

# **Exploring Perspectives on Equine-Assisted Therapy for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders**

**Carmelina Heydrich, Kira A. Dies, Erin Thorpe, MaryAnn Campion**

Boston University School of Medicine, Boston, Massachusetts

Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are characterized by impaired social skills, deficits in communication, and stereotypic behaviors. Treatment and management of ASD is complicated due to the limited understanding of the condition's underlying mechanisms. The literature currently focuses on Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) as an effective method of management for ASD. While families often utilize more mainstream therapies such as ABA, recent studies indicate that a significant number of children with ASD have received an unconventional or off-label treatment. Recently, attention has been given to animal-assisted therapies, including equine-assisted therapies. Via anonymous survey, this study assessed families' interest in equine-assisted therapy and their current utilization of such therapies, and explored the perceived effectiveness of and barriers to equine therapies in the ASD population. Results from this study indicated that equine-assisted therapy is perceived and experienced positively by members of the ASD community. Perceptions seem to accurately represent the true experience. Additionally, equine-assisted therapy appears to benefit children both on an emotional level and a physical level. However, while there appear to be therapeutic benefits, there are barriers to utilization of equine-assisted therapy. Access was the most commonly reported barrier, which is limited due to finances, time, and challenging aspects of the location and number of facilities. Overall, caregivers' demonstrate interest in and positive experiences with equine-assisted therapies for children with ASD.