

**“The experience could tell you more than we could possibly tell you”**  
**An evaluation of the Family Development Programme at Think Like a Pony**

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Commissioned by Lynn Henry (Think Like a Pony founder)

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## **Introduction**

Animal interaction can have a number of benefits on both physical and mental health. There is a growing number of programmes where animals have been included in therapeutic interventions. Research has found that use of animals in therapy can have a positive impact on both physical and mental health and reducing behaviours that challenge (Barker & Wolen, 2008; O'Haire et al., 2013).

### **Equine Assisted Interventions**

Equine therapy is a broad term used to describe different interventions that involve horses. For the purposes of this study, the term horse and pony will be used interchangeably to describe equines, which also includes mules and donkeys. This can involve both mounted (e.g., riding) and groundwork (e.g., grooming). Equine Assisted Interventions (EAI) are therapeutic interventions that involve a horse to promote wellbeing and is based on the relationship with the horse (De Santis et al., 2017). There are many different variations of EAI, including Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy which involves a qualified psychotherapist facilitating the therapeutic intervention.

Research has shown that horses can have a positive impact on psychological distress (Fry, 2013; Wilkie et al., 2016). However, in much of the research, there are often issues with the credibility of the findings. Stern and Chur-Hansen (2019) highlight issues with the methodology in the current literature which weaken the conclusions drawn. Much of the research is quantitative with unstandardised outcome measures. There also appears to be confusion around the terminology and what is considered 'therapy' (Kruger & Serpell, 2010). Furthermore, a large portion of studies on EAI focus on physical health, making the evidence-base for mental health very limited (Stern & Chur-Hansen, 2019). As such, the current evidence-base for EAI is mixed, with some research and anecdotal support, it is an area that would benefit from more research to build an evidence base that can be used when making recommendations about interventions for those with mental health difficulties.

### **Theoretical frameworks for EAI**

EAI is often presented as a 'final' option after 'traditional' talking therapies have not been helpful to that person (Kendall et al., 2015). As above, the evidence base for EAI is mixed, and there is no widely used or empirically supported theoretical framework as a result (Kruger & Serpell, 2010). There are different perspectives on how EAI can potentially have positive impacts.

#### ***Attachment Theory***

Attachment theory can be a useful theory to draw upon when considering how EAI can be helpful from a relational perspective. Bonds between infant and caregiver developed in childhood can form a foundation for how we experience relationships (Bowlby, 1969). For some people, early attachment figures may have been difficult, with experiences of abuse, neglect and feelings of unsafety. From this, being in a relationship with another person may feel scary and unsafe and it can be difficult to try and build relationships as a result. This could be an explanation as to why 'traditional' talking therapies have not been helpful as they rely heavily on building a therapeutic relationship with another person (Thompson, 2000). The horse provides safety to build a relationship with as they harbour a 'non-judgemental' presence. It could also be that the horse serves a social mediator for building a relationship with the therapist by creating a more relaxed and less threatening environment (Kruger & Serpell, 2010). Through learning to build the relationship with the horse, individuals can feel empowered to build relationships with others as they learn to regulate their emotions and physical and mental state (Walton et al., 2021).

#### ***Cognitive Learning***

Cognitive Learning theories could also explain possible therapeutic benefits of EAI. One aspect of cognitive learning theories is that learning takes place when behaviour is modelled. Many EAI include learning through observation and practicing skills with the horse (Kruger & Serpell, 2010). It is thought that the horse in this context is particularly helpful as the horse gives instant feedback (Brooks, 2001). For example, if someone is anxious when approaching a horse, the horse will respond to this, mirroring their behaviour. This is also true if someone worked on being calm, the horse would respond and become

more relaxed. Individuals learn to pick up on the horse's cues and will also focus on how they are feeling and how to regulate themselves (Jolly, 2022). Furthermore, people have reported to become more aware of themselves and their body when working with horses therapeutically (Hemingway et al., 2019). The presence of a horse may enable individuals to learn about their own emotions through observation and then practice emotion regulation skills.

### **Individual and Family Interventions**

Much of the current research focuses on individual experiences of EAI and little is known about the impact of involving families, especially when working with young people. This is important to consider given young people exist within a system of parents and guardians. Parental interaction is thought to influence a child's behaviour and development (Popov & Ilesanmi, 2015). Research has explored how the inclusion of parents in therapeutic interventions improves family functioning, such as improvements in problem solving, communication, emotion regulation and implementing boundaries, as well as reducing the difficulties experienced by the children and young people in the family (Adams, 2001). More recent research has investigated the impact of family involvement in equine assisted learning, highlighting positive impacts on both the young person and family functioning (Solarz, 2019). From this, it makes sense that for interventions involving young people, there is also an opportunity to involve caregivers to extend any positive impacts or behavioural changes beyond the individual therapy.

### **Think Like a Pony**

Think Like a Pony (TLAP) is a community interest company established in 2013. TLAP supports young people and families through EAI. TLAP support vulnerable young people who have often tried other forms of therapy which has not been helpful. The Youth Development Programme (YDP) empowers young people to develop skills by teaching the young person how to communicate with the pony and ride in a balanced way. For example, young people learn how to care for the pony and understand the pony's needs and how to respond in an empathetic and respectful way. In turn, this improves a young person's psychological wellbeing and teaches the young person important skills and about relationships.

