

One More Thing for Teachers to Do? Why and How Educators Should Develop Students' Empathy and Humanity

By Michael Kaufmann and Jennifer Fitchett

In recent months, citizens have witnessed more school-related violence than anyone could ever have imagined possible, most of which included animals as victims prior to the perpetrators' final public acts directed at people. With the American Humane Association's headquarters in Denver, its staff was personally touched in many ways by the murders at Columbine High School. In the aftermath of these tragedies, communities and their schools have struggled to find ways of developing a more caring, compassionate, and humane ethic in youth, in hopes of stopping the violence. To this end, a special focus of many in the educational system has been the fact that animals are often included in the list of victims of perpetrators of violence. This topic, perhaps more than any other, has motivated communities to find new ways of raising children to be considerate of all living beings.

This consideration has a name: empathy. The development of empathy in children and youth is a well-studied topic – one which has much to offer educators as they consider ways to engender humanity in their students. Empathy is widely understood to consist of an emotional dimension (experiencing the feelings of another), and a cognitive dimension (understanding the perspective of another), resulting from the recognition of and response to an accurate perception of another's emotional state or condition

(Eisenberg et al., 1996). Numerous studies conducted with people of all ages have found that empathy acts as an inhibitor of aggression and violence (Mehrabian, 1997). Specifically for adolescents and children, research has shown that:

- Empathy is important, because it motivates children and youth to relieve another's distress and to stop their own aggression. Those with greater empathy also tend to act in more prosocial ways. Once a certain prosocial behavior enters a child's repertoire, empathy has a bearing on whether or not the child will perform this behavior.

- Empathy follows a developmental path, not unlike that of cognitive and moral development. We would do well to help young children be more emotionally expressive, as well as to better understand and describe their own emotions and the emotions of others, because by so doing they are likely to have higher empathy levels as they age. We should also be teaching preschoolers and kindergartners to regulate their emotions, because those with this ability have higher empathy and social functioning in later years.

- Starting to build empathy and humane behavior when children are young is critical. In early childhood, those who are at low, moderate, and high risk for developing disruptive behavior disorders are *equally* able to express concern for others in distress, and behave in ways that provide help and comfort. One striking difference between those at risk and those who are more typical at this age, is that low-risk children are able to feel more positive emotion when faced with another's distress.

- When children reach their middle years, they are more developmentally ready to understand the plight of others. Unfortunately, by this time aggressive children often appear to lack empathy and are deficient in prosocial skills. This type of early-onset aggression is linked to chronic and pervasive antisocial

patterns – these are the children to whom we need to be paying closer attention.

- As children enter adolescence, the gap in empathy and prosocial skills between troubled and typical youth widens even more. Older troubled youth score lower in empathy, are less able to accurately describe the emotions of others, and feel more personal distress when faced with someone else who is experiencing difficulty. This difference in the degree to which children and youth feel, and cope with, more self-focused anguish may explain some of the differences in empathy. Younger and older children who feel very disturbed and upset at witnessing the plight of another, may be so absorbed by these feelings that they are incapable of generating and expressing empathy – their own immediate needs outweigh those of someone else. This represents another teachable moment, for all ages of children and youth. Teaching how to deal with the natural feelings of distress that we all experience is essential, so children can move past egocentric preoccupation with their own needs to attend to the needs of others.

- Some theorists suggest that empathy may be an important factor in one of the multiple intelligences: personal-social-emotional intelligence. This characterization of empathy is significant for educators, because social intelligence can be tapped for both positive and negative outcomes. The higher a child's social intelligence, the more likely he/she is to use indirect aggression (social manipulation), which may not be as readily apparent as physical or verbal aggression. This aspect of intelligence must be considered when constructing methods by which to teach empathy and humane behavior.

(Roberts & Strayer, 1996; Eisenberg, Fabes, & Maszk, 1996; Miller & Jansen op de Haar, 1997; Litvack-Miller, McDougall, & Romney, 1997; Zahn-Waxler, Cole, Darby Welsh, & Fox, 1995; Cohen & Strayer, 1996; Kaukianinen, Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, Osterman, Salmivalli, Rothberg, & Ahlbom, 1999; Gardner, 1983; Salovey & Mayer, 1990 & 1993)

It becomes highly evident that empathy is a critical element in the emotional, social, and cognitive development of children and youth. But the "...single most interesting and difficult question in education remains: can we teach students to care..." (Barrow, 1975), and if so, what are the most effective methods? The literature is replete with examples of why empathy and compassionate behavior *should* be taught in schools.

