of the most important qualities of any relationship. Research demonstrates that there appears to be a link between the quality of communication and parental interaction. A lack of communication is the biggest issue with this form of parenting. According to Wesolowski, even after couples separate, communication is still an important issue when children are involved. Communication involves such things as childcare negotiation, transportation to and from extra curricular activities, vacations and travel, etc. Wesolowski also notes that conflict is decreased and support increased when strategies are more cooperative and less competitive (Wesolowski, Nelson & Bing, 2002).

**Summary**

The best option for co-parenting as it relates to a child’s wellbeing and psychological and emotional health is the cooperative co-parenting style. While more effective than conflicted co-parenting, parallel parenting is still less then ideal, and potentially damaging and challenging in other ways. Yet, parallel parenting is most common style of co-parenting, and generally considered an acceptable for of co-parenting.

**Summary**

Divorce for 50% of couples appears to be inevitable. With divorce can come a whole host of emotions, feelings, and behaviors, all of which are part of the healing and coping process. These emotions are not exclusive to the parent, but are often also felt by the children of divorced parents.
Common emotions surrounding divorce are anger and depression, and both are expressed by both adults and children, but for differing reasons. It is not uncommon for angry parents to lash out at one another, using the child as a weapon. The child feels angry and resentful for being put “in the middle”.

There is great loss in divorce, often resulting in depression. There is a loss of self-identity, family identity, homes, friends, etc. Divorce also puts new stressors in place, such as financial stress, challenges of being a single parent, and the ex-partner or ex-spouse moving into new a relationship. All of these things, plus many others, contribute to the depression felt after a divorce.

While the outcome of divorce cannot be controlled, how a parent perceives and reacts to divorce can be. Many parents are not aware of how their actions and reactions affect their children. Many parents simply do not know what it means to co-parent, nor do they have the skills or the knowledge necessary to successfully co-parent.

As more research became available surrounding the effects of divorce on children, it was apparent that an intervention was needed to increase the well-being of children. A solution to this problem was to create co-parenting interventions to help parents learn how to co-parent.

Ideally, professionals that help these families would like to see more co-parenting in a cooperative style. Yet, 50% of divorced couples with children co-parent in a parallel fashion. Granted, parallel co-parenting is better than conflicted parenting, but there is still room for growth and improvement.

A solution would be to conduct co-parenting intervention utilizing Equine Assisted Psychotherapy. EAP would allow for parents to work toward the most ideal
parenting relationship, in which two parental systems can function independently of one another, but cooperatively, and with mutual respect. An Equine Assisted Co-Parenting intervention would offer a new approach to assisting conflicted parents to better meet their children’s needs. Using the horses, parents can practice different scenarios, and deal with the emotions of those scenarios as they come up, giving them the opportunity to practice changing negative emotions and reactions into emotions and behaviors that promote a positive environment for their children. Healthy, cooperative interactions and communication between parents will result in healthier children.
References


Appendix A

Co-Parenting from the Pasture:

An Equine Activity Manual
Co-Parenting from the Pasture:
An Equine Activity Manual

Created by: Lindsay Hildreth
Introduction

“Two real homes with no fighting does not happen over night. It takes work, sweat, and tears. But it’s worth the effort.”
~ Isolina Ricci, PhD

Co-Parenting from the Pasture

The idea for this manual came to me after working with children and adolescents whose parents were newly divorced or in the process of divorcing. They, the children, had been identified as the patient, or the one needing “fixing”, yet the many reasons for which these children were being brought to therapy was simply a symptom of a much greater problem.

So many times I thought to myself, or mentioned to my co-facilitator “why are the parents not out here?” But as most of us in this line of work know, it is none too easy to point the finger toward the self, or the system in which the self is part of. Pointing outward is much easier. Children tend not to have a voice in these kinds of situations, so they react to the situations instead. It is this reactional behavior that brings them to the office, or in my case, the pasture.

It is estimated that approximately one half of recently contracted marriages will end in divorce (Kenny, 2000; Wesolowski, Nelson, & Bing, 2008). As a result, many children experience the dissolution of their “family” as they know it. Divorce is a very unsettling experience, for both the adult, and children. According to Ross and Wynne (2010), research has shown that most children interpret their parent’s divorce as a stressful life event.
Research has examined the effects divorce has on children. Children experience grief and loss, and can have a variety of reactions and changes in psychological well-being, and many of the side effects of divorce are exacerbated by the level of conflict between parents (Ross).

A great amount of research has surfaced with regard to the psychological effects of divorce on children. Co-parenting intervention education classes and counseling are available in every state, and even online. Divorce courts are court-ordering parents to receive co-parenting interventions. There appears to be a correlation between the three, but this writer was unable to find any connection through research, and further investigation as to whether or not there is a connection would need to be done.

