

# Running with Mustangs

Equine Assisted Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy  
with Court-Ordered Youth



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# Table of Contents

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## Section One: Curriculum Overview

Description of Population.....	11
Existing Evidence Based Treatment Modalities.....	13
Cognitive-Behavioral Concepts Related to Conduct Disorders.....	15
Using Equine Assisted Clinical Practice (EACP) for Skill Development with Conduct Disordered Youth.....	19
Logistics: Programming, Intake Paperwork, Coordination of Care, & Gang Considerations.....	21
Entrance and Exit Criteria.....	23
Graduation.....	25
Working Principles.....	27
Description of Session Format.....	33

## Section Two: EAGALA Model Equine Assisted Clinical Practice, Skills 1–8

<b>Skill 1:</b> Observation and Awareness of Environmental Cues.....	39
<b>Skill 2:</b> Observation and Awareness of Physiological States.....	43
<b>Skill 3:</b> Awareness of Thoughts and Internal Dialogue.....	47
<b>Skill 4:</b> Problem Solving.....	51
<b>Skill 5:</b> Awareness of Internal and External Triggers.....	55
<b>Skill 6:</b> Modification of Negative Thought Patterns.....	59
<b>Skill 7:</b> Gaining Perspective and Empathy.....	63
<b>Skill 8:</b> Relaxation: Knowing When to Chill.....	67

## Section Three: Natural Horsemanship Skills, Vocational Development & POETIX

Natural Horsemanship Skills.....	73
Vocational Development.....	93
POETIX.....	97

## References and Appendices

References.....	115
<b>Appendix A:</b> General Information Regarding Gang Culture and Gang Members in Counseling Settings.....	117
<b>Appendix B:</b> Generalization of Skills Graphic.....	123
<b>Appendix C:</b> Vocational Materials.....	125
<b>Appendix D:</b> Skill Cards & Blanks.....	129
<b>Appendix E:</b> Skills Sign-Off Cards.....	135
<b>Your Notes</b> .....	139

# Cognitive-Behavioral Concepts Related to Conduct Disorders

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) principles can be applied to a wide variety of psychiatric disorders. When applied to Conduct Disordered youth, several themes have been found in the existing psychological literature. These themes, discussed below, provided the foundation for *Running With Mustangs*.

When compared to non-aggressive children, those who display aggressive behaviors have more significant deficits and distortions in information-processing (Kendall, 2000). Specifically, youth with Conduct Disorders often interpret ambiguous interpersonal cues as being hostile, and may pay attention to fewer cues before arriving at a conclusion (Crick & Dodge, 1996). In addition to this type of distortion, children with aggression problems often have deficiencies related to processing information, so that fewer options are generated when attempting to solve problems (Crick & Dodge, 1996). Youth with aggression problems are more likely to generate solutions that involve physical action rather than verbal communication (Mpofu & Crystal, 2001). When this type of child experiences physiological arousal, their thought processing decreases in deliberateness and thoughtfulness. The situation compounds itself, and once the child is upset, he or she will think of additional aggressive ways of dealing with the problem (Lochman et.al., 2003).

An additional characteristic often associated with Conduct Disordered youth is a lack of empathy or feelings of guilt and remorse (Frick, 2004; American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Arbuthnot, J., Gordon, D. A., & Jurkovic, G.J. (1987) identify several other “sociocognitive” skills that are often weak for this population, including poor social reasoning and minimization of harm to others. Programming for this type of client often includes methods for increasing the capacity for empathy and victim awareness.

*Running With Mustangs* has selected eight basic CBT skills that are particularly relevant when working with impulsive and aggressive youth. These skills can be taught in a variety of settings, and can be useful for any individual to have in his or her repertoire. This manual describes horses as a unique method of teaching and reinforcing these skills in a way that is appealing to an often treatment-resistant population.

The general themes that will be addressed in this manual will focus on helping aggressive and impulsive youth improve their skills in the areas of: assessing situations neutrally or more accurately through observation, increasing awareness of physiological state and relaxation skills, generating increased problem solving options, increasing awareness of internal dialogue and distorted thoughts, increasing awareness of internal and external triggers and gaining perspective and empathy. Two skill topics, identification of cognitive distortions and problem-solving, are discussed below to provide more detail as to how these concepts specifically relate to Conduct Disorder youth. The two were chosen for deeper discussion due to their importance in treating this population and their central relevance to the other skills.