The education director of a private school believes that it does no good to give children the intellectual skills they need to succeed, if they don't learn the importance of caring about those around them (Shlossman, 1996). Numerous scholars advocate for this moral-cognitive approach to education, which assumes that two equal and interconnected purposes for education exist: the development of critical intelligence, and the nurturance of the human capacity to care (Stout, 1999). The success of this model depends upon teachers being given autonomy in classrooms and with curricula, and for administration to truly support an emphasis on caring, even if this means a temporary halting of the delivery of content. Compassion, humane behavior, and empathy *can* be taught as an integral part of day-to-day lessons, so that district-mandated curriculum is still followed, and requirements for achieving standards are still met. The nature of educational institutions, and the degree to which they impact youth, either reinforces or undermines our ability to care for one another – it makes logical sense to reinforce this helpful behavior.

Meier (1997) states that informed empathy, stepping into the shoes of another both intellectually and emotionally, is central to democratic society. Additionally, Ms. Meier believes that the job of the schools is to prepare citizens, and that as citizens, our tasks are identical. It is as working members of society that our tasks differ, and thus the educational system is mandated to prepare all students to conduct themselves in ways that are

compatible with democratic life, and that keep them safe from harm to themselves and others.

A teacher of eighth-grade language and visual arts witnessed a scene where a student in the class purposefully harmed a dog, with some classmates expressing glee and others expressing outrage at this act. In response to this horrific event, she created a series of instructional units (in accordance with district standards) that were specifically aimed at stimulating imagination, developing empathic awareness, and instilling the capacity to care (Stout, 1999). All units intended to evoke empathic response to fellow human beings as well as to other creatures. Through this coursework, students became more willing to listen to the ideas and opinions of others, showed signs of respect for differences, became more personal and reflective in their responses, and were less self-absorbed. Hatcher et al. (1994) found that providing empathy training made a significant difference in individuals' empathetic abilities, as long as the students were developmentally mature enough for such training. These results give optimism for the teachability of empathy, particularly when one creates curricula that attends to developmental readiness of students.

One curricular approach that shows promise for developing empathetic, compassionate, and prosocial behavior is humane education. Humane education has been lauded as a long-term measure to prevent general kinds of cruelty toward both humans and animals, because it includes animals as living beings which are equally deserving of kind treatment, and whose well-being is important. A key point to remember is that to achieve the purpose described by this article—namely, students who are less violent toward their species and others – a humane education program must include conscious generalization or transference between animals and people (Ascione, 1997). If we judge someone or something to be similar to ourselves, we are

predisposed to experience empathy for that other – we are compelled to expand our scope of justice to include that being inside our own moral community (Hills, 1995). Values and attitudes toward animals underlie one of the many forms of nurturance that children display (Fogel et al., 1986), so if those who educate children can tap these thoughts and emotions through effective humane education, animal-directed empathy that can also be directed toward people will be based on a more accurate understanding of the nature of the other (Hills, 1995). Educators who share these philosophies should consider integrating humane education concepts and methods as part of their educational approach.

The goals of humane education usually focus heavily on the relationship between people, animals, and the environment. Compassion for animals and sharing the earth are also common themes, as are detailed instructions about how to care for various pets. Since humane education often expects young people to change behavior (i.e., not to hit pets, to feed the dog, to be considerate of wildlife), a deeper "buy-in" is expected of children than with other subjects. Humane education therefore is not just the transmission of information – it questions ethics, examines morality, builds empathy and compassion, and often challenges children to act differently with both animals and people. Humane education is the process of:

1. Engendering the values of respect, compassion, and reverence for life;
2. Instilling the understanding of the dynamic relationship and interconnectedness between and among the living and nonliving components of the world;
3. Promoting a sense of the individual's place, role, and responsibility within this "web"; and
4. Striving, through a variety of strategies and methods, to provide experiences that transform the individual.

Generally, a more intensive intervention (that which is repeated over time), and an intervention of higher quality will yield a more positive impact (Ascione, 1992 & 1997). Only one longitudinal study of a program of humane education, utilizing experimental and control groups, has been performed. The information was integrated into the district's academic curricula, and was conveyed over the course of an entire school year. Interestingly, differences in empathy and humane attitudes between first and second grade students who did and did not receive humane education information arose, but were not statistically significant. However, fourth and fifth graders who took part in humane education did show significantly more empathy, which generalized to human beings.

