

Physical Activity for Addressing Violence: new applications, established practice

Despite the impression that this is a new question, outdoor physical recreation has been a successful therapy for anti-social behaviour for a very long time, particularly activity involving animals such as horses.

Article:

Although the modern phenomenon of organized sport for development (S4D) is new, there is a longstanding understanding of physical activity as a facilitator of pro-social behaviour. S4D as a field is a relative newcomer, emerging in the 2000's, after the developments of positive psychology in the 1990's.

S4D is based on the assumption that people are resilient, and that climates that foster development of assets and pro-social lifeskills, inherently diminish risk factors and anti-social behaviour. S4D is very attractive because it combines a way to meet needs for physical health promotion, as well as other psycho-social outcomes at the individual (micro) and community (macro) levels. Yet, the field grapples with questions of how sport can be used to achieve these psycho-social outcomes. S4D considers such questions new, because the field is new.

However, if you shift from the narrow definition of sport and look at physical activity more broadly, suddenly new avenues open for practice, and for theoretical explanation. S4D is only the historically recent tip of an iceberg, sitting on top of long traditions of use of physical activity to bring about pro-social and personal transformation. Three of these traditions are outdoor experiential education, recreation therapy and its sub-field of animal-based therapy. Although these fields provide the foundational notion to S4D that physical activity and psycho-social development go together, there is very little cross-reference from S4D into these fields. This is because of the emphasis in S4D on popular urban competitive sports, even though there is common understanding in S4D that activity needs to focus on development as a primary goal, and not sport skill acquisition, to be successful S4D (Mulholland 2008, Cameron 2013).

With regard to physical activity addressing violence specifically, one of these older traditions rich in theory and documented success addressing violence is recreation therapy. Violence is a defensive reaction to perceived threat, scarcity and lack of trust. Whatever the reason (PTSD, population trauma, experience of domestic or cultural violence), violence is a marker of alienation or break in ability for constructive resolution of problems between people. In some cases, such as PTSD, there are deep neuro-biological changes in pathways between the limbic brain and frontal cortex, which make it difficult for people to navigate social situations, particularly when feeling overwhelmed.

In the broadest sense, restoring healthy functioning and relationship ability, or fostering them where they were never well developed in the first place, is therapy- even if it is 'just' an S4D program. Physical activity as an option is so interesting because in many contexts the need is just too great and the resources too small, to recourse to mental health professionals. An example could be a population of young people in a war torn area, who have been removed from parental or adult mentorship because of deaths, but there is insufficient funding for adequate intervention by mental health professionals.

The reason that physical activity and animal-based physical activity have been so common in recreational therapy is that there are limits to the achievements of psychotherapeutic counselling over a desk. In recreational therapy, the activity, the animal and the other people

involved together in the activity become co-therapists with the person (Graham 1999, Austin 2010), in much the same way that the activity, peers and adult facilitator work together with participants in positive youth development (PYD) programming, including sport programs framed by PYD or personal development goals.

An aspect often overlooked in mainstream Western culture is that activities with animals are still physical activity, and there is actually one animal-based activity which is a world sport included in major world games: equestrian. In North America there is a very old tradition of incorporating horses in teaching youth positive social skills, through the Scouting movement and its summer camps of the early last Century.

Today, horses are particularly useful in therapy for conditions producing strong anti-social behaviour, such as PTSD. Unlike other common animals used, the horse can be ridden giving a person a normative sport experience. Also, the horse is a large and intimidating, but highly sensitive animal (Burgon 2011, Dell et al. 2011). The impact of interaction with the horse in activity structured for personal development does not depend on personal affinity for horses.

Although this point is not usually made in equine-based therapy literature, the size of the animal creates conditions and mechanisms very similar to those used by Outdoor Experiential Learning where change happens through encounter with challenge, and overcoming that challenge with the help of others. Equine activity also tends to occur in an environment with nature elements, rather than an impersonal/non-natural environment, and has features of unknowability/ uncontrollability which parallel the same elements outdoor learning literature highlights as effective. Although not a subject of equine therapy studies, self-efficacy appears to be one result of personal development programs (equine experiential learning or therapy). Self-efficacy is significantly tied to executive function: the belief that one has power to act in one's circumstances, is not a victim, and has ability to impact and meet needs without recourse to anti-social behaviour to do so.