***Family Development Programme***

The Family Development Programme (FDP) aims to help parents/guardians implement and support young people to implement the same strategies in the YDP, by teaching the parents/guardians the skills themselves. Whilst there is flexibility in how the FDP is run, the FDP is initially run without the young person and just with the parents/guardians. The FDP is a mix of four sessions that are classroom-based exercises and practical groundwork sessions with a pony, aiming to build a range of different skills (see Table 1 for session overview).

Table 1

*Session overview*

Session	Brief description	Working with the pony
<p><b>1. Breathing</b></p>	<p>This is the first session where the parent/guardian will learn about breathing techniques and the theory behind this. In particular, bringing awareness to their breathing and the importance of breathing fully, rather than shallow breathing which is linked to a stress response.</p>	<p>After some practice, they will go and practice the breathing skills with the pony, by standing by and touching the pony. The pony will respond to their breathing by relaxing (e.g., lowering their head) or becoming alert and tense (e.g., putting their ears back and raising their heads).</p>
<p><b>2. Intention</b></p>	<p>In this session, the parent/guardian will learn about how to communicate in an authentic. They will spend some time thinking about how the body responds to positive and negative thoughts and how this impacts the words they say.</p>	<p>The parents/guardians will practice moving around the pony. In particular, walking around the back of the pony (something that has been widely told not to do due to risk of the pony kicking). They will focus on the process of completing this task. The parents/guardians are also learning to pay attention to the pony's intention based on what they learned about the pony's relaxed and tense states from the first session.</p>
<p><b>3. Body language</b></p>	<p>Parents/guardians continue to learn about aspects of communication and will consider their body language, including facial expressions.</p>	<p>Again, parents/guardians will then spend time with the ponies, paying attention to the pony moving in and out of their personal space, as well their own body language.</p>



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Session	Brief description	Working with the pony
<b>4. Have a plan</b>	This session focuses on how to use their voice and having a plan when communicating. For example, breaking tasks down into steps and building on the skills in the previous sessions (first breathing, then thinking about their intention and what they are trying to communicate, then their body language matching this intention).	The practical session with the pony will involve asking the pony to complete a task (e.g., to stop or step back). As above, this will require the parent/ guardian to notice their own breathing, intention, body language and make a plan. They will then communicate this to the pony and pay attention to the pony's signals as above. Each time they are practicing the skills from the sessions.

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### **Aims**

The aim of this Service Evaluation Project (SEP) was to evaluate the FDP at TLAP. This SEP explored the parents/guardians overall experience of the FDP whilst also looking at the different skills (e.g., emotion regulation and communication skills) aimed within the programme. The SEP also aimed to explore the impact of the pony in this programme. This SEP was commissioned by Lynn Henry (TLAP founder).

## **Method**

### **Design**

This project adopted a qualitative research design with the aim of exploring parent/guardian's experiences of the FDP. Given the limited research on EAI and the involvement of families in current literature, as well as no specific EAI outcome measures which would capture the nuances of this programme, interviews were chosen to collect a rich data set. Also, the small pool of participants (around 50 participants had completed the FDP at the time of recruitment) meant it would be difficult to collect enough meaningful data to fit with a quantitative design.

### **Data Collection**

#### ***Interviews***

An interview was completed with each participant lasting around 30 minutes. The interviews schedule (appendix A) was developed with TLAP by capturing background information (such as the circumstances leading to a referral to TLAP) and considering the overall evaluation of the FDP and the impact of the FDP. All interviews were recorded on Microsoft teams. Please note, the interviews were completed between May-June 2023.

#### ***Participants and Recruitment***

The participants for this project had completed the FDP at TLAP. Most participants were also the parent/guardian of a young person who had completed the YDP, although this was not a requirement to participate in the project. There was a total of nine participants in the project.

### **Procedure**

Eligible participants were initially contacted by TLAP staff via email about the project. The email contained the Participant Information Sheet (PIS- appendix B) and participants were asked to contact the researcher if they were interested in the project. At this point, the interview was arranged between the researcher and participant. Most interviews took place over Microsoft Teams, although there was the option to complete the interviews face to face at TLAP which was done with one participant. Once enough participants had been

recruited, another email was sent by TLAP staff thanking everyone for showing an interest and that the data collection was completed.

Before the interview took place, participants were asked if they had read the PIS and whether they had any further questions. The consent form (appendix C) was gone through and either signed by the participant or verbal consent recorded prior to the interview commencing. After the interview, participants were thanked, and an email was sent with further resources for participants to access (appendix D). Participants were advised that they could not withdraw their data once the interview was complete as their data had informed the analysis at this point.

All interviews were completed independently of TLAP (i.e., the researcher did not disclose who had completed an interview) to ensure participants felt confident in sharing their experiences and this being kept anonymous.

### **Data Analysis**

The data was analysed using rapid qualitative analysis (Hamilton, 2013). Rapid qualitative analysis employs a realist epistemological stance, where the data generated by the participant is directly reflected in the results. As a result, there is no 'in depth' analysis where the researcher interprets the results through their own perspectives in great detail, although there may still be biases which need to be minimised (see reflexivity below). Rapid qualitative analysis is therefore quick, efficient and ideal for informing service development, which fitted with the timescale and aims of this project (see Table 2 for a summary of the steps involved in rapid qualitative analysis).