A follow-up study one year later with the fourth-grade students showed that these effects remained significant (Ascione & Weber, 1996). Researchers stated that this method was successful in changing attitudes, in maintaining this change over the course of a year, and transferring these attitudes to interactions with humans because the curriculum was extensive and intensive, multimodal, curriculum-blended, developmentally sensitive, and the instructor was familiar to the students.

Great inconsistency exists about what constitutes cruelty to animals in the United States. Additionally, the wide range of cultures and ethnicities in our country results in an equally wide variety of cultural values regarding animals. It must be remembered that attitudes toward animals, in part, hinge on socioeconomic background, ethnicity, religious belief, gender, age, or rural/urban background (Kaufmann, 1999). Heated arguments occur regularly between various cultural groups when it comes to the appropriate or inappropriate treatment of animals. Regardless of the community, teachers interested in humane education need to be sensitive to this disparity.

For example, placing a pet in a boarding kennel while away on vacation may be the humane choice for many suburbanites, but this

scenario has no relevance to the impoverished child who has never been on a vacation and is always home with the pet. Conversely, a child from the wealthiest part of the city may travel often, yet would never utilize a boarding kennel because a maid may watch the pets while the family is away. Dog fighting, keeping farm animals, rodeo, hunting, and other controversial activities involving animals all have a cultural component. In order to address these issues effectively, and change people's behaviors to create a more caring society, competent outreach is mandatory.

For a teacher, it is generally important to know the varied cultural backgrounds from which their students come, and how their home/community environment has shaped attitudes toward animals. Some children will view pigs as cute pets, while others will think of them as farm animals raised as food. In some cultures, pigs are considered unclean and off-limits. Thus, the opinions and emotions a child will have in relation to pigs will fluctuate from affection to disgust, which is also true of attitudes regarding all animals. It must also be considered that many children today grow up in shopping malls and have little or no exposure to any animals. Fear of animals, or indifference to animals, can be the result.

Teachers trying to incorporate animal-focused humane education into his/her academic curricula must understand a child's belief systems about animals prior to starting a lesson. Equally important is for educators to conceptualize their students' developmental level, before including humane education concepts and activities in their practice.

Humane Education in Preschool

Children of this age group are most influenced by their parents and home. At this age, animals seem more like live-action toys and the world, in general, is still a magical "thing." Constant adult supervision is important, and children must be steered toward and rewarded for good behavior

through use of simple "do's and don'ts" imposed by authority. Children are learning about trust and security, personal pride and control, self-assurance, imagination and fantasy, and cooperation. Developmentally this is a very egocentric age, but most children are able to learn how to better express, describe, and regulate the range of their own emotions, and how to understand and describe the emotions of others (including animals). Introduce concepts that connect the experience of the students with animals, such as both children and animals: getting hurt and feeling pain; needing food, water, shelter, and vaccinations; liking to play, but not always; being living breathing creatures that don't appreciate being hit or pulled on; and liking gentle care and handling, nurturing, and lots of affection.

For all the humane education activities described in this article, including those directly below, be sure to transfer and generalize the learning back to the students themselves and their interactions with people.

- *Demonstrations of how to handle animals:* Preschoolers need to learn the right and the wrong ways to approach and handle animals. They can often learn these social skills with stuffed animals first, and then later transfer the behavior to real animals.

- *Concept of respect:* Respecting an animal's space and privacy may be a novel idea for students. Give examples of how children should respect wildlife, pets when they sleep, and other animals in different situations.

- *Pets as part of the family:* While many children have pets at home, some will not. For those children, it is especially important to understand how animals are part of the family, and how people live with animals and share their home. What are all the specific ways that different pets become part of the human family?

- *Positive images:* Any age-appropriate animal image, whether real, on television, on

video, or in books can enrich the development of humane attitudes. It is equally important to keep this age group away from violent images.

- *Modeling*: Preschoolers are very influenced by adult role models. Adults must consistently show that animals are valued and that it is unacceptable to be inhumane to other living beings.

- *Access to the natural world*: Formal and informal activities in the natural environment are tremendously enriching.

Walks in the park, camping, gardening, playing outdoors, and observing animals in nature are important activities to instill appreciation and care for the world.

