

Presentation Abstracts

Theme 1: Innovation in models of care

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Abstract title: *Can horses really change lives? An evaluation of the Equine Learning Experiences Australia Program*

Across Australia, schools, social welfare organisations and mental health providers are faced with increasing challenges in their efforts to assist people experiencing complex mental health and behavioural issues. A diverse range of specialist welfare and therapeutic approaches exist to address these challenges. Although Equine-Assisted Therapy (EAT) has received much attention for its capacity to engage and facilitate change, much of the “evidence” about positive outcomes for EAT is anecdotal. This presentation reports the preliminary findings of an evaluation of Equine Learning Experiences Australia, a program based in Napoleons in the Central Highlands region which utilises horses to provide equine-assisted learning to vulnerable children, adolescents and adults.

This project applied the Most Significant Change methodology which involves the collection and analysis of significant change stories and case study analysis of participants to document participants’ experience of the program, the benefits they derived, the direct and indirect outcomes of the program, and the persistence of these benefits.

The presentation will enable audience members to broaden their understanding about:

1. The transformative potential of the innovative approach of EAT.
2. Research methodologies which have the potential to contribute to research evidence about innovative therapeutic/treatment programs.

Biography

Dr Christina Sadowski is a researcher and academic in the Social Work program at Federation University, Australia and experienced social work practitioner. She has completed a PhD (exploring children’s experiences of shared-time parenting arrangements), a Masters of Social Science (Policy and Human Services) and a Bachelor of Social Work (honours). Christina is interested in understanding evidence-based research about interventions which facilitate positive and meaningful outcomes.

Janet Phillips has a Masters of Arts in Social Ecology, and extensive experience as a research consultant on a range of projects including evaluation reports of the Growing Abundance project, the Sustainability Victoria Community Facilitation Regional Network, the

Sustainability Victoria Climate Communities funding program, the Castlemaine 500 project and a Case Study of the Gapuwjyak Early Childhood Nutrition Project.