Table 2

*Summary of rapid qualitative analysis steps*

Step	Description
1	Neutral domains developed which corresponded to each interview question. For example, Has the FDP changed/impacted the family? Was named, 'Impact on the family' (appendix E).
2	Summary template developed and used for analysis (appendix F).
3	The summary template was tested and fitted with the data.
4	Each data set was analysed using the summary template.
5	The final step was to group all the participant's data together into themes.

**Credibility Check**

The final themes were checked with an academic tutor and another trainee clinical psychologist to see if they made sense. Changes were made to the initial themes developed whilst maintaining the epistemological stance of the project.

### **Reflexivity**

Within qualitative research, it is best practice to acknowledge the researcher's position and influences (Dodgson, 2019). I had spent some time at TLAP before the project was developed and found EAI interesting. Growing up around horses, I have positive associations. I was aware of this and tried to make sure I had a clear interview guide that had been developed alongside my academic tutor to keep the interviews focused and in line with the aims of the projects and to minimise the risk of my own bias. In line with the project's commissioning, I had some awareness of how TLAP is funded and how research projects like this can influence this. To maintain the integrity of the project, I made sure all interviews were completed independently of TLAP and the participants were not disclosed to TLAP.

### **Ethics**

This project received ethical approval by the School of Medicine Ethics Committee at the University of Leeds (DCLinREC 22-011).

## Results

A total of eight interviews were completed with nine participants (one interview was completed jointly). Of the participants who completed an interview, eight out of nine had a young person who had attended the YDP. In all cases, the FDP was suggested by TLAP. The participants were five parents, three grandparents (also the main carers for a young person in the family) and a kinship foster carer. See Table 3 for information about the referrals. The themes developed from the data have been captured in Figure 1. A selection of quotes relating to each theme have been included. Pseudonyms have been used to keep participants and their families anonymous.

Table 3

### *Referral information*

Source of referral	Reason for referral*
Self-referred (3/9)	Crisis or longstanding challenges (8/9)
School (3/9)	Previous or current therapeutic intervention not helpful (3/9)
CAMHS (2/9)	Battling with services to get help (3/9)
Social worker (1/9)	Interested in what FDP provided (some challenges but not the reason for referral) (1/9)

\*There may have been multiple reasons why someone was referred to TLAP, for example, being in a crisis situation and previous interventions not helping

