

Safe and Caring is a centre of excellence that fosters effective networks and partnerships to improve the quality of life for all Alberta children and youth.

LEARNING TO CARE THROUGH KINDNESS TO ANIMALS

Animals play important roles in all our lives, and children especially seem to have a natural affinity for animals. The nature of their relationships with animals and the natural world are important in shaping their overall attitudes and beliefs. Encouraging positive relationships with other living beings and our common home—the Earth—is the aim of Humane Education.

Humane education is an approach to instruction that infuses the curriculum with concern for all living creatures. It is not limited to instruction on animal care (though that is included), nor is it a separate subject. It is taught when teachers model respect and reinforce knowledge, skills and attitudes that demonstrate responsibility, kindness and caring.

Humane Education values the inter-dependence of all living things. Respect, responsibility and compassion for both animals and people are at its heart. Humane educators do not regard animals as more important than people, but believe that showing kindness to animals and having empathy for people go hand-in-hand.

Childhood is a time when one's character is being formed, and humane education can help students to do the following:

- Consider the needs, feelings and suffering of all living things
- Understand what it means to be human by examining out relationships to other creatures
- Consider the effects of their own actions
- Reflect on the world and their place within it.

Humane education is premised on the belief that children raised to be kind to animals will also show compassion to people. Research has shown that there is a demonstrated link between cruelty to animals and other violent behaviours.

Many adults who commit violent crimes have a history of childhood cruelty to animals, and many children who abuse animals have themselves been abused. Numerous studies show that there are correlations between animal cruelty and child abuse, domestic violence and elder abuse.

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Teachers can become aware of warning signs of violence by paying attention to students' behaviours in relation to animals. Discussions about pets or the presence of an animal in the classroom will occasionally prompt unsettling disclosures from students, who may find it easier to report abuse of an animal than abuse of a family member or themselves.

Not all actions against animals are intentionally abusive. Sometimes a student's natural curiosity can unwittingly harm an animal. Regardless, any action that causes harm to an animal, whether intentional or unintentional, requires an appropriate response.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF HUMANE EDUCATION

The phrase humane education was coined in 1868 by George T. Angell, the founder of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA). Angell appreciated that teaching children the importance of kindness and respect for animals encouraged overall moral development. He reasoned that children who learned to be kind to animals would mature into kind and caring adults.

In 1882, Angell began to organize "Bands of Mercy" in schools throughout the U.S. (and eventually in Canada and around the world). These clubs encouraged children to learn about animals and organize activities to help them. In Alberta, humane education was championed by Louise McKinney, one of the Famous Five who opposed violence and discrimination. In 1904, at the first convention of the Women's Christian Temperance Union held in Alberta, she led the passage of a resolution to "encourage the formation of humane societies and bands of mercy."¹

In the 1970s, the Canadian Senate Committee on Health, Welfare and Science sponsored a study in response to "an alarming increase in violent juvenile delinquency." The committee, spearheaded by Senator Frederick A. McGrand, examined the factors that lead to adolescent violence and recommended actions to reduce such occurrences. The study included among its recommendations the following point:

"If we are to teach children how to respect their human and natural environment and all its elements, they must be taught they are a part of nature ... One of the objectives of education from nursery school onwards must be to give children a balanced sensitivity to life – a humane education."²

The committee recommended humane education work on four levels:

- providing factual information about animals, people and their relationship
- developing problem solving skills to enable students to make good choices
- developing a positive self-image that is essential to valuing others
- reinforcing people's responsibility toward other living creatures.

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Humane Education programs conducted and supported by SPCAs (sometimes called Humane Societies) now carry on the work that Bands of Mercy began over a century ago. It is worth noting that many SPCAs originally included the protection of children as well as animals in their mandates. As children's aid societies formed and eventually became integrated into government departments, SPCAs focused solely on animal protection.