Most of the education courses offered to parents who seek or are ordered to obtain parenting education are in classroom like settings. They provide a lot of information and instruction, but no real opportunities for parents to practice what they are learning. This method of education poses certain limitations, and leaves many parents frustrated and discouraged. This frustration of the parent, most likely is carried over to into family interactions, and only perpetuates existing stress experienced by the children.

Parents need to have the opportunity to practice the skills learned, and apply the education received from co-parenting instruction in a safe environment, before, or while, putting those skills to practice in real life with their children. Equine Assisted Psychotherapy is the answer. Parents can address and alter maladaptive co-parenting strategy and behaviors, in a therapeutically safe environment, using an experiential modality, thus becoming better co-parents.
How to Use this Manual

This manual is an 8 session Equine Assisted Psychotherapy Activity Manual. Ideally, this manual would be used in conjunction with a state approved or other Co-Parenting curricula, however, it can be used independently as well. This manual is not a how to book, but rather it is designed to be a guide. As with all equine activities, it is the process that is important. I encourage Mental Health Professionals (MH) and Equine Specialists (ES) to get creative and modify these activities in a way that best suites the parents that they are working with. Every Co-Parenting couple that walks through the office doors is unique and their therapy should be too. When working with groups, the activities may best be used more generically, but can also be modified to fit the uniqueness of the group.

Session 8 of this activity manual is unique in that it calls for the whole family, not just the parents, to participate in the session. This session really is a celebration; a opportunity to celebrate each person in the family and to encourage future opportunities.
Equine Activity 1
Observe, Join, Select

This first exercise is to start the projection process between the clients and the horses. It is also designed to help the clients to get acquainted with their surroundings and comfortable in the environment.

The hope is for the client to begin to assign feelings or names to specific horses and or props in the pasture. We also hope that the client becomes more present and mindful in the pasture, and to begin to become aware of emotions, thoughts, and or feelings that may be coming up for them.

1. Observe

Each parent enters the pasture to observe the horses. Let the clients know that there is no touching allowed at this point. This will allow the parents to become acquainted with their surroundings while encouraging projection.

2. Join

After parents have spent some time observing, let parents know that they may now join the horses.

3. Select

Ask the parents to individually select the horse that is most like them self and bring it back to the facilitator team.

4. Reflection
Equine Activity 2
Feelings Squares

The purpose of this exercise is similar to the first exercise, but also for parents to begin to identify and express those feelings they may have surrounding the divorce/separation. Marital dissolution began while the couple was still living together and ended well after the legal divorce is concluded (Amato, 2000). The uncoupling process sets in motion numerous stressors, which increase the negative risk of emotional, behavioral, and health outcomes for adults and children (Amato). Successful adjustment then, is important for both the adults in the relationship, but for their children as well.

Again, the anticipated outcome is for an increased client awareness surrounding the feelings about their divorce/separation. Specifically, which feelings are they avoiding, struggling with, stuck on, etc.

1. Have each parent write down 4 feelings they have about their divorce/separation/transition on a note card.
2. Using the resources available, have each parent create 4 “squares” in the pasture.
3. Assign one “feeling” note card in each square.
4. Have each parent select a horse to work with.
5. Ask each parent to bring the horse into each square, being mindful of any things that may be coming up for them.
6. Also in each square, each parent is to “ground tie” their horse. Provide an explanation of “ground tie”. Once the horse is “ground tied”, have each parent
walk around the horse as many or few times as they feel comfortable, and as close or far as they feel comfortable. Let the parents know that the ground tie process is to be done in each “square”.

7. Reflection
Equine Activity 3
Mom’s House, Dad’s House

The purpose of this exercise to begin to help each parent re-frame their individual family culture. According to Ahrons (1979), the reorganization of the nuclear family through divorce results in the establishment of two households.

Ideally, each parent would become aware of their own individual family culture. Also, I would hope that each parent would become less competitive, and begin to recognize that one home is not better over the other, but that they are different.

1. Ask each parent to build a representation of their own home.
2. Ask parents to add to their house those things in the home that tells their children “you are safe”, “you are loved”, “you will be taken care of”
3. Process
   How are the homes similar? Help to point out the strengths each home has to offer. Parents may want to focus on the differences between the homes, but Facilitators are to encourage each parent to focus on their own home. The exception may be if one parent feels that there is a safety issue, at which point the Facilitators can help parents process that particular issue. Again, the focus here is independence and autonomy.
4. Each parent selects a horse that represents their individual family.
5. Move “their family” horse into the home.
6. Reflection
Equine Activity 4
Mom’s House to Dad’s House, and back again.

This exercise is designed to get parents to begin to learn to let go of their need to control the other parent and trust that their children will be taken care of while with the other parent. It is now widely accepted that ongoing, serious conflict between parents has negative consequences for children (Ahrons, 2007). Parents need to learn how to have two individual homes while working together as a binuclear family.