Humane Education in Elementary School

In addition to learning primarily by example, elementary school children will begin to identify cause-and-effect relationships: when I pet the cat, she purrs; when I pet my dog, he lays his head on my lap; when I pull on the cat's tail, she hisses. Students are more able to think logically, to problem solve, to relate with peers according to "rules," and to be industrious. During elementary school, children leave the security of their parents and are more influenced by teachers, peers, and the world at large. Elementary school children can be eager to please adults, but also are forming their own ideas and opinions. Remember that middle and upper elementary students are able to understand the perspective of others, which represents a uniquely teachable moment in terms of compassionate and humane behavior, whether toward people or animals.

At these ages, humane education may focus on: each animal having a special niche in the web of life, even those who appear scary or unattractive; what inappropriate and aggressive actions toward other beings feel like to the victims, who experience fear, pain, and suffering; animal safety and bite prevention; nature being the wild animal's home with humans being guests who should behave

accordingly; people, their pets, and other loved ones sharing special relationships, loving and caring for each other no matter what; humans causing problems for animals every day, such as pet overpopulation or habitat loss; providing accurate information about the sources of meat, eggs, milk, etc., so children can learn responsible stewardship for all animals.

Humane education activities for elementary-age students include:

- *Observing nature*: This age group often has had little exposure to the natural world. Introducing them to the sights, smells, sounds, and views of nature can be an introduction to the beauty and fragility of nature.

- *Field trips*: Visits to animal shelters, reputable zoos, wildlife sanctuaries, or nature centers can offer actual animal encounters for elementary school children. Many will not have pets at home, and contact with animals during a field trip can be extremely valuable.

- *Reading and research*: During elementary school, students learn basic research skills. Books, magazines, television, and the Internet all can be used to encourage children to find out more about animals.

- *Fun*: Elementary school children love fun, games, and creativity. Animal information and facts can be introduced in the form of recreational/educational games. Art, music, dance, and other forms of expression can be integrated with the humane education message.

Humane Education for Middle and High School

Adolescence is a critical period in which youth develop abstract thought, a sense of personal identity and self-certainty, and ideals by which to live their lives. By the time youth reach middle school, most understand what is expected of them. However, at this age children are very interested in what their friends think and often make questionable choices in groups, as they strive to define their role. It is at this stage that adolescents begin to extend

themselves beyond personal concerns, and focus on issues that are important not only to them, but also to the world. Many teens have strong convictions of right and wrong, and become very cause-oriented. In their attempts to reconcile competing information and feelings, other teens become withdrawn and appear to be filled with apathy.

There is no doubt that the middle and high school years are challenging, yet unique opportunities for impact through humane education still exist. Educators might try introducing: why laws exist to protect people and animals from cruelty, even perpetrated by those who care for them; the differences between abuse and neglect of all creatures; ethical or value-laden issues such as euthanasia, dissection, endangered species, rodeos, bullfighting, circuses, horse and dog racing, and hunting; how society "uses" animals and people, and the differences between humane and inhumane treatment of food and research animals; and the concept of charity and service projects, such as donating time or money to a good cause. To convey these concepts, consider the following activities:

- *Discussion*: Middle and high school students hate lectures and love to discuss. Therefore, it is always best to informally introduce topics and engage the students. Let them challenge each other and you, allowing for respectful disagreement. Be a guide, moderator, and sounding board. Consider presenting students with an ethical dilemma, in a safe environment that allows them to make their own moral choice. For example, pose questions such as: Would you sell your pet if the money would get you something you really wanted? What if the money were to go for food for your family, or another in need? How about an operation for your parent, that your family couldn't afford otherwise?

- *Speakers*: While this age group does not like lectures, they will respond to knowledgeable guest speakers, especially if

that person is a respected professional. Veterinarians, animal control officers, and other animal-related personnel could reach the group with direct and accurate depictions of their work. Questions and discussion with a speaker usually work well.

- *Do good deeds or service activities:*

Middle and high school students like to be respected as “near” adults. Appealing to them for help as activists can often motivate them to action, as they ponder the question “What can I do to make a difference?” Work projects at the shelter, cleaning up a wooded area, helping wash dogs, protesting, picketing, writing editorial letters, and the like all can be activities that appeal to this age group, because they are given the opportunity to express themselves and their views. This activism can be channeled into social justice, environmental, or animal causes.

- *The legislative process:* Students become interested in politics and the process of influencing legislation. They’re curious about how one lobbies, contacts special interest groups, and enacts or defeats legislation. With proper guidance, this age group can take an issue that relates to the humane treatment of animals and/or people, and learn about the legislative process.