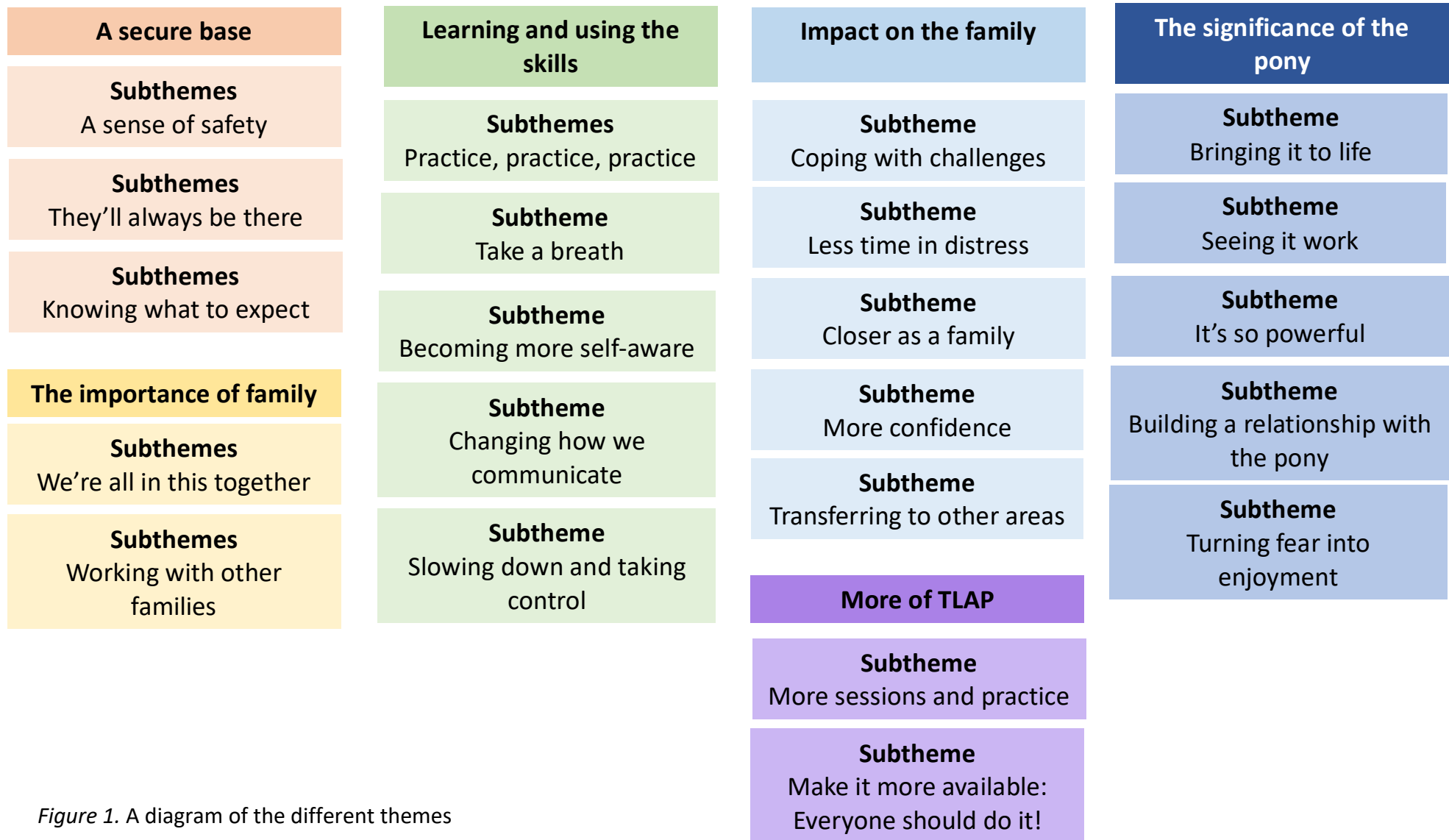


Figure 1. A diagram of the different themes

### **A secure base**

Participants related to TLAP as a 'secure base' and spoke about the TLAP environment feeling safe and consistent.

### ***A sense of safety***

Given the level of distress many of the families were experiencing when they first came to TLAP and the vulnerability experienced when completing the FDP, feeling safe was for many essential.

*"You just felt immediately at ease. Staff were just really friendly and what I got was the openness and transparency which is vital and I think is missing from a lot of services. You feel welcome and you feel valued and that for me overall was really important." (P4)*

*"There's something about the way that Lynn is and the way that her team are that just made it really safe to be vulnerable like that." (P2)*

### ***They'll always be there***

Another important part of building a secure base was TLAP being consistently there for the participants and their family. There was also a sense that even after the FDP had ended, participants knew they could always get support from them.

*"Even now, we have a connection with them. So if we needed something... there's been a couple of times when Harper has needed to talk and we've just rung and just gone up" (P1)*

*"They are there for you, no matter what" (P6)*



### ***Knowing what to expect***

Participants reflected on how they always knew what to expect and this fed into TLAP being a secure base, as they were a transparent, trustworthy and reliable service in many of the family's life.

*"They tell you what's going to happen, you know what we are doing that day" (P9)*

*"The clarity, so at the beginning of each session they would explain exactly what we're going to do and why...so it was very clear, you could see how you were going to benefit and why you were going to benefit. It was very professional." (P3)*

### **The importance of family**

The FDP is an intervention which involves parents/guardians, and all participants mentioned the importance of the intervention having a family focus.

### ***We're all in this together***

Most participants spoke about how the FDP enabled the TLAP principles to become embedded in the family as everyone was doing them.

*"[TLAP] it goes further, it goes deeper...It actually involves you, it brings you and that child together..." (P4)*

*"...she'd done her part...But I was still me and I needed to learn and grow in that way too to enable us to harmonise" (P3)*

### ***Working with other families***

For some participants, it was also working with other families that felt helpful. In particular, a sense of not being alone and shared experiences with others.

*"...we're not the only people that are going through this" (P8)*

*“I saw those realisations being made for other people and for myself... that’s powerful because then it becomes a whole family shift and everybody looking at themselves and thinking ‘what needs to change to make this better for us?’” (P2)*

### **Learning and using the skills**

All of the participants spoke about learning the different skills and how they use them.

#### ***Practice, practice, practice***

A key part to learning the skills was practicing them, again and again. Not only when the participants were at TLAP with the ponies, but also when at home.

*“It’s something that you have to commit to” (P6)*

*“If you don’t do the work, you aren’t going to build that relationship... there’s no short cuts...” (P2)*

#### ***Take a breath***

The breathing skills was viewed as a fundamental part of the programme, with all participants mentioning the importance of breathing. Participants spoke about how this helped them to become more regulated and able to implement the other skills.

*“One of the things I realised is, I’m not even breathing properly! You know, just something as simple as that but actually is massive” (P4)*

*“I’ve learned to take a deep breath and to speak in a more measured way” (P3)*

#### ***Becoming more self-aware***

Paying attention to these different skills and how they implement them each session, participants also spoke about becoming more self-aware and realising the impact they had on the family.

*“It takes the self-awareness to recognise what’s going on for you...” (P2)*

*“...Realise your actions and words and everything you do does have an effect of the rest of the family.” (P1)*

### ***Changing how we communicate***

Many participants reported changing the way they communicate and a shared way of communicating based on the skills they had learned at TLAP.

*“We communicate better now... my relationship with Addison is better. It’s more talking rather than shouting... and explaining and listening” (P3)*

*“Shared connection is definitely what it feels like...it’s having that same language” (P5)*

### ***Slowing down and taking control***

Participants also spoke about how they started to pause and take control of situations, particularly when coping with challenges.

*“We had more control because we had more control over ourselves” (P9)*

*“Stopping and reflecting on what we’re doing, what we’re doing together as a family...” (P6)*

### ***Impact on the family***

All of the participants reflected on the impact the FDP had on the family.

### ***Coping with challenges***

Many of the participants acknowledged that there were still challenges but they felt better able to deal with these challenges due to the learning on the FDP, such as communication and breathing.

*“...we breathe with [them]... when things go bad” (P8)*

*“...If there is something going on, we can address it in the right way.” (P1)*

### ***Less time in distress***

Participants also noticed that they were less distressed as a family once they all started to implement the skills they had learned on the FDP.