The Society for Safe and Caring Schools & Communities and the Alberta SPCA's Humane Education program share a common goal: to foster respect, responsibility, caring and compassion in young people. Both organizations recognize the key role that all adults play in modelling these behaviours, and both advocate the integration of this goal into classroom practice.

THE LINK BETWEEN ANIMAL CRUELTY AND HUMAN VIOLENCE

Over the last decade, there have been a number of dramatic stories in North American newspapers.

- A 16 year-old boy wrote in his journal that he and a buddy had beaten, burned and brutally killed his dog. Sometime later, he stabbed his mother to death and went to his school where he shot and killed two classmates and injured seven others.
- Another boy, at 15, often talked to others about how he liked to torture animals. He finally killed both his parents, then opened fire on his high school cafeteria, killing two students and injuring 22 others.
- Another high school student was known to smash the heads of mice with a crowbar and setting them on fire, long before he and a classmate killed 12 students and a teacher at his school – Columbine High in Littleton, Colorado.

These reports illustrate the need to pay attention to reports of animal abuse, whether enacted or witnessed by students. There is a growing body of research that demonstrates links between animal cruelty and human violence.³ Below is a brief summary of findings.

- Adults who commit violent crimes frequently have histories of serious and repeated animal cruelty in their childhood and adolescence.
- Cruelty to animals is widely recognized as a warning sign that a child may need help to prevent further violence.
- Childhood cruelty to animals may be an indicator of other forms of abuse in the home.
- Family pets are often targets in domestic violence, and threats of violence toward a pet can be used as a means of control by a family member.

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- Many victims of domestic violence remain in an abusive situation out of concern for the safety of their pets or livestock.

Knowing about these connections between animal cruelty, child abuse and domestic violence can help teachers to identify warning signs that their students may be at risk – and provide guidance on how to deal with it.

WHAT IS ANIMAL CRUELTY?

The phrase “animal cruelty” encompasses a variety of behaviours harmful to animals, ranging from neglect to malicious torture and killing. There are legal definitions of animal abuse and neglect in provincial and federal legislation. A more common definition, however, was summed up by Dr. Frank R. Ascione at the Alberta SPCA’s Cruelty/Crime Connections conference in 2009. Dr. Ascione defined animal abuse as: “non-accidental, socially unacceptable behaviour that causes pain, suffering, or distress to and/or the death of a vertebrate animal.” This definition, like most legal definitions, excludes non-intentional and commonly accepted practices.

Most cases investigated by Alberta SPCA Peace Officers involve neglect – not providing the basic necessities of life to animals dependent on human care. More intentional cruelty can be either willful or reckless neglect (i.e. the deliberate withholding of food, water, shelter, socialization or care) or malicious cruelty (the torture, mutilation, maiming or killing of an animal).

STUDENTS DISCLOSING ANIMAL ABUSE

Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for teachers to be confronted with childhood animal cruelty, either through their students’ disclosure of having witnessed or conducted a cruel act on an animal or through direct observation of their students. In recent years, Alberta teachers have reported these incidents to the Alberta SPCA:

- A student blurted out an incident where her friend put her hamster on a chopping block and cut it in half with an axe.
- On a field trip to a pet store, a student picked up a hamster and squeezed it to death. Later it was discovered that the student had also been kicking and punching the family pets.
- A high school student cornered a gopher at the back of the school. While other students watched, and some encouraged, the boy began to kick the gopher against the wall. The gopher eventually got away. The boy thought there was nothing wrong with what he did, saying “It’s only a gopher.”
- A junior high student wrote in her journal describing various acts of torturing animals that she had engaged in.

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Such events may catch a teacher off-guard, but it is important to respond appropriately. If faced with a disclosure of this sort, take it seriously without over-reacting. You are encouraged to discuss it with a school counsellor or administrator. You could also contact the Alberta SPCA Education Department at 780-447-3600 ext. 3739, or education@albertaspca.org. They will discuss the case with you to determine appropriate action. If warranted, an Alberta SPCA Peace Officer will investigate and work to protect the animal.

