



On Behalf of Their Animal Friends: Involving Children in Animal Advocacy

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To cite this article: Jyotsna Pattnaik (2004) On Behalf of Their Animal Friends: Involving Children in Animal Advocacy, *Childhood Education*, 81:2, 95-100, DOI: [10.1080/00094056.2005.10522248](https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2005.10522248)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2005.10522248>



Published online: 25 Jul 2012.



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On Behalf of Their Animal Friends

Involving Children in Animal Advocacy

Children and teachers in 750 kindness clubs (organized by the World Society for the Protection of Animals, WSPA) in 32 African countries are actively involved in coordinating rural animal clinics and participate in clinic activities including the treatment of these animals. (WSPA, n.d.)

Blanca Villarreal's class at Austin Elementary in Harlingen, Texas, collected and recycled plastic ring tops from soda cans to prevent seagulls and other animals from becoming tangled in them. (The Humane Society of the United States, 2003, ¶ 3)

The two news items shared above bear testimony to children's commitment to the welfare of animals. Animals have occupied a central place in the physical and emotional lives of children across cultures, as is evident in a gamut of animal-related products, places, and hobbies that are of interest to children, such as books, videos, software programs, stickers, toys and games, live and virtual pets, zoos, and sea worlds.

Since time immemorial, animals have been serving human society in at least three broad roles: as teachers, as healers, and as companions and friends (Pattnaik, 2004). As teachers, animals have been used as symbols to convey cultural wisdom and moral lessons, as reflected in proverbs from various cultures and such stories and tales as *Aesop's Fables* and the *Jataka Tales* (from India). Animals' potential role in children's educational and emotional development is gaining wider acceptance. Teachers in many countries have begun to include pet animals as integral members of their classroom communities. Animals also have served the role of healers in ancient cultures as well as in modern medical practices. Originally developed by Boris Levinson, an American child psychotherapist, the technique of "pet therapy" is frequently used in hospitals, nursing homes, and with children all over the world. Dogs also are used as companions for children with special needs (Hart, Hart, & Bergin, 1987) and for people who are blind. Children's authors around the world have championed the companion aspect of the human-animal relationship. John Heffernan's (2001) *My Dog* (Australia's 2002 "Children's Book of the Year for Younger Readers") is set during the crisis in Kosovo and centers around the optimism and courage of a boy whose only companion is a dog he rescued from a dying man. The dog serves as a constant companion

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While both ancient and modern cultures emphasize the importance of animals to the human society, we are witnessing rising incidences of cruelty towards animals and growing endangerment of the world's animals and the ecosystem. Although some governments and animal advocacy organizations are acting to protect the welfare of animals, many feel the need for proactive measures, especially those that concern educating and involving children in animal welfare and advocacy activities.

NEED FOR INVOLVING CHILDREN IN ANIMAL ADVOCACY

Many recent publications have focused on the benefits of child-animal relationships (e.g., Jalongo, 2004; Melson, 2001; Myers, 1998). Using the child-animal relationship as an important mediator, the author will argue the need for preparing school children as caring, compassionate, and eco-friendly individuals.

Benefits of Child-Animal Relationships

Researchers in the United States have reported a host of benefits that accrue from the child-animal relationship, including the developmental benefits (Poresky & Hendrix, 1989). According to Levinson (1972), pet ownership provides young children with many advantages to their development, such as tactile stimulation through touching a pet, physical development through following a pet (by crawling, walking), and enjoying a pet's unconditional love and acceptance. Through cuddling, stroking, and touching pets, children nurture their sense of love and affection. Relationships with pets allow children opportunities to test their own capacities for gentleness, empathy, cruelty, and indifference (Hindley, 1999). In addition, understanding a pet's needs aids children in their journey toward empathy and perspective-taking, which represent a gradual departure from childhood egocentricity. Melson (2001) maintains that the nonverbal communication between children and their pets hones children's ability to understand the internal states of other beings through nonverbal cues.