*“...it’s enabled a more harmonious situation here at home...” (P3)*

*“We have noticed vast improvements since she’s attended from last year to this year. She still has a couple of blips but they’re not half as bad as they used to be” (P8)*

### ***Closer as a family***

The participants felt that what they had learned at TLAP had brought them closer together as a family. In particular, the skills they learned as part of the FDP helped with managing challenges, enabling a more relaxed environment at home, giving more opportunity for the families to reconnect.

*“When we were going through it is was all a bit like we were fractured. Whereas now, we are much more together as a family, we all chat a lot more.” (P1)*

*“And to think that I started think Like a Pony for Ellis and actually what it’s done... they have given to us as a family a whole new method, a whole new way of working, a whole new way of coming together as a family” (P6)*

### ***More confidence***

The parents/guardians reported that they felt more confident, in themselves and in setting boundaries and managing difficulties.

*“I’m so much more confident and the girls are so much more confident... which has on a day-to-day level made a big impact” (P2)*

*“I think that they run a really effective Family Development Programme. It really helps you to feel confident in yourself and believe in yourself. And feel empowered to stay calm and take control of a given situation” (P6)*

### **Transferring to other areas**

Participants also shared that they noticed they could use the skills learned in the FDP in other areas of their lives and noticed an impact in doing this.

*“You can actually use those skills in other communications with other professionals, other challenges that you might come up against with other people in your life” (P6)*

*“Close your eyes. Let’s go back to TLAP’ and straight away she did the breathing. So, we’re applying what we’re learning in everyday situations” (P4)*

### **The significance of the pony**

The pony plays an important role in how participants experience the FDP.

### **Bringing it to life**

The participants spoke about how practicing the skills with the ponies enabled them to learn how to do the skills after learning the theoretical background to the skills, bringing the theory to life.

*“When they give you a pony and you’re having to do stuff then it becomes more real” (P3)*

*“If you hadn’t have done that stuff practically then you wouldn’t know what it was that your child was doing...it would just all be theoretical” (P5)*

### ***Seeing it work***

Seeing the impact of what they were doing also had a big impact on them. For example, changing how they were breathing led to the pony changing their body language in response to this.

*“It’s almost like they become a mirror to you of how you’re feeling. You know if you’re unsettled and you’re near that pony, they become unsettled and it makes you reflect and look at you. And actually, you’re projecting onto them how you’re feeling.” (P4)*

*“...once we started to relax and do our breathing, then you could feel the just the tension just going from the pony, it was amazing” (P7)*

### ***It’s so powerful***

A number of participants spoke about learning with the ponies being powerful, particularly when they saw what they were doing working, and this instilled a sense of achievement.

*“When you do it, you get a real big sense of achievement... I actually can do this” (P1)*

*“It was jaw dropping, the only word I can use is ‘magic’” (P4)*

### ***Turning the fear into enjoyment***

A big part of working with the ponies were the initial fear they had turning into enjoyment.

*“I love being with horses now, it’s not something that frightens me anymore” (P5)*

*“It’s great...there’s no fear there now” (P9)*

### ***Building a relationship with the pony***

The skills used to build a relationship and trust with the pony are those that they use in the relationships with their family. The pony gives the opportunity to build these skills by giving

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them instant feedback (e.g., if they are unsettled, the pony becomes unsettled) whereas the complexity of human interaction can make this difficult.

*“It’s about teaching people to be in relationships. With themselves and others, and the pony is the vehicle for that” (P2)*

*“The ponies are authentic, and I think very quickly that becomes a safe opportunity to be in relationship [with the pony]” (P2)*

### **More of TLAP**

Participants spoke about wanting more of the TLAP experience, including more sessions and wanting more families to be reached.

### ***More sessions and practice***

*“You can tell that there is so much more that you could do, if say it was double the amount of sessions, so 8 sessions instead of 4” (P3)*

*“...the more you did it the more you learned how to breathe better. I suppose they could’ve extended it a couple of weeks. Instead of being 4 weeks, maybe 6 weeks” (P8)*

### ***Make it more available: Everyone should do it!***

*“The whole foundation of the FDP I believe should be opened out throughout primary and statutory services” (P4)*

*“...we have a child with significant complex needs and it’s so powerful that it seems to me ridiculous that it’s not embraced and used more effectively for children and families that are going through difficult times...That’s not about Think Like a Pony, that’s about services accessing it...and funding” (P6)*

## **Discussion**

The aim of this SEP was to evaluate the FDP at TLAP. The findings and attribution of the positive change, strengths and limitations and conclusions and recommendations are discussed.

### **Attributions of Positive Change**

All of the participants reflected on the different skills they learned and reported improvements in their relationships, especially with the young people in their family. Participants also reflected that they felt they were closer as a family, able to cope with challenges and overall were less distressed. There was also discussion around parents/guardians feeling more confident and that this had an impact on being able to implement boundaries, keeping the young people in their family safe.

### ***Secure Base***

Participants talked about TLAP in ways that related to a 'secure base'. Linked to attachment theory, a secure base refers to a caregiver who is reliable, consistent and able to meet the individual's needs. As mentioned above, many of the families were experiencing a high level of distress when they first came to TLAP, with some feeling this was the 'last resort' for the family. It was important that TLAP was a safe, reliable and consistent service in the family's life. Similarly, participants spoke about the excellent care that TLAP provided for the horses. Tedeschi, Jenkins and Perry (2019) suggest that seeing how the therapists speaks about and treats the horse can serve as a foundation of trust of how the therapist may treat them, thus helping to build a therapeutic relationship between the individual and therapist.

