

From Individuals to Communities: The Evolution of the Beyond Violence Program

By Mary Lou Randour, Ph. D.

The Beyond Violence Program (BVP) is now a little over four years old. A lot has happened in those four years. Originally, the program consisted of the well-received booklet, *The Violence Connection*, and a computerized slide presentation on the same topic. In response to changing legislation that mandated or permitted counseling for juveniles and adults convicted of animal abuse, such as the DDAL initiative in California, BVP expanded to include two *AniCare* handbooks for the assessment and treatment of animal abuse: *AniCare*

Child and an *AniCare* for adults. To date, BVP has reached over 2,500 professionals—police and probation officers, prosecutors, domestic violence counselors, educators, humane society personnel, and mental health professionals—in 17 states and throughout Canada.

In large part, the maturation of BVP took place as the result of interactions with the very people who were the “consumers” of the program. A child mental health counselor from a Newport

Ritchie, Florida, clinic asked about materials for counselors treating juveniles who abuse animals. Responding to this request, and many similar ones, *AniCare Child* was developed. A Madison, Wisconsin, police officer described some of the techniques specially-trained police use to question at-risk children, which helped sharpen the assessment techniques used by the *AniCare Child* approach. A BVP workshop in Fremont, California, at a large domestic violence agency resulted in collaboration between the agency and DDAF in the development of educational materials.

We have made a number of friends and developed productive collegial relationships with individuals throughout the country. BVP not only develops printed materials and programs, but also nurtures relationships and establishes networks. Once BVP is presented to a group, we do not disappear. We continue to collaborate with individuals and communities dedicated to protecting animals and keeping families safer and healthier.

By talking and listening to people in the “front lines” we learned a number of things. We realized that, as important as the “violence connection” is, it is only part of the picture. It is crucial to identify, investigate, prosecute and adjudicate children and adults who abuse animals. Those who can benefit should be offered counseling and other support services, such as academic help, so they can redirect their lives. However, it also is necessary to remember the big picture. And that “big picture” includes addressing prevention and promoting positive development. We discovered that teachers wanted to know what to do when a child handles an animal roughly—how does one know when to intervene? What is the most effective way to intervene? Can empathy be taught?

The Beyond Violence program fosters positive emotional, social and moral development in children. A new project, *The Empathy Connection*, is being developed to strengthen children’s relationships to animals.





The development of “emotional intelligence” skills, such as empathy and prosocial behavior, help children become compassionate adults. Compassionate children are also more likely to enjoy academic, social and career success.

By listening to our colleagues across the country, we understood that the best inoculation against violent, aggressive behavior is to instill empathy and other positive emotional skills in children. That process begins at home, before children attend their first day of school. As a consequence, we expanded our audience to include parents. We realized it is important to offer parents a rationale—based on sound psychological research and practice—for paying attention to the child-animal relationship AND to also provide parents with practical, concrete examples of what they can do in their daily lives to foster positive emotional, social and moral development in their children. Now under development, *The Empathy Connection*, which will be a companion piece to *The Violence Connection*, will offer parents and other adults practical activities and approaches to promote pro-social development in children by focusing on the child’s relationship with pets in the home and animals outside the home.

Empathy, pro-social behavior, perspective-taking, social and interpersonal competence are all skills that can be taught to children. Sometimes referred to as “emotional intelligence,” these skills are related to academic and social success, as well as to cognitive abilities. A compassionate child also is a smarter child and one who is more likely to enjoy academic, social and career success. *The Empathy Connection* will be another tool for parents to help their children grow up into the best person they can be.

BVP’s growth took it from a focus on identifying and intervening in cases of animal cruelty, to the development of prevention materials so that children could be redirected away from cruel and aggressive behavior; and now we are taking into consideration ways to reach communities with materials that would support the positive development of children. Youth workers at the Boys and Girls Club of America were interested to hear about the partnership of DDAF with Marvel Comics to produce a special edition of

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It’s All About Connections

Karen Dunne, director of the Cecil County Domestic Violence Rape Crisis Center in Elkton, Maryland, shares her insights and experiences relating to the violence connection:

My precious grandmother, Ethel, was known in our neighborhood as “the dog lady.” She had a remarkable soft spot for strays and, despite a limited income, provided many homeless animals with food, care, and often, her home as shelter. From an early age, I knew her boundless compassion for animals perhaps exceeded her empathy for humans, and I understood from her life-example that I would forever work to aid and defend animals in my earthly journey.