Deffenbacher et. al, (1996) identified several distortions specific to individuals with anger problems. These are summarized by Wilde (2004) as follows:

- **Poor estimation of probabilities** – individuals with anger problems tend to overestimate the probability of negative outcomes and underestimate the likelihood of positive outcomes

- **Attributional errors** – anger prone individuals attribute negative acts as being done intentionally with the expressed purpose of maliciously attacking them. They believe they have the ability to read others’ minds
- **Overgeneralizations** – angry clients tend to use overly broad terms when describing time (i.e. excessive use of “always” and “never”) and use global descriptions of people (i.e. stupid, lazy)
- **Dichotomous thinking** – also thought of as black-and-white thinking
- **Inflammatory labeling** – using descriptive terms that are emotionally charged, which only increases the person’s anger
- **Demandingness** – believing other should not act in certain ways or that they must not behave as they have, in fact, behaved
- **Catastrophic thinking** – evaluating unmet demands in an exaggeratedly negative fashion (i.e. “It’s horrible, terrible, and awful that things haven’t gone my way”)

Problem-solving abilities have also been identified as an area of weakness for youth with anger problems and externalizing behavior disorders (Spivak, G. & Platt, J., 1976; Wesner, DW, 1996). There are programs specifically designed to teach this skill to children with impulse control problems and acting out behaviors (Kazdin, 2003). Kazdin’s model of teaching problem solving skills incorporates helping the client learn to use self-talk as he or she goes through each step. It also emphasizes the role of examining the potential consequences of each solution that is generated, as this is often an area that impulsive youth overlook. As in Kazdin’s model, *Running With Mustangs* has chosen to include the concept of consequences when presenting the stages of problem solving to our clients.

Spivak’s model, Interpersonal Cognitive Problem-Solving, viewed adolescence as a time when principle problem-solving skills were emerging, though successful development of these skills could be influenced by many factors in a child’s life (i.e. lack of learning opportunities, social and parental influences). Though the skills are cognitive in nature, they are pivotal to effective interpersonal functioning. In this model, the focus of problem solving is not upon the outcome, but is upon acquiring the skill of knowing how to engage in problem solving. The skills deficits identified by Spivak, G. & Platt, J. (1976) as particularly relevant to susceptibility to delinquent behavior include:

- **Alternative-solution thinking** – “an individuals’ ability to generate in his or her own mind, different options (solutions) that could potentially be put into action to solve a problem” (Spivak, p. 19)
- **Means-end thinking** – “the ability to orient oneself to and conceptualize the step-by-step means of moving towards a goal” (ibid, p. 83)
- **Consequential thinking** – “the ability to generate in one’s own mind what might happen as a direct result of carrying out an interpersonal act” (ibid, p.31)
- **Social cause-and-effect thinking** – “the ability to relate one event to another over time with regard to the ‘why’ that might have precipitated an event” (ibid, pp.38-39)
- **Perspective taking** – “the ability to see interpersonal situations from the perspectives of other involved individuals” (ibid, p. 83)

Developing cognitive-behavioral skills is crucial in the treatment of clients with Conduct Disorder. Many of their oppositional and disruptive behaviors are rooted in a lack of these central skills, such as problem solving and awareness of thought distortions. However, clients with Conduct Disorder are often resistant to treatment, may present with co-morbid diagnoses such as ADHD, and often become bored with didactic therapy. Thus, an alternative approach for teaching CBT skills is necessary.



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# Using Equine Assisted Clinical Practice for Cognitive Behavioral Skill Development

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An EACP session generally consists of a horse-involved task or a series of tasks intended for the client to complete independent of extensive guidance from the treatment team. Because of the perceptive and responsive nature of horses, successful execution of life skills such as assertiveness, problem solving, and clear communication is mandatory for completing such a task. As big, sometimes intimidating, and often unfamiliar animals, horses capture the attention of clients, and force them to discard unhealthy coping skills such as aggression and manipulation. Clients quickly learn that horses act according to the human that stands before them, caring nothing of gang status, clinical diagnoses, or court referrals.