Companion animals provide a feeling of emotional security to the developing child. In a study conducted by Kidd and Kidd (1995) that used children's drawing to explore child-pet relationships, pet-owning children between the ages of 5 through 13 placed their self figures significantly closer to their pet figures, as compared to where they placed their family member figures. The emotional security that a pet offers serves children's need for a transitional object that can link the child's inner self with the outside world (Levinson, 1980) and helps reduce stresses and anxieties that children experience from their engagement with normal

developmental tasks (Blue, 1986). Pets also serve as sounding boards children can use to share their feelings, secret experiences, and wishes. From their study, Hyde, Kurdek, and Larson (1983) reported that children who were pet owners demonstrated higher social sensitivity and interpersonal trust than non-owners. Melson maintains that the gender-neutral aspect of pet care has significant implications for children's gender role development, especially for young boys, who often very early internalize a widely held misperception that caring is a feminine domain. The field of medicine has reported a host of health benefits that accrue from the child-animal interaction as well. "Green Chimneys," a social service agency in the United States, employs animal-assisted therapy to help emotionally disturbed children cope with their difficulties.

The benefits of child-pet relationships also extend to the cognitive realm. As Melson (2001) writes, "Animals may function as a meaning system through which children make sense of themselves and their surrounding environment" (p. 13). Researchers describe educational benefits of pets and other animals, including the power of animals to motivate children's learning, cooperation, and expression (Kaufmann, 1997). Animals are increasingly used as important resources for teaching and learning (Beck & Beck, 2000). The Reading Education Assistance Dogs (R.E.A.D.) program is a case in point. The program is designed to motivate and support children with academic and reading difficulties. In the presence of a dog handler, the child reads high-quality books with animal themes to a companion dog (for about 20-30 minutes). While reading, the child touches and strokes the dog. The dog handler acts as a mediator to speak for and about the dog and to make valid points about the child's pronunciation and comprehension. After reading 10 books, and then advancing to the next level of reading, each child receives a new book "pawtographed" by the companion dog. Specific goals are set for each child and progress is documented and evaluated (for details, see Intermountain Therapy Animals, 2003). Researchers report a host of benefits for children involved in R.E.A.D. programs, such as higher reading scores, decreased absenteeism, increased use of the library, higher reading comprehension, increased confidence as readers, and improved grades (Jalongo, in press).

Studies from countries around the world report other positive findings on child-animal interactions. For example, a study of 37 elementary urban and rural schools in Australia reported that the presence of cats helped children gain knowledge of responsible pet ownership, increased cohesiveness in the class, created a calm and orderly environment, modified disruptive behavior, and reduced friction among children (European Pet Food Industry, n.d.).

Preparing Environmentally Conscious Citizens

The current call for teaching and involving children in animal welfare activities comes from a need to preserve the ecosystem, of which the animal kingdom is an integral component. Irresponsible actions of human beings, such as the feather, leather, and ivory trades, to name but a few, have endangered the lives of many animals in recent years and brought some species to the verge of extinction. Therefore, it is essential that children from all over the world understand the contributions of animals to the ecosystem, and make an enduring commitment to preserve the world's environment, including animals. Yet by emphasizing only academics, schools have reneged on their responsibility to prepare socially and environmentally responsible individuals. From her study with children, Yoon (2001) concludes that, "by at least grade 5, children have fairly robust conceptions and strong opinions about the uses and rights of the animals. Along the way in their education, these feelings are not being encouraged or even acknowledged" (p. 20).

Environmental educators around the world recommend promoting a spirit of "deep ecology" (a word first coined by the Norwegian philosopher Arnie Naess in 1972) in the school curriculum; instead of embracing anthropocentrism (the belief that human beings are the center of existence), children would develop an ecocentric attitude (that human beings are an inseparable part of the ecosystem) and engage themselves in eco-activism. Some international organizations have led efforts to involve children in voicing their concerns and propose solutions to environmental issues. In May 2002, the International Children's Conference on the Environment (ICC) was held in British Columbia, Canada, in cooperation with the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP). Eight hundred children (10-12 years old) from over 115 countries attended the conference, presented their environment projects, voiced their environmental concerns (including their concerns for the world's animals), and led discussions. Some teachers have incorporated animal-advocacy activities in their curriculum, such as teaching about endangered animals. Such topics need to be integral aspects of curriculums in classrooms around the world.