### ***Importance of Family***

Most participants spoke about how the FDP enabled the TLAP to become embedded in the family. This aligns with research exploring the importance of family in EAI (Solarz, 2019) and is helpful when considering interventions for young people. Furthermore, for some participants, it was also working with other families that felt helpful and the group element of the FDP was important in not feeling alone. Spiegel and Yalom (1978) suggest that many factors can contribute to groups being helpful, such as a feeling of not being alone and



'alienated' from others, the experience of helping others and the presence of hope that this has helped other families.

### ***Learning and Using the Skills***

A key part to embedding the skills was practising them, especially with the horses and then transferring to other areas of their lives. The breathing skills was viewed as a fundamental part of the programme, with all participants mentioning the importance of breathing.

Crockett (2014) highlights the importance of breathing on emotion regulation and links this to building attachments with others. The breathing skills are used to help feel calm and regulated and therefore better able to relate with others.

Participants also spoke about becoming more self-aware and realising the impact they had on the family. Participants also spoke about how they started to pause and take control of situations, helping them to cope with challenges more effectively. Communication skills was also another aspect of what participants learned on the FDP and many reported changing the way they communicate. Popov and Ilesanmi (2015) highlight the importance of communication in the parent/guardian relationship with the young person in their family, which aligns with what the participants were saying.

### ***Significance of the Pony***

For all of the participants, the pony was an essential part to the FDP and the positive changes that come from this. In line with current literature on EAI, one possible mechanism for changes associated with EAI could be the reduction in arousal and anxiety when working with the pony (Hemingway et al., 2019). A significant theme that came up for many participants was how their initial fear of ponies shifted to fun and enjoyment over time. It appears that the ponies at TLAP have helped the participants to feel more relaxed and helped to regulate their emotions and arousal.

Many participants spoke about how the pony brought the programme to life, helping them to learn the different skills. Linked to this, many participants spoke about how 'seeing it work' with the pony was also a key part to learning the skills. Seeing the pony relax and

respond to their presence was a significant part of the programme and helped participants build self-awareness skills and practice implementing the different techniques such as the breathing. Learning through observation and getting instant feedback from the pony has been highlighted in the current literature (Brooks, 2001; Kruger & Serpell, 2010) and a valuable part of the FDP.

Another feature of involving the pony was the ability to build a relationship with the pony. A key part of TLAP is learning how to be in relationships and the pony was safe to do this. As mentioned in the current literature, individuals can feel empowered to build relationships with others as they learn to regulate themselves when working with the ponies (Walton et al., 2021). This appears to have been the case for many participants in the FDP who report a positive change in their relationships.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Whilst the sample size was small (nine participants), this fitted with the scope of the SEP and was a reasonable sample size out of the 50 participants that had completed the FDP at the time. There was a mix of parents and carers. All participants had young people in the family that had completed the YDP except one participant. Whilst this sample aimed to be representative of the small proportion of people that had completed the FDP at the time, future research could look at larger sample sizes and exploring the long-term impacts of the FDP.

The participants were self-selecting and therefore anonymous to the TLAP team. As mentioned, all participants still had some involvement with TLAP creating a possible bias of positive experiences being captured. That being said, there was room for negative feedback and room for improvement which some participants did comment on. It is hoped that the anonymity of the participants and the independence of the researcher from TLAP, enabled participants to speak freely.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The findings from this project show the positive impact the FDP has had on families. The aim of this SEP was to explore the parents/guardians overall experience of the FDP whilst also looking at the different skills (e.g., emotion regulation and communication skills) and the impact of the pony. See Table 4 for recommendations.

Table 4

*Recommendations from the SEP*

<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>1. Funding to continue and sustain and grow TLAP and the FDP</b>	<p>The FDP has been a ‘lifeline’ for a lot of the families that participated in the project. All of the participants felt that TLAP provided an essential service and they hoped it would continue. Securing funding to enable TLAP to continue is key to continuing the vital support they are offering young people and families.</p>
<b>2. To explore possibilities of FDP and work at TLAP being preventative and offered to more vulnerable families</b>	<p>Many of the participants reported being in ‘crisis’ prior to the FDP, and TLAP feeling like a last resort. It was felt that TLAP being utilised proactively would be helpful, especially for the young people and families that are supported by social care. A lot of the participants wanted the FDP to be available to everyone and could see how beneficial it could be for others.</p>
<b>3. To extend the sessions of the FDP</b>	<p>Some participants felt that more sessions to consolidate some of the learning would be helpful. There were also some points about more practice with the ponies as well.</p>

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Recommendation	Description
<b>4. To offer 'top up' sessions</b>	Similar to the recommendation of more session, participants also felt it would be good to have 'top up' sessions after the FDP had finished, in particular to have opportunity to practice the skills with the pony again.
<b>5. To encourage participants to keep a reflective log*</b>	One participant suggested that it could be useful to encourage participants to keep a reflective log of their experience and TLAP

\*Please note, this has since been implemented at TLAP since the data was collected

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### **Dissemination**

The SEP has been shared at University of Leeds SEP conference and website. The findings of the SEP have also been shared with the TLAP team and summaries will be shared with families at TLAP.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A- Interview schedule

#### Interview schedule

##### Introductions

- Cover consent (including recording)
- Expectations of interview (e.g., don't have to answer a questions if don't want to, can pause/take a break, will be maximum of 30 mins)
- Any questions
- Pseudonyms- for you and young person

##### Background information

*I'm going to ask some questions about your situation before starting work with TLAP*

- When was the first contact with TLAP:
  - - Was the young person/people referred to TLAP (youth development programme) first?
    - How did you hear about TLAP?
    - Who made the referral?
- Why was a referral to TLAP made/what were the challenges?
- (If different) why did you participate in the family development programme?