Child welfare authorities should also be informed, especially if the disclosure involves an adult abusing animals within the home. Social service personnel realize that animal abuse is often an indicator of other problems in the home and they are trained to intervene appropriately.

Sometimes an educational approach may be more appropriate. The Alberta SPCA and some local societies can provide speakers to address a specific issue or to give a general presentation about the humane treatment of animals.

Recognizing the connection between cruelty to animals and violence toward people is an important first step in ending the cycle of abuse. Children and youth who abuse animals are far more likely to become involved in bullying, vandalism and more serious crimes. Adults need to take action. Children who harm animals need to know that it is wrong. They need to understand the impact of their actions and they should experience consequences that teach them more positive ways of behaving.

CHILDREN AND ANIMALS: MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL RELATIONSHIPS

A positive relationship with animals is an important factor in a child's healthy development. Caring for animals has been shown to improve self-esteem, alleviate anxiety and depression, improve social skills, promote empathy and foster both verbal and non-verbal communication. As noted therapist and author Mother Hildegard George notes, animals "often teach children how to relax and be themselves. Animals are often better playmates for children than toys because animals constantly bring the child back to the reality of the relationship. An animal can also contribute to the development of children as an animal is an active playmate helping to release energy and tensions in the child."⁴

Children perhaps relate so well to animals because they have many commonalities. As stated by researchers Lynn Loar and Libby Colman, "Children identify with animals. Both tend to be smaller and lower to the ground than adults, and both share the largesse and bear the brunt of benign and harmful human behaviour. Like young children, animals express their emotions directly and are not misled by words."⁵

The positive effects of animal-assisted therapy and animal-assisted education are well documented and these methods are being used more extensively. Controlled contact with animals can be especially helpful when children have emotional difficulties. One report states that "the constancy of animal companionship can help children move along the developmental continuum and may even have an inhibiting effect toward mental disturbances."⁶

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Many teachers have successfully introduced animals into the classroom and found this to have many benefits for individual students and for the class as a whole. They report that having animals in the classroom helps students with overcoming shyness, leads to appropriate emotional expression, and even increases attention spans. Potential problems are usually preventable with planning. Here are some points to consider.

- **Rationale:** What are the educational and/or therapeutic reasons for having a classroom pet?
- **Safety:** What provisions are in place for avoiding bites, diseases passed between animals and humans, and allergy problems?
- **Animal care:** Do you have a prepared schedule for feeding, watering, exercising and grooming the animal during school hours and on weekends and vacations?
- **Habitat:** Have you ensured there is a proper habitat including bedding, ventilation and place of refuge? Be careful when placing a cage for a small animal to avoid extreme temperatures from air vents, sunny windows, etc.
- Does your school or district have a policy regarding animals in schools? A policy will guide the decision you make around classroom pets.

To view sample policies and other considerations regarding classroom animals, visit <http://www.albertaspca.org/welfare-care/issues/classroom-animals.html>

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS AND PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

Alberta Education's current curriculum includes many opportunities to integrate humane education principles into learning. The study of animals is most often included in Science, but appreciation for animals, concern for their well-being, and the exploration of animal-related issues can be incorporated across subjects. The following list provides teaching ideas that can be integrated into specific subjects.

Science

- **Animal Care:** Starting in Grade 1, needs of animals are studied in Science.
- **Respect for life in all its forms:** Small crawling and flying animals are in the Grade 2 program, and animal life cycles in Grade 3.
- **Stewardship:** Throughout the science curriculum, care for living things and their environment are emphasized.
- **Environmental responsibility:** Besides learning about the environment, there is room in the science curriculum to research, discuss and debate how best to balance the needs of people, animals and the environment.
- In junior and senior high school, use current technological methods for teaching anatomy rather than dated dissection.