EACP and CBT combine quite naturally from a theoretical standpoint. Of all the psychological theories of behavior and personality, animal behavior is best classified in behavioral terms. Horse behavior is strongly influenced by basic principles of reinforcement. Horses learn to go to eat in fields with the best grass; they avoid fields with less appealing grass. They continue to use behaviors that lead to survival and gratification of needs, and avoid behaviors that invite danger or fail to serve a purpose. When horse trainers work with horses, they use behavioral principles to shape responses. If a horse is anxious and reacts excessively to stimulation in the environment, behavioral strategies are used to decrease reactivity. For example, the technique of gradually exposing a horse to the noise and movement of a dangling plastic bag is a form of systematic desensitization that is one of the most well studied treatments for people with anxiety disorders. Though horses do not have the same type of “cognitive” processes as humans, this difference actually serves as an excellent learning tool in therapy. Humans are different from animals in that they can “think about thinking.” Their thoughts can thereby become “distorted” and patterns of distorted thinking can become “automatic” to the point that a person may have an ongoing, unproductive stream of thought playing in his or her head without realizing how it is affecting choices and behavior. Discovering how these thoughts and resulting behavioral patterns play into our daily lives is one of the main tenants of CBT.

The term Cognitive Behavioral Therapy has many forms and connotations used in both popular culture and in the psychological community. When used in this manual, the term is meant to refer to very general principles that are associated with cognitive behavioral theory and behavior modification such as the relationship between thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, and the many ways in which thoughts and behavioral patterns are reinforced or extinguished. Several versions of formal CBT exist with significant variations in each: i.e. Aaron Beck’s Cognitive Therapy, Albert Ellis’s Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy, Donald Michenbaum’s Stress Inoculation Therapy, Marsha Linehan’s Dialectical Behavior Therapy. For further reading, several references are provided in the References Section. These include texts by authors of the original, seminal works in the field (Beck, Ellis) as well as more recent contributors whose approaches include more Eastern concepts such as mindfulness (Hayes, Linehan).

Allowing clients to learn about and experience horse behavior is a logical way to help them learn about how behaviors of all kinds are learned, reinforced, and maintained. The principles of behavior therapy are constantly at play with horses. Horses are behavior oriented, skill based, reinforcement driven animals. Horses don’t think about their “inner foal” or worry about penis envy and castration anxiety (well, geldings might). Instead, their lives naturally include positive and negative reinforcement, contingencies, habituation,

desensitization, and other behavioral principles. An EACP session places the client in a real-life context in which they can learn about cause and effect relationships, reinforcement, and ways that they can affect change. Additionally, horses are strongly driven by safety-focused instincts. As prey animals, they constantly make decisions and behave according to what they perceive as “safe.” Thus, they will only respond to a client’s attempted use of a new skill if it is performed in an assertive, non-aggressive, and consistent manner.

As stated earlier, increasing problem-solving skills has been identified as one of the most useful treatment components for conduct disordered youth, yet didactic teaching models can be unappealing to young people. EACP is a unique way to teach these skills as most activities require that the client engage in numerous forms of problem solving. For example, simply asking a client to “choose and retrieve a horse” requires the client to begin assessing a novel situation and to assemble information into a working plan. Virtually any EACP activity can be designed to address problem-solving skills. The difficulty level can be easily adjusted according to client needs and progress.

One of the most unique aspects of EACP is that horses offer immediate feedback and reactions to behaviors presented to them. Clients who impulsively jump into a situation without thinking of possible consequences will likely see some immediate effect displayed by the horse. Throughout the course of the session and treatment, patterns will emerge and become apparent. This provides a vivid way in which youth can learn about their own behavioral patterns with multiple opportunities for staff to inquire about accompanying cognitive processes. Staff can reflect these themes back to the client, and can also directly or subtly model alternative approaches. Youth begin to see patterns in the way they approach activities, engage in self-talk, and problem solve. The novel circumstance of working with horses typically keeps the youth motivated to persist, whereas learning about these patterns in an office type setting might not be as stimulating for them.

Additionally, it is *Horse Sense’s* opinion that this modality is a useful form of “in vivo” style learning. Though the client is not technically involved in “real life” situations, he or she is presented with unpredictable, unscripted scenarios in which they have no previous experience base from which to draw. The skills that clients use to accomplish tasks are actually being practiced and adapted in the moment. Mastering problem solving skills in a setting such as this appears to strengthen a clients’ self-confidence as they complete tasks initially thought to be beyond their ability.

Many manuals and books currently available in the body of literature relevant to equine therapy contain a compilation of new activities that are appropriate for use with a specific population. Rather than focus on new activities, we have chosen to focus on CBT skills. That is to say, we have highlighted and discussed ways in which activities that readers are most likely already using can allow clients to discover and practice CBT skills.

The new activities presented in this manual are the natural horsemanship skills activities presented later in this book. This is a body of treatment possibilities that we have designed specifically for this population, intended for longer-term treatment.