

Measuring Outcomes at High Horses: Pilot Study Results

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Mango is pictured above carrying one of the 6 elementary school-aged students who participated in a 7-week therapeutic riding program at High Horses



Each 90-minute weekly lesson promoted skill development through un-mounted games and activities in the riding ring, horse grooming (shown above), horse leading, barn activities, and 30 minutes of horseback riding

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High Horses' Mission:
To improve the well-being of people with special needs through a therapeutic equine experience.

Why evaluate outcomes?

To further its mission to improve clients' lives, High Horses Therapeutic Riding (TR) Program initiated an outcomes evaluation (OE) program to measure the efficacy of its services. An OE system will also support the organization's commitment to continuous learning, demonstrate its willingness to take a leadership role in the TR field, and provide greater accountability to clients, community, and funders. This report summarizes that effort's pilot study, with recommendations for continued program development.

What were the evaluation requirements?

In 2011, High Horses served 212 clients with diverse needs, abilities, and reasons for participating in TR. To accommodate, High Horses required client-specific achievement measures. The measures needed to be sensitive enough to capture changes that occur during short intervention periods. Yet, to determine overall program effectiveness, the measures also needed to allow aggregation. Though accredited as a PATH International Premier TR center, High Horses is a small nonprofit, and required a low-cost OE program that could be utilized and maintained by existing staff and volunteers. Nonetheless, to prepare to collaborate with other TR centers and potential partners on similar initiatives, High Horses also sought to build organizational capacity for scientifically credible research.

What method was used to measure client achievements?

The existing literature on TR effectiveness offers little to guide TR centers in the selection and implementation of OE programs and methods for measuring individual client advancements. However, Goal Attainment Scaling (GAS)—an OE method widely employed in rehabilitation and mental health services—clearly offered potential for measuring clients' achievements in a therapeutic riding setting. This method:

- ◆ Defines unique goals for each client
- ◆ Pre-specifies expected outcomes for each goal
- ◆ Accommodates weighting of goals to reflect goal importance and difficulty
- ◆ Generates overall program effectiveness scores
- ◆ Utilizes independent raters to score achievement on a 5-point scale after a predetermined intervention period, as follows:
 - ◆ -2 is baseline performance before intervention
 - ◆ -1 is improvement less than expected after intervention
 - ◆ 0 is the expected improvement after intervention
 - ◆ +1 is better than expected improvement
 - ◆ +2 is much better than expected improvement

Measuring Outcomes at High Horses: Pilot Study Results (continued)

What were the pilot study procedures?

Two instructors collaborated to assess baseline performance, define individualized goals, and create expected performance outcome scales for each of the 6 students selected by their school district to participate in a TR program. Three raters independently scored student goal achievements during the last lesson. Below, find a sample goal attainment scale.

Table 1: Sample Goal Attainment Scale

(-2) The rider is totally dependent on his support team to prompt him to respond to the instructor's request to ask his horse to "walk on," "whoa," or "trot"
(-1) The rider requires extensive assistance from his support team to prompt him to respond to the instructor's request to ask his horse to "walk on," "whoa," or "trot"
(0) The rider requires some assistance from his support team to prompt him to respond to the instructor's request to ask his horse to "walk on," "whoa," or "trot"
(+1) The rider requires limited assistance from his support team to prompt him to respond to the instructor's request to ask his horse to "walk on," "whoa," or "trot"
(+2) The rider independently responds to the instructor's request to ask his horse to "walk on," "whoa," or "trot"

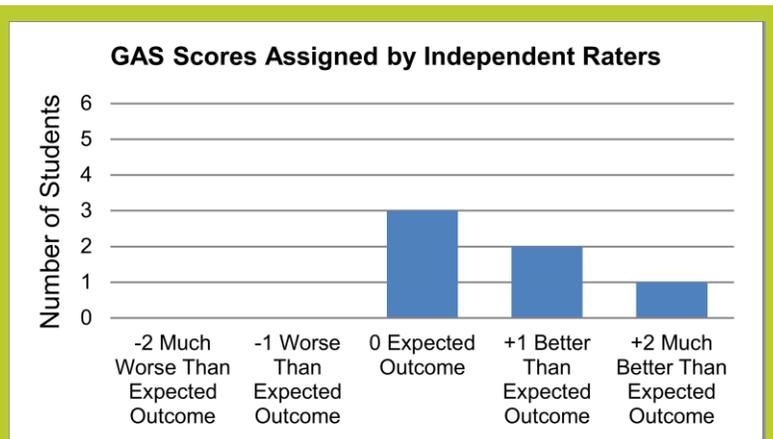
What were the pilot study findings?

Three of 6 students progressed as expected in skill acquisition. Two students made better than expected gains, and 1 attained much better than expected improvement (see Figure 1). The aggregated individual scores suggest the TR program was effective. With pilot study results, subsequent studies will be necessary to confirm findings.

What lessons were learned?

The application of Goal Attainment Scaling delivered client-specific assessments of functional improvements sensitive to changes achievable during a short intervention. It provided a cost-effective method for determining program efficacy and resulted in increased collaboration among staff and volunteers and greater standardization of program activities.

Figure 1: Student Goal Attainment Scale Scores



Students rode in groups of 3 under the direction of an instructor with each rider's support team composed of 2 trained side walkers and a horse leader

Lessons learned (continued)

There was less certainty about whether GAS met the organization's criteria for ease-of-use. While the independent raters expressed no concerns about scoring goal achievements, the goal-setting process was time-consuming and at times confusing to instructors. Three contributing factors:

- ◆ Instructors had no formal GAS training
- ◆ No expected performance scale examples with TR goals were available to guide efforts
- ◆ Opportunities to collaborate with teachers or caregivers in setting goals were not available

What is recommended next?

The pilot study results support continued use of GAS for developing outcomes evaluation capacity at High Horses. The next steps should include:

- ◆ Formal training in GAS for all instructors
- ◆ Development of a collective list of common TR goal areas to facilitate goal setting
- ◆ Using GAS to encourage collaboration in goal setting with clients and caregivers
- ◆ Using GAS to further collaboration and communication among staff and volunteers
- ◆ Exploring the feasibility of adding standardized outcome measures to address client well-being more broadly

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