Also, unlike dogs, horses are flight animals. This makes them highly sensitive to body language and responsive to emotional knowledge. All animals in therapeutic or personal growth activity offer the benefit of being a living being to practice building a positive relationship with, without being distracted or overwhelmed because of crossed signals between body language and spoken language. People that are suffering from PTSD or are otherwise engaging with the world primarily emotively, get overwhelmed by these mixed signals. Interacting with the animal as a mediator helps build trust between the person and the animal, and the person and the other people involved in the activity. This actually transfers to other relationships, as the neural wiring permitting more constructive collaboration has a chance to develop.

Activity with the horses works particularly well because of their highly sensitive nature, and because being a flight animal, they have more to fear from the person than the other way around. To engage a horse willingly, domination is not effective. Humans have to use empathy, not predatory or aggressive behaviour (fight) to interact successfully with the horse. They need the same for interaction with other humans, but where trauma has produced sufficient anger, other humans trigger fight responses. Since participants with animals are not allowed to be aggressive with the animal (and often motivated by its size not to be), and since they are not threatened by the animal either, there is an opportunity to practice more co-operative approaches to negotiating a task together. In reality, the mental processes and neural connections acquired can be used again in other circumstances, with other species.

In the field of equine therapy, a shift from anti-social to pro-social behaviour is commonly noted both at the activity between peers, and outside the activity in the participant's

'real life' (Pendry et al., 2013). Another important aspect of the horse is that they do not hold grudges. Changes in behaviour of the person effect changes in the horse's response. So the person can try and retry new approaches and self-regulation of emotions, learning more effective ways to communicate desires or frustrations without alienating the Other. By having multiple opportunities to practice a new attitude or behaviour, the participants begin to rewire the way they respond to challenging tasks or people.

A final and vital aspect of any animal based activity is the actual measurable biological changes which occur, which are promotive of pro-social behaviour. Touching and working with animals in therapy has been shown to reduce cortisol (stress hormones blocking executive functioning in the frontal cortex (Pendry et al., 2014), which controls response to frustration or threat), and increase oxytocin (Beetz et al., 2012) (the hormone making a person feel relational belonging and positivity toward others).

In normal sport circumstances, physical affection between participants or between participants and coaches is not appropriate, yet connection and affection are exactly what a person feeling alienated and angry needs. There is no barrier to the touching and gestures of care between the participants and the animals. For people who have undergone trauma, particularly at the hands of other people, this touch is very therapeutic and restorative of positive mood about personal space, and of a sense that someone cares for them or needs them.

So, how does this therapy relate to sport for development? These mechanisms appear to work regardless of any intervention by a mental health professional, suggesting that they can be accessed in similar programming to standard PYD programming (including sport) where there is a facilitator who also teaches activity skill, and an overarching main goal of personal development. Also, when S4D is addressing strong issues normally treated in therapy, the recreational literature offers some helpful insights into the elements and mechanisms which are effective. To some extent, there are many parallels between goals of sport for development, and the goals and success of its roots in outdoor learning, positive youth development programming, and recreation therapies.

When combined with other pro-social facilitative elements of happy sport engagement (positive endorphins, positive common ground with others, release of tension) (Skwarok, 2013), physical activity with horses can be a really interesting sport for development idea where the culture lends itself to the availability of the animals and their appropriateness in the context. In other contexts, dogs and dogsledding, or camels and camel-racing might be a contextually appropriate and sustainable form of sport for development which offers similar benefits, while avoiding enculturation into Western leisure consumer interests.

Link to ABC News video about equine therapy with inmates, learning emotional self-management to work with the horses:

<https://www.facebook.com/abcnews/videos/10153485692358812/?fref=nf>

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