A Call for Humane Education

Humanistic educators emphasize that the curriculum in schools needs to foster a spirit of justice, goodwill, and humanity towards all life, and they maintain that children's motivation for social action comes from their engagement in all four domains of humanistic education: cognition, behavior, affect, and values (Darom,

1988; Thomas & Beirne, 2002). As Selby (1994) aptly states, "An exploration of animal welfare and rights issues may be the entry point to a wider environmental consciousness for many young people" (p. 14). Although many question current discussions on the rights of animals to live a natural life free of exploitation (Wise, 2002), the issues of animal rights are embedded in ethical and moral consideration concerning humanity's responsibility towards other beings. Tuuk (1999) argues that the existence of animals needs to be perceived beyond their instrumental values, such as the economic, environmental, or other such usefulness; rather, they should be recognized for their intrinsic value, that is, "the animal is of value for its own sake" (p. 31).

Recognizing the need for fostering responsibility towards animals among children, the World Society for the Protection of Animals, or WSPA, has implemented humane education programs in many areas of the world, including Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, that teach children compassion and respect for all lives, promote responsible pet ownership, and engage children in important community-wide animal welfare projects. WSPA has opened kindness clubs in the United States, India, England, the West Indies, Belize, Ireland, Australia, Korea, Japan, and many countries in Africa. Some states in the United States have legislated humane education laws for schools. For example, California Education Code 233.5 states, "Each teacher shall endeavor to impress upon the minds of the pupils the principles of morality, truth, justice . . . including the promotion of harmonious relations, kindness toward domestic pets, and the humane treatment of living creatures" (Official California Legislative Information, n.d.).

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

Elementary teachers have an important role to play in planting the seeds of humanistic attitude and motivation for action. Children's natural interest in animals can be an important motivational tool for their involvement in critical and analytical thinking.

Resources for Teachers

A wide variety of resources exists to help teachers plan a curriculum that integrates animal advocacy learning and action. The Web sites of various organizations, such as the Animal Assisted Lifelong Learning Institute (www.aallinstitute.ca) and Share the World (www.sharetheworld.com), have information on programs and resources for fostering a sense of compassion, respect, and empathy for animals. The Web site of the Humane Society of the United States (www.hsus.org) serves as a good resource for teachers and children researching important issues facing animals, including abuse, neglect, and animal overpopulation.

Two educational series produced by PBS, *Science in*

the Rainforest and *Journey Into Amazonia* (www.pbs.org/tal/costa_rica/index.html), are very good resources that address the specific concern about the gradual destruction of the Amazon ecosystem. The series investigates interrelationships among living and non-living beings in rainforests and the need for preserving rainforests. The Web site also provides resources for teachers and lesson ideas. The Doris Day Animal Foundation's (DDAF) program *Animals Aloud!* is a humane education program that focuses on reading aloud animal-friendly books to children (K-3) as a means of promoting empathy and compassion. Teachers can request the *Animals Aloud! Teacher's Kit* from the Foundation's Web site (www.ddaf.org/animalsaloud). The organization Animal Protection Institute (www.api4animals.org) supports teachers with ideas and resources related to animal advocacy in the curriculum. Teachers may also refer to *The KIND (Kids in Nature's Defense) News*, a monthly publication of the Humane Society of the United States, which includes articles, stories, puzzles, and project ideas that inspire children in K-6 to take action on behalf of animals. The books *Earth Kind: A Teacher's Handbook on Humane Education* (Selby, 1995) and *Teaching Compassion: A Guide for Humane Educators, Teachers, and Parents* (Raphael, Coleman, & Loar, 1999) also are valuable resources for teachers integrating humane education topics in their curriculum.

