

Contact: Natalie Tomczak, External Relations
Phone: (306) 337-2452
Cell: (306) 536-4312
Email: natalie.tomczak@uregina.ca

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How Horses Contribute to the Well-being of First Nations Youth in Treatment for Solvent Abuse

A new study shows that horses can help teenagers overcome problems of solvent abuse.

The research, co-led by a University of Regina professor, involved 26 First Nations youth ranging in age from 12 to 17. The youth were from the White Buffalo Youth Inhalant Treatment Centre, an all female, six-month residential treatment centre near Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. Details of their findings were announced at the Issues of Substance conference in Ottawa.

The lead researchers are Darlene Chalmers, assistant professor in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Regina and Colleen Dell, professor of Sociology and the Saskatchewan Research Chair in Substance Abuse at the University of Saskatchewan. They found that the Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) program positively impacted the physical, emotional, social, spiritual and cultural aspects of the youths' lives, and the horse was a key helper to all of this. The youths experienced increased:

- physical well-being largely through physically touching and interacting with the horse;
- social well-being primarily through developing relationships with the horses and others, bettering their communication skills, having an important new experience in their life, and positively changing their behavior;
- emotional well-being mostly through increased self-identity, increased self-worth, improved ability to problem solve, and a more positive attitude; and
- spiritual well-being through just being with the horse and developing a bond.

The study represents a unique collaboration between the White Buffalo Youth Inhalant Treatment Centre, a non-profit organization located at Sturgeon Lake First Nation; the Cartier Equine Learning Center's EAL program located north of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan; and the universities of Calgary, Regina and Saskatchewan. National guidance was provided by the Youth Solvent Addiction Committee, the National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation, and the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse.

A future study is being planned to explore the use of horses and dogs in animal-assisted therapies and addiction treatment.

For more information, please contact:

Darlene Chalmers (Primary Contact)
Assistant Professor
Faculty of Social Work
University of Regina, Saskatoon Campus
Tel. 306 664-7379
darlene.chalmers@uregina.ca