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Language Arts

- Share books and stories that feature people behaving in respectful, caring and responsible ways toward animals. Discuss the differences between how animals are portrayed in literature and how they appear in reality. Novel studies can include titles such as the *Shiloh* series by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor and *Dog House Blues* by Jacqueline Pearce.
- Create opportunities for students to write essays focusing on animals. This could include researching animal heroes and famous animals in literature or history, and examining the ways humans benefit from animals.
- Use the context of animal shelter to create opportunities for inquiry or project-based learning. For example, research the role and function of local animal shelters. What are their needs? Design a brochure or poster that has a humane education message.
- Develop media literacy by creating opportunities for students to identify examples of animals being used in advertising. Critically examine the implications of these media messages.

General

- As an extracurricular activity, create opportunities for students to design and participate in service learning projects related to animals. For example, they might decide to raise money for an animal shelter or walk dogs for people who are house-bound.

DESIGNING A HUMANE EDUCATION COURSE: WHAT ONE TEACHER DID

Judith Snowdon, a teacher and counsellor at Isabelle Sellon School in Blairmore, Alberta, created a locally developed course for junior high students. Her students were involved in the planning and delivery of many different projects that served both animals and people in their foothills community. Some of the activities included:

- Students designed and built doghouses with the help of the shop teacher.
- Students researched humane education and educated others. They created their own videos, set up displays at malls and shared their knowledge with students in other grades.
- Guest speakers were invited to share their expertise. For example, professional groomers showed how to groom long-haired dogs; RCMP and Search and Rescue personnel demonstrated how their dogs do their jobs; horse owners demonstrated safety with horses; and veterinarians spoke about pet overpopulation and the importance of spaying and neutering.
- Fundraising events such as walkathons were held to raise money for the local SPCA, the animals' food bank and for the pets at a seniors' home.
- Students wrote essays, made videos and sent letters to the editor expressing their opinions on topics such as the seal hunt, trapping and dogs riding loose in the back of pick-up trucks.
- Students helped house-bound seniors by walking their dogs.

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Judi received the Prime Minister's Award for Teaching Excellence in 2001 for her contributions in these and other innovations in humane education. Judi mobilized community volunteers to assist in the work. Judi says, "The only boundaries are the boundaries of our minds. This course does what it set out to do—make the world a better place for animals and people."

RESOURCES

Community Contacts

Many local SPCAs and Humane Societies in Alberta provide educational resources, speakers and advice for teachers. Each Alberta community SPCA/Humane Society is an independent organization. Some of the organizations are listed below:

The Alberta SPCA

10806 124 Street, Edmonton AB, T5M 0H3 Phone: 780-447-3600
<http://www.albertaspca.org/>

Calgary Humane Society

4455 110th Avenue SE, Calgary, AB, T2C 2T7 Phone: 403-205-4455
<http://www.calgaryhumane.ca/>

Edmonton Humane Society

13620 163 Street, Edmonton, AB, T5V 0B2 Phone: 780-471-1774
<http://www.edmontonhumanesociety.com/>

Red Deer and District SPCA

4505 77 Street, Red Deer, AB, T4P 2J1 Phone: 403-342-7722
<http://www.reddeerspca.com/>

END NOTES

1. The Famous Five: Emily Murphy and the Case of the Missing Persons by Nancy Millar. Published 1999 by Western Heritage Centre, Cochrane.
2. Child at Risk: A Report of the Standing Senate Committee on Health, Welfare and Science. Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1980. page 63.
3. For a comprehensive list of animal cruelty research and prevention resources, please visit www.albertaspca.org/crueltyconnectionresources.asp.
4. The Role of Animals in the Emotional and Moral Development of Children, in Child Abuse, Domestic Violence and Animal Abuse, 1999

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5. Lynn Loar, PhD, LCSW and Libby Colman, PhD, Teaching Empathy: Animal-Assisted Therapy Programs for Children and Families Exposed to Violence, Latham Foundation Publications, 2004
6. B. Levinson, Pets, child development and mental illness. In Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, 1970, vol. 157

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