Curriculum Activities

Teachers must determine the age and grade appropriateness of activities that foster a spirit of animal advocacy. Two pedagogical approaches will facilitate effective transmission of the curriculum ideas proposed here. First, teachers need to adopt a critical thinking approach to curriculum, which requires children to examine their personal values as well as the explicit and implicit values promoted by society and by institutions that are responsible for making policies and practices related to animals. Second, such a curriculum needs to utilize Russell's (1997) pedagogical ideas of "teaching for" and "teaching with" the environment in order to foster responsible behavior, as well as to facilitate children's personal connection with the environment. With careful planning, teachers can fit animal advocacy-related themes into state/school district standards for various academic areas.

Integrating Animal Advocacy Activities in the Science Curriculum. The topic of animals often appears in science curriculum for children beginning in the early childhood years. Japanese schools incorporate various kinds of *mushi*, such as crickets, rhinoceros beetles, and stag beetles, into the curriculum. Many Japanese, having raised pet beetles, have pursued a lifelong interest in breeding beetles (Laurent, 2000). It is important that

the science curriculum move from a level of awareness to a level of critical understanding and social action. For example, to address their students' understanding of the standard "Living organisms depend on one another and on their environment for survival," a grade 4 life sciences standard in California, teachers may encourage students to write letters to elected local representatives and/or to a local newspaper in which they express their concerns regarding the welfare of marine animals in California. While teaching about the food chain, teachers may emphasize the need for protecting animals, especially the endangered species. Students may stage a mock court hearing on a legal issue involving endangered species in their communities. Children could browse the Web site of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (www.nal.usda.gov/awic/legislat/usdaleg1.htm) to explore animal welfare regulations in the United States and in other countries to make their case.

Representing Animal Advocacy Through Art. Animals can be incorporated easily into the art curriculum for children. It could be helpful to collaborate with the art departments of local colleges/universities and arrange field trips to their campuses. Students from the art departments may be invited to present lessons on famous animal artwork and artists from various countries. Care must be taken to steer children's artwork from merely an interest in animals to an expression of advocacy for animals. For example, after reading Jonathan London's book *Red Wolf Country* (1999) (appropriate for ages 4-8), which informs readers about the extinction of the red wolves in the southeastern United States through habitat destruction, trapping, and overhunting, children in a primary grade classroom could make a quilt that represents the endangered animal species in their own region. Children could send their class quilt to local and international events to express their commitment to the issue.

Learning About Renowned Animal Rights Activists. Learning about famous animal rights activists will broaden students' knowledge. Studying about such people as Henry Bergh of the United States and Richard Martin of the United Kingdom, both of whom were instrumental in establishing animal protection laws in their respective countries, will motivate young children to make their own efforts for animal welfare within and outside their own communities. Primatologist Jane Goodall's book *The Chimpanzees I Love: Saving Their World and Ours* (2001) recounts Goodall's groundbreaking work while studying the chimpanzees of Gombe National Park in Tanzania, details the remarkable similarities between chimpanzees and human beings, and invites readers to make their own efforts to protect the world's animals. During the story writing activity, teachers may encourage children to write about their own involvement in animal care and

welfare activities (including pets at home), if any, or career options/hobbies that involve studying about and caring for animals. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) honors books in a nonfiction category, "Humane Heroes," that would be good resources for teachers and children.

Nurturing a Spirit of Compassion Among Children.

It is important that children learn to watch for practices that are harmful to the well-being of animals in their own homes, communities, and in the world. Using children's books, teachers can hold meaningful discussions on this topic. For example, children may be introduced to the topic of "bear dancing" through the picture book *The Deliverance of Dancing Bears* (1994) (appropriate for grades 2-5), written by Elizabeth Stanley, an Australian children's author. The story describes the plight of a bear in a Turkish village that is forced by its owners to dance on its hind legs for hours to entertain people, and then relates the bear's journey to freedom in the wild. Afterwards, children may hold critical discussions on other practices that are harmful to animals' well-being and conduct research on the continuation and/or abolition of such practices in their own and in other countries. A resolution passed by the San Francisco Commission on Animal Control and Welfare in April 2004 to transfer three elephants from the San Francisco zoo to a wildlife sanctuary may be debated among students from two perspectives: the welfare of animals versus the use of animals for entertainment purposes.