##### What went well?

*I'm going to ask some questions about your overall experience at TLAP and the family development programme*

- What worked well for you?
- Where there any particularly important aspects of the programme?
- Anything else that went well?

##### Are there any suggested improvements or things that didn't work so well?

- Anything you would like more of?
- Anything you would like less of?
- Anything that wasn't helpful or unhelpful?
- Any suggested improvements?

##### Family Development Programme: what have **you** learned?

*I'm going to ask some questions about your experience of the TLAP family development programme*

- What have you learned from the family development programme?
  - Emotion regulation skills (e.g. breathing skills)
  - Communication (e.g. body language/tone of voice)
  - Building positive relationships (e.g. respect and trust)
  - Self-awareness (e.g. body language, breathing, emotions)

##### Family Development Programme: How has this impacted the **family/young person/situation?**



## Service Evaluation Project: Evaluation of the Family Development Programme at Think Like a Pony

*I'm going to ask some questions about how you feel the TLAP family development programme has impacted the family, young person/people and situation*

- Has the TLAP family development programme changed/impacted the family?
  - How?
  - Examples?
  - How is this different from the youth development programme?
- Has the TLAP family development programme changed/impacted the young person/people?
  - How?
  - Examples?
  - How is this different from the youth development programme?
- Has the TLAP family development programme changed/impacted the situation described above (i.e. why the referral to TLAP was made)
  - How?
  - Examples?
  - How is this different from the youth development programme?

### **The impact of the pony?**

*A unique part of TLAP is the pony, I am going to ask some questions about what you feel the impact the pony is*

- What were your initial thoughts about working with a pony?
- How have you found working with a pony?
- How do you think the pony has helped with some of the skills you have developed?

### **Any other comments?**

**Thank participant for taking part in the project.**

## **Appendix B- Participant information Sheet**

### **Participant Information Sheet**

#### **Evaluation of the Family Development Programme at Think Like a Pony**

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

#### **What is the purpose of the project?**

The aim of this project is to evaluate the family development programme. The family development programme aims to help parents/guardians to support young people to implement the strategies they have learned at Think Like a Pony (TLAP), by teaching the parents/guardians the skills themselves. This evaluation will explore the impact of the TLAP family development programme on the parent/guardian and how this translates to the young person. The hopes are that findings from this project will help be used to improve and develop the family development programme further.

This project is being carried out by Hannah Own (Trainee Clinical Psychologist) at the university of Leeds. This was organised by Lynn Henry (Founder of TLAP). This project is being supervised by Dr Beckie Yeates (Academic tutor) at the University of Leeds.

#### **Why have I been chosen?**

You have been chosen to take part in this project because you have completed the TLAP family development programme. For this project, you will also be the parent/guardian of a young person who has participated in the project. Parent/guardians must be able to understand and communicate in English.

#### **Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw at any time during the interview. You do not have to give a reason. Once the interview is complete, you will not be able to withdraw your data from the study.

It is your choice to take part in the interview. Any involvement (or not) in the project will not affect your involvement with TLAP.

### **What do I have to do?**

If you decide to take part in the project you will complete one interview with Hannah which will last up to 30 minutes. The interviews will take place either in person at TLAP in a private space or online (e.g. via MS Teams/Zoom). During the interview you will be asked questions about your experiences of the family development programme at TLAP. This is a chance for you to share your experiences and views about the programme and the impact this has had on you and your family. All questions are optional and you will be asked some demographic information (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity).

If you would like any further information about the project, contact details are provided at the end of the information sheet.

### **What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

It is hoped that this project will be a positive experience, however, some questions are around your experiences and challenges within the family. If you become upset, you can speak with Hannah who can provide support. Additionally, if you feel you can no longer continue, you can leave without giving a reason. There will also be the opportunity to speak with staff at TLAP and written information about how to access further support will be provided.

### **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will help further improve and develop the family development programme at TLAP. It can also be a positive experience to talk and reflect on your experiences.

### **Use, dissemination and storage of research data**

All information will be kept confidential. Once you have emailed the researcher with interest in the project, you are consenting to the researcher obtaining personal contact information (e.g. name, email address and contact number).

Interviews will be audio recorded on Microsoft teams (or a similar platform permitted through the University of Leeds Information Governance pathway) and all files stored securely (password protected) on storage permitted through the University of Leeds Information Governance policy (e.g., OneDrive) and be transcribed into password protected files.

The results will be written up in a report which will be available on the University of Leeds website. The project will also be presented at the University of Leeds. The results and report will also be shared with TLAP to improve and develop the family development programme and may be published in an academic journal. All data will be anonymised in reports and publications.

Further information relating to this can be found at: [Privacy Notice for Research](#)

### **What will happen to the results of the research project?**

All the contact information that we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and will be stored separately from the research data. We will take steps wherever possible to anonymise the research data so that you will not be identified in any reports or publications.