- *Getting more information:* While lecturing may be out, research is in. This age group thrives on finding out facts for themselves, and the Internet, books, community resources can be exciting ways to confront middle and high school students with humane issues.

Inclusion of Live Animals

Many teachers choose to involve living animals in their humane education outreach. Consider this decision carefully, because bringing live animals into school situations introduces various risk factors both for the human and animal participants. If live animals are working in humane education programs, the following areas are critical to

the health and welfare of both human and animal participants:

- Health and safety of animals and humans;
- Clearly defined protocols for handling and transportation of animals;
- Clearly defined goals for animal interactions;
- Insurance for animals and handlers; and
- Avoidance of stress on animals during interactions.

If a teacher or school intends to involve live animals, AHA recommends that you comply with the two major categories of animal interaction as defined in 1991 by the Delta Society’s National Standards Committee.

Animal-Assisted Activities (AAA) provide opportunities for motivational, education, and/or recreational benefits to enhance a person’s quality of life. AAA are delivered in a variety of environments by a specially trained Animal-Assisted Activities specialist. This professional, paraprofessional, or volunteer possesses and applies knowledge about animals and the human population with whom they interact. Together, the AAA specialist and the animal (which must meet specific criteria regarding its own health, grooming, and behavior) deliver opportunities for animal-oriented interactions that can benefit people in schools, health care facilities, and other residential and treatment locations.

Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) is a goal-directed intervention in which an animal is an integral part of the treatment process. AAT is designed to promote improvement in the physical, psychological, and/or cognitive functioning of people who are being treated. AAT is delivered or directed by an Animal-Assisted Therapy specialist. This AAT specialist is a human-service provider, who, within the scope of her or his professional practice includes animals (which must meet specific criteria regarding their own health, grooming, and behavior) as a treatment method. This

AAT specialist demonstrates expertise and skill in human-animal interaction and its clinical application.

Teachers involving living animals in the classroom would fall under Animal-Assisted Activities. Special school programs that bring animals and people together in a more targeted therapeutic setting may also qualify as Animal-Assisted Therapy. It is important to check with the Delta Society as to screening methods for various species. Keeping and handling animals in schools requires specialized knowledge and experience on part of teachers and administrators.

It is a sad reality that many well-meaning teachers have had mixed experiences with animals in the classroom. Thousands of reptiles, mammals, and other animals have suffered unintentional neglect and abuse in schools. We’ve all heard the horror stories of animals being left at school without food or water, abandoned at the end of the school year, and getting dropped or stepped on. Since one of the goals of humane education is for children to learn empathy for all living beings, a sad contradiction arises when animals come to harm in the name of humane education. Fortunately, there are steps a teacher can take. If a school feels strongly about keeping an animal in the school, consider utilizing the following checklist:

1. Does the school have a policy regarding animals in the classroom? Will the administration provide written acceptance of liability in case of an animal-related incident or accident?
2. Are there any parents who object to animals in the classroom?
3. Are there students allergic to animals? Many young children will be unaware of their risk, until the first asthma attack occurs.
4. Consider what types of disease animals can transmit to children, and vice versa.
5. Does the school have a budget for animal care, or are the teachers expected to

pay for expenses out of their own pockets? Even a small animal will need food and environmental and veterinary care.

6. Decide who will care for the animal on holidays and weekends. Many schools shut off the heat, air conditioning, and light during those times. It is unacceptable to send animals home with children. This common habit stresses animals and parents, and often results in animal neglect, illness, and injury.

7. Designate who will care for the animal in the teacher's absence. Substitute teachers seldom have the time or energy to care for both a group of children and classroom pets.

8. Research if an optimal environment can be provided for the type of animal you are considering. This would include shelter, food, temperature, exercise, companionship (birds) or isolation (hamsters), and health care.

9. Consider if the area where the animals are kept is secure at all hours of the day and night. Is student access to the animals limited?

10. Develop clear goals for having the animals at school. Integrate the animals into the curriculum throughout the year.

It must be remembered that classroom animals remain the responsibility of the teacher even after the school year is over. Simply giving the animals away on the last day of school is inappropriate – humane education conveys the value that animals and people are not disposable, so the actions of educators must be in compliance with this belief.

At the time this article was originally published, **Michael Kaufmann, BA**, was Director of Education, for the Animal Protection Division of the American Humane Association, and

Jennifer Fitchett, MSW, was a Staff Associate in AHA's Children's Division and Project Manager for AHA's National Resource Center on the Link Between Violence to People and Animals.

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