Teachers, parents, and other adults need to teach children the proper procedures for contacting local, national, and international humane societies, animal control agencies, and animal shelters. Reading and learning about issues of cruelty towards animals may help children guard against their own impulses toward cruelty. Researchers have identified children's and adolescents' violent behavior towards animals as a predictor of aggressive behaviors with human beings in later years and an indicator of deep-rooted psychological problems (for more information on this topic, see the research findings compiled by Lockwood & Ascione, 1997).

Incorporating Children's Literature That Fosters a Sense of Responsibility Towards Animals. Experts in children's literature suggest that books are very effective in influencing children's cognitive, emotional, and moral development, such as fostering a feeling of connection and empathy with other living beings, including animals, without the need for didactic approaches (Miller, 2001). Books also will help move children from a simple intellectual understanding of the moral elements, such as responsibility, fairness, and friendship, toward compassionate action (Lake, 2001). Children's book awards, such as the Henry Bergh Children's Book Award (awarded by ASPCA) and the Kind Children's Book Award (awarded by the National Association of

Humane and Environmental Education, or NAHEE) in the United States, are very good sources for information about such books.

- *Saving Lily* (by Peg Kehret, 2001). This award-winning book (it received the Humane Heroes Award from ASPCA in 2001) describes the courageous attempts of a group of 6th-graders who are instrumental in canceling a field trip to a circus planned by their classroom teacher, and who raise enough money to purchase Lily the elephant from the circus manager and send her to an elephant sanctuary.
- *Heroes and Lionhearts* (by Louis van der Merwe, 1996). This book received South Africa's "Bookchat Award" for the best nonfiction book of the year in the English language category. Appropriate for children ages 9-12, the book recounts the stories of animal who received the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals-South Africa's prestigious "Animal of the Year" award for saving the lives of humans and other animals, and stories of humans who received medals for courageously rescuing animals from danger.
- *Stray Dog: From a True Story* (by Reiko Sassa, 2001). This Caldecott honor-winning book from the United States relates a success story involving two young children who rescue a stray dog from a dog warden at a community park, declare the dog as their pet and bring him home.
- *Hurry!* (by Harry Hartwick, illustrated by Emily Arnold McCully, 2000). The book received NAHEE's 2001 KIND Children's Book Award. A 10-year-old boy, Tom Elson, glimpses a special creature, the farivox, in a crate and hurries home to get money to buy it. He also hears the animal urging him to hurry. However, Tom arrives back too late and the farivox is gone, symbolizing the urgent need for society to take immediate action to prevent extinction of endangered species.
- *Sweet Magnolia* (by Virginia Kroll, 1995). The book received the 1996 KIND Children's Book Award. Denise, a young girl, visits her grandmother, a wildlife rehabilitator, in the Louisiana bayou. She meets a host of wild creatures, and learns a valuable lesson about wild animals needing to be free.
- *The Golden Deer* (by Margaret Hodges, 1992). This picture book version of a Jataka tale from India depicts the sacrificial act of a banyan deer (Lord Buddha's reincarnation) who voluntarily offers himself to be served as the king's dinner in place of a pregnant doe (part of an arrangement made between animals and the King of Benares that one animal will be offered as a daily sacrifice instead of succumbing to rampant hunting by the king's hunters). After hearing the deer, the king releases the deer and promises to protect all creatures on earth.

CONCLUSION

Children's interest in and attachment to animals transcends time and culture. Therefore, teachers around the world need to steer children's emotional relationship with animals towards meaningful and responsible actions that focus on animal welfare and advocacy. These actions will serve the interests of everyone. Moreover, engagement in these actions will connect children to an inner self that is inherently kind, compassionate, empathic, and justice-oriented. These animal advocacy attitudes and actions also will be reflected in their interactions with fellow human beings and their physical environment. It is important to point out that while animal advocacy themes can be incorporated easily into curriculum standards for various subject areas and grade levels, the purpose of such themes is embedded within the environmental and humanistic purpose of education. As future leaders, teachers, policymakers, and conscientious citizens, children can utilize their training and the spirit of animal advocacy to make this world a better place for all beings.

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