

# The Helping Horse: How Equine Assisted Learning Contributes to the Wellbeing of First Nations Youth in Treatment for Volatile Substance Misuse

There is growing interest in Canada about what is commonly referred to as horse therapy and treating individuals who problematically misuse volatile substances. Bringing the two topics together, our study examines if and how the Saskatchewan-based Cartier Farms Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) program contributes to the wellbeing of First Nations youth in treatment for volatile substance misuse (VSM) at the White Buffalo Youth Inhalant Treatment Program at Sturgeon Lake First Nation.

Our study is framed within the holistic bio-psycho-social-spiritual framework of healing applied by the White Buffalo Youth Inhalant Treatment Centre. Its complementarity with Cartier Farm's EAL program addresses whether EAL contributes to the wellbeing of First Nations youth who misuse volatile substances; in theory it does. A case-study design was applied in our exploratory, community-based research project to specifically examine how EAL contributes to youths' wellbeing.

Through the use of stories, which reflect a First Nations cultural approach to knowing, this study shares how the EAL horses, facilitators and program content contributed to youths' wellbeing in multiple ways and to various extents. The youths' experiences of the EAL program positively impacted the physical, mental/emotional, social, spiritual and cultural aspects of the youth, and the horse was a key helper to all of this:

- ❧ The youth experienced physical wellbeing largely through physical touch and interacting with the horse;
- ❧ The youth experienced social wellbeing primarily through developing relationships; bettering their communication; having an important new experience; and positive change in their behavior;
- ❧ The youth experienced mental/emotional wellbeing mostly through increased self-identity; increased self-worth; improved ability to problem solve; and more positive attitude;

- ❧ The youth experienced spiritual wellbeing mainly through just being with the horse and developing a bond;
- ❧ The horse has a cultural significance for some First Nations youth in the EAL program. The horse offered the White Buffalo staff a tangible connection for teaching the youth about who they are.

Since the widely-played media clip in 1993 of Innu youth in Davis Inlet, Labrador getting high by sniffing gasoline, there has been on-going interest in effective ways to treat this health issue. Based on the findings of this study, key policy and practice implications warranting attention are:

- ❧ Recognizing that the horse and First Nations culture are historically linked, and that there is room for further understanding about this in the context of EAL;
- ❧ Acknowledging the lack of research in the EAL field, and with youth who misuse volatile substances, and that the findings of this study show significant promise;
- ❧ Valuing a multi-disciplinary, community-based team approach to researching the diverse areas of EAL and VSM;
- ❧ Practicing traditional First Nations ceremony to ensure a 'good' and respectful research process;
- ❧ Being familiar with a case study design so that in-depth accounts of the EAL program can be communicated to decision makers for whom this is an unknown area; and
- ❧ Understanding that there is significant variation in how EAL is applied across programs and therefore a need for exploratory and evaluation studies designed specific to individual programs.