Sometimes it is not possible to keep everything confidential, for example if during your interview, information is disclosed about a risk to your safety or the safety of others. If this does happen, the

appropriate staff would be informed (e.g., staff at TLAP in the first instance) and appropriate support would be provided. It may also be necessary to provide any information relating to risk to other organisations. Further written information can be provided around this including where to get further help and support.

**Contact for further information**

This project is being carried out by Hannah Own (Trainee Clinical Psychologist) and can be contacted via email at [umho@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:umho@leeds.ac.uk).

You can also contact Lynn Henry at TLAP [info@thinklikeapony.co.uk](mailto:info@thinklikeapony.co.uk) and Dr Beckie Yeates ([r.a.yeates@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:r.a.yeates@leeds.ac.uk)).

**Who has reviewed this study?**

Ethical approval has been given for this study by the School of Medicine Ethics Committee at the University of Leeds (details once ethical approval has been given)

**How do I sign up?**

If you would like to participate in the project you can contact the researcher (Hannah Own) at [umho@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:umho@leeds.ac.uk) to arrange a time and date for the interview.

**Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.**

**Appendix C- Consent form**

**Consent form**

Please read the following statements:

1. I confirm that I am happy to participate in the research project.
2. I am happy for the researcher to have my personal contact details (name, email address, contact number) to contact me about the project. I understand my details will be deleted once the interview has taken place.
3. I am happy that I have been provided with answers to any questions or further information has been provided.
4. I agree to being audio recorded for the interviews.
5. I understand the audio recording will be stored securely will not be shared with anyone else except relevant members of the research team.
6. I understand my data will be transcribed and reported in the research report and being published. I consent to the report containing elements of my data and this being integrated with other participant's data.
7. I understand I can withdraw from the project during the interview. Once the interview has been completed, I cannot withdraw my data as this has informed the project and analysis.
8. I understand that any information relating to risk (i.e., to myself or others) will be passed onto staff at TLAP in the first instance. I understand this information may also be passed onto relevant services/organisations and I will be provided with further information about help and support.

My Name \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number \_\_\_\_\_

My preferred method of contact is

Email

Telephone

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

*Appendix D- Further resources*

**Further help and support:**

If you require any additional support, please contact your GP in the first instance. In an emergency, please call 999.

Other services and organisations include:

**The Samaritans**

Website: <https://www.samaritans.org/>

Telephone number: 116 123

**Mind**

Website: <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/crisis-services/>

Telephone number: 0300 123 3393

For support for young people, please contact their GP, Social Worker or Mental Health professional (e.g. CAMHS) for further support. As above, in an emergency, please call 999.

*Appendix E- Step 1 of rapid qualitative analysis*

**Rapid Qualitative Analysis**

Step 1- Neutral domains

Question	Domain
<i>Background information- Your situation before starting work with TLAP</i>	
When was the first contact with TLAP?	First contact with TLAP
Was the young person/people referred to TLAP (youth development programme) first?	
How did you hear about TLAP?	
Who made the referral?	Circumstances prior to TLAP
Why was a referral to TLAP made/what were the challenges?	
(If different) why did you participate in the family development programme?	
<i>What went well- overall experience at TLAP and the Family Development Programme (FDP)</i>	
What worked well for you?	What worked well on the FDP- overall evaluation
Where there any particularly important aspects of the programme?	
Anything else went well?	
<i>Suggested improvements- overall experience at TLAP and the Family Development Programme (FDP)</i>	
Anything you would have liked more of?	What didn't work well on the FDP- overall evaluation
Anything you would have liked less of?	
Anything that was helpful or unhelpful?	
Any suggested improvements?	Suggested improvements
<i>Experience of the TLAP family development programme- what the parent/carer learned</i>	
What have you learned from the FDP?	Learning for parent/carer on FDP
Emotion regulation skills	
Communication	
Building positive relationships	
Self-awareness	
<i>How the FDP has impacted the family, young person/people and situation</i>	
Has the FDP changed/impacted the family? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How?</li> <li>• Examples?</li> <li>• How is this different from the YDP?</li> </ul>	Impact on the family

<p>Has the FDP changed/impacted the young person?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How?</li> <li>• Examples?</li> <li>• How is this different from the YDP?</li> </ul>	Impact on the young person
<p>Has the FDP changed/impacted the situation described above (i.e. why the referral was made- if applicable)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How?</li> <li>• Examples?</li> <li>• How is this different from the YDP?</li> </ul>	Impact on the situation/circumstances
<i>Impact of the pony</i>	
What were your initial thoughts about working with a pony?	Impact of the pony
How have you found working with a pony?	
How do you think the pony has helped with some of the skills you have developed?	



*Appendix F- Step 2 of rapid qualitative analysis*

**Rapid Qualitative Analysis**

Step 2- Summary template

Participant number:	
<i>Background information- Your situation before starting work with TLAP</i>	
First contact with TLAP	
Circumstances prior to TLAP	
<i>What went well- overall experience at TLAP and the Family Development Programme (FDP)</i>	
What worked well on the FDP- overall evaluation	
<i>Suggested improvements- overall experience at TLAP and the Family Development Programme (FDP)</i>	
What didn't work well on the FDP- overall evaluation	
Suggested improvements	
<i>Experience of the TLAP family development programme- what the parent/carer learned</i>	
Learning for parent/carer on FDP	
<i>How the FDP has impacted the family, young person/people and situation</i>	
Impact on the family	
Impact on the young person	
Impact on the situation/circumstances	

<i>Impact of the pony</i>
Impact of the pony