For my part, I volunteer with a small local dog rescue, Cold Nose Warm Heart. Since 1998, we have worked assiduously to rescue Chihuahuas from dismal situations. Since the inception of the organization, over 65 homeless, abused and/or neglected Chihuahuas have been placed with secure, loving homes. Our Center staff works determinedly to promote the Violence Connection within our community: we have strengthened our relationship with our local SPCA to provide animal shelter services to every victim’s pet when a victim seeks safe house services; we provide advocacy and cross-training through a multi-disciplinary

approach to child protective services, animal control officers, veterinarians, law enforcement and attorneys to better assist them in identifying precursors to human and animal abuse; and we incorporate pets’ safety issues in our victim safety planning and in all screening, education, outreach materials.

In May 2001, my Granny passed away. However, on the morning of her premature departure, I stood proudly with other resolute professionals as the Governor of Maryland signed a law allowing egregious acts of animal cruelty to be prosecuted as a felony. I could not think of a better way to honor her memory and my oath than to continue to protect those who cannot protect themselves.

For more information regarding the Violence Connection in Cecil County, Maryland, please call 410-996-0333.



Karen Dunne and her husband Matt at home with (left to right) Marty, Shrimpie, Chip the bunny, and Acadia.

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cult subjects and looking at them in ways many of us had not considered before. The more dialog there is, the better it is for the animals. Thank you, Matthew Scully, for opening more eyes and getting more people to look at non-human animals in compassionate, thoughtful and merciful ways. 🐾

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ful efforts of Beverlee McGrath, who works for us with the California legislature, we passed the first state law requiring psychological counseling as a condition of probation in certain felony animal cruelty cases.

Dr. Mary Lou Randour of our staff, in conjunction with PSYETA, developed the protocol to be used by therapists treating patients with issues related to cruelty. This second initiative is equally or perhaps more important than the first. Now, 27 states have provisions that may order someone convicted of a felony to undergo psychological counseling.

We still have a way to go in sensitizing our society to the negative ramifications of ignoring or downplaying cruelty to animals. However, we have made great progress, and we are proud of the milestones we have achieved to date. 🐾

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X-Men comic that addresses juvenile animal cruelty. This "Comic for Compassion" ("Standing Up for the Underdog," *Animal Guardian*, Winter 2003) is another promising intervention for young boys to steer them away from violence and toward humane attitudes and action. Our goal is not only to reduce the number of juveniles who think that being cruel to an animal is acceptable; we also want to see more youth in shelters helping animals, appreciating their family pets and defending animals from other ill-intentioned teenagers. AnimalsAloud!, targeted at young children, helps get them started on the right foot by supporting caring attitudes toward animals and contributing to the development of reading skills.

No matter how much energy and commitment we have, we realized that we need a method that would allow us to reach a greater number of communities than would be possible for us to personally visit.

Although we have visited communities in 17 states and throughout Canada in the last four years, there are many more that could benefit from our resources and our message. In conjunction with Psychologists for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, we are producing an instructional DVD, due to be released by the summer of 2004. This DVD covers three major areas: the identification, assessment and treatment of

juvenile and adult animal abuse; the importance of prevention programs and materials; and the advisability of directly addressing the development of empathy and other emotional intelligence skills in children through their attitudes toward and relationship with animals. The best inoculation against violent, aggressive behavior is promoting empathy and other positive emotional skills in children.

The directions taken by the BVP program have increased in number as well as size. We have more materials and resources to offer more individuals and groups. We expect that we will continue to evolve in ways that we do not as yet anticipate. But the goal has remained, and will remain, constant: through education and outreach to protect animals and help families and communities understand the very real significance of the human-animal relationship. 🐾

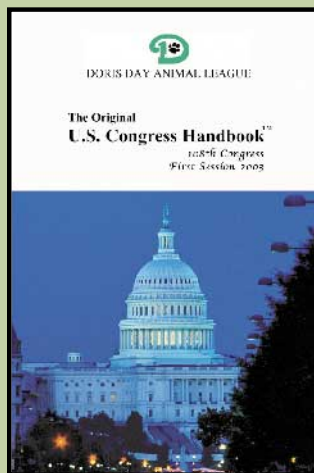
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