Ideally, each parent will come away from this exercise being able to feel a better sense of self control when their children are with the other parent through being able to trust that their children are safe while not in their own care.

1. Choose an area in the pasture that will represent mom’s house, and one for dad’s house, in same area as exercise 3 if possible. Include in the home area something that represents self care.

2. Ask parents to build a path from one home to the other. Include as part of the path something that tells your children “you are safe”, “you are loved”, “you will be taken care of”.

3. Together, have the parents select one horse that will represent their children.

4. Move a horse from one house to the other and back again.

5. Reflection
Equine Activity 5
Parenting Styles

This exercise is to help facilitators to identify what each parent’s individual parenting style is. Research shows that authoritative parenting style protects youth from risky and dangerous behavior (McVittie & Best, 2009). Research also indicates that the authoritative parenting style is the most likely to produce happy, confident and capable children (Baumrind, 1991).

Being that divorce can be a trigger for youth to rebel, parenting style could potentially be an added burden or benefit, depending on the style. This Equine Activity is to be used to educate parents ways in which they can become more authoritative in their parenting styles.

![Parenting Styles Diagram](http://alexplusthree.blogspot.com)

1. Prior to clients arriving, set up an activity course with three different components with which to move a horse through.
2. On separate note cards, have each parent write down 3 household guidelines that are important to them.

3. Have each parent assign a note card to an area of the activity course.

4. Have each parent select a horse and ask them to move the horse through the activity course.

5. Reflection
Equine Activity 6
Communication

The purpose of this exercise to help identify each parent’s social style. If each client has an awareness of their own social style, then they can learn how to flex to be more accommodating to other styles. This flexing creates for better communication, which creates a better environment for the children. Listed below are some identifiers to help determine your client’s social style.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analytical</th>
<th>Driver</th>
<th>Amiable</th>
<th>Expressive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good listener</td>
<td>Poor Listener</td>
<td>Good listener</td>
<td>Poor listener</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoids conflict</td>
<td>Debatable</td>
<td>Doesn’t offer opinions</td>
<td>Talks a lot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withdraws in conflict</td>
<td>Opinionated</td>
<td>Avoids conflict</td>
<td>Tells lots of stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over analyzes</td>
<td>Hates to Admit Wrongs</td>
<td>Quiet</td>
<td>Loud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reserved</td>
<td>Stubborn</td>
<td>Easily gives in</td>
<td>Opinionated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Softer Tone</td>
<td>Blunt</td>
<td>Agreeable</td>
<td>Demonstrative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

None of these styles are “right” or “wrong”. It is important for clients to know which style is their style, to be able to notice the style of others, and to acknowledge style differences and work to meet half way (leadfearlessly.com, 2013). By being flexible, or flexing, communication can be greatly improved.

1. Prior to parents arriving, select 4 areas around the pasture for the parents to work in.

2. In each area provide a simple task. Any task will work, or you can use the ones provided below.
   a. Move the horse clockwise in a full circle
   b. Move the horse counter-clockwise in a full circle
   c. Move the horse over an obstacle
d. Move the horse around an obstacle

3. Tell the parents that 2 of the 4 tasks will be non-verbal. No talking will be allowed in these particular tasks. Have the parents choose which two tasks will be non-verbal.

4. Together, have the parents select one horse that will represent their children.

Reflection
Equine Activity 7
Keep Kids Out of the Middle!

The purpose of this activity to create a parental awareness about the many ways in which kids are put in the middle during a divorce or separation. We want the clients to begin to create a boundary from which they protect their children.

We want clients to have the physical experience of creating and keeping a boundary in which their children are kept out of the middle of their divorce or separation. Children caught in the middle experience more turmoil, stress, and anxiety.

1. Ask the parents to create a “square” in the pasture and when finished return to the facilitation team.

2. On note cards, write down common ways that parents put their kids in the middle. Have each parent select two cards from the pile.

3. Assign each note card to a single bucket, for a total of 4 buckets.

4. Have each parent place their buckets in the “square”.

Image retrieved from http://healertoday.com/articles/6401/
5. Once the buckets are placed in the square, the facilitators will explain that
the “square” now represents the “middle” and the horses are now their
“children”. They are to keep their children out of the middle. At this point, the
facilitators will add grain to each of the buckets.

6. Reflection
Week 8 Equine Activity
Moving Forward

The purpose of this activity is an opportunity for the family to celebrate new learnings, new awareness, growth, and / or completion of the 8 week program. This activity includes the children as it is also a celebration about family.

We hope that the clients have an awareness of things that went really well in the program, and areas that many need improvement. We also want the clients to feel encouraged about what the future holds for them as they embark on this new chapter of their life.

1. Ask the family to build a representation of a way to celebrate all the things that have been done, or the completion of this program.

2. Select a horse together and move it through this celebration.

3. Reflection
References:


