Fostering Empathy: Humane Education and the Prevention of Violence

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Basic Points

Humane education

• uses animal-related lessons and stories to foster empathy toward animals and people

• can prevent or interrupt a developmental path leading to interpersonal violence

• is an essential part of violence prevention programs
What is Humane Education?

Humane education is a form of character education that uses animal-related lessons, stories, and activities to foster respect, empathy, kindness, and responsibility in children’s relationships with animals, people, and the natural environment.
Humane Education: The Rationale

Animal-related lessons and stories

• Capture children’s attention
• Foster empathy
What is empathy?

• A central component of pro-social behavior

• Includes
  – perspective-taking (cognition)
  – sharing another’s feelings (affect)
Why is empathy important?

- Empathy inhibits aggression
- Empathy for animals is correlated with empathy for people
Empathy Development

• In typically developing children
  – Empathy unfolds over time
  – Reinforcement is needed

• Exposure to violence
  – Interrupts empathy development
  – May result in “empathy deficits”
Children Exposed to Violence

Empathy deficits are reflected in

- Callousness
- Externalizing behavior
- Attachment difficulties
- Aggression toward people or animals
Exposure to Violence: Family Violence as a Web of Abuse

• Direct targets include partners, children, and animals

• Witnessing or experiencing violence
  – Interrupts empathy development
  – Increases the risk of perpetrating violence toward animals or people
Children’s Exposure to Violence

- Harsh physical punishment
- Witnessing intimate partner violence
- Experiencing child maltreatment: neglect, physical abuse, or sexual abuse
- Witnessing animal abuse in the family or with peers
Exposure to Violence: Consequences

• Witnessing or experiencing violence increases the risk of perpetrating animal cruelty

• Perpetrating animal cruelty is associated with bullying and other anti-social behavior in adolescence and adulthood
Humane Education and Empathy

• By fostering empathy, humane education may prevent or interrupt a developmental pattern that leads to violence

• Humane education facilitates
  – the development of empathy
  – detection of risk factors
  – early intervention
Humane Education: Overview

Three methods of humane education

• Animal-related lessons and activities
• Humane literacy programs
• Service learning and animal protection clubs
Humane Education through Lessons

A lesson on pet care

• Humans and animals have similar needs
• Humans are responsible for pets
• Humans need to recognize animals’ feelings and respect the ways they communicate
Humane Education through Lessons

How children may respond

• Compare message with treatment they and their pets receive

• Disclose abuse of pets, other family members, or themselves
Evaluation of Lesson Method

• Increase in humane attitudes toward animals
• Increase in human-directed empathy
• Less aggressive behavior
• Persistence of effects in follow-up
Humane Literacy Program: Red Rover Readers

• Red Rover Readers (www.redrover.org/readers)
  – Grades K-5
  – Implemented in schools and other structured learning environments

• Linked to state curriculum standards
Humane Literacy Program: Red Rover Readers

Goals

• Foster empathy
• Enhance literacy skills
• Encourage critical thinking
Humane Literacy Program: Red Rover Readers

• Reading and discussion
  – specially selected books
  – focus on relationships between people and companion animals

• Question and discussion method
  – perspective taking
  – understanding others’ feelings
Red Rover Readers

Qualitative evaluation (2009):

• Builds self-esteem and knowledge about animals
• Fosters empathy and compassion for animals
• Stimulates student-directed learning
Clubs and Service Learning

• Example: Roots and Shoots (JGI)
• Mission
  – Foster respect and compassion
  – Promote understanding of cultures and beliefs
  – Inspire individual action on behalf of people, animals, and the environment.
• Groups focusing on projects to improve communities throughout the world
Humane Education and Living Animals

• Successful humane education programs with and without living animals

• Factors to consider
  – Ensuring animals’ welfare
  – Qualifications of animals and handlers
  – Modeling what we are teaching
  – Parental permission for participation
Humane Education or Animal-Assisted Intervention?

Humane education

• Education for primary prevention
• Reinforces empathy in typically developing children
• Provides opportunity for early detection of risk factors in children’s lives
Humane Education or Animal-Assisted Intervention?

Animal-assisted intervention

• remedial, rehabilitative, or therapeutic

• used with children exposed to violence
  • Victims
  • Perpetrators
  • At risk of perpetrating violence
Animal-Assisted Interventions with Child Victims

Therapy animals accompanying children

- Children’s advocacy centers
- Police stations
- Hospitals and other medical facilities
- Prosecutors’ offices
- Courthouse and courtrooms
Animal-Assisted Interventions with At Risk Youth

• Healing Species program (Sprinkle)
  – 11 weekly sessions in grades 4-6
  – Shelter rescue dog as “teacher”
  – Decrease in suspensions and aggressive behavior

• Project Second Chance (Harbolt & Ward)
  – Rescued, “at risk” dogs paired for training with boys in state prison for youth offenders
  – Success revealed through dogs’ adoptability
Treatment for Animal Abusers

- AniCare and AniCare Child for adult and juvenile animal abusers (ASI)
- Cognitive-behavioral approach
- Emphasis on accountability of offenders
- Does NOT involve living animals
Connections

“We can never live in harmony with each other unless we live in harmony with nature.” (Jane Goodall)

“The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.” (Mahatma Gandhi)