

2000 *Year of the Humane Child*

by Jill Howard Church

Photography by David Deal



Timmy and Lassie. Fern and Wilbur. Jesse and Willy. Storybook tales about relationships between children and animals abound, but in real life there isn't always a happy ending. Some children grow up respecting the animals who share their world; others do not. Such relationships have important consequences, both good and bad, and can say a lot about individual families, communities, and societies.

A special program called "2000: Year of the Humane Child" seeks to underscore the importance of child/animal bonds. Devised by the Summit for the Animals, a coalition of national animal protection groups that convenes annually to promote cooperative programs, the YHC effort began in November and will continue throughout the year. Participating organizations, including the Doris Day Animal League and the Doris Day Animal Foundation, have developed educational materials based on their chosen area(s) of

interest. Some groups will focus on companion animals, while others will discuss school issues, farm animals, and/or wildlife. Whatever the subject matter, the theme will reinforce the idea that teaching children to respect and care for animals benefits everyone by creating a more humane society.

There is no set definition of what makes a "humane" child. To some it means instilling rules of behavior that preclude the mistreatment of animals children may encounter in their daily lives. For others, it means going further by encouraging children to empathize with animals, understand their needs, respect their individuality, and lead lifestyles that minimize both individual and institutionalized harm.

Year of the Humane Child (YHC) programs aim not only to reinforce positive attitudes and behaviors toward animals but also urge the discouragement of negative ones. Empathy, kindness, respect and awareness are among the

principles emphasized. Explains Mary Lou Randour, Ph.D., a psychologist and Director of Programs for Psychologists for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PSYeta), "The first step is teaching the little human being how to take another being's perspective. That's the first step of empathy." Currently co-chair of the Summit for the Animals, Randour believes one of the YHC's main goals is "to get across to the general public that people who care about animals care about life – all life."

Says DDAL's Sara Amundson, the former Summit chairperson who has helped guide the YHC program since its inception, "Kids need to know that there are other people out there who connect with them when it comes to this kind of concern and ethic."

Conversely, children whose circle of concern does not include animals may be more likely to harm them. As with other social issues, it's often the bad news that makes the biggest headlines. Every time a news report relates yet another sordid case of a child beating a dog or setting a kitten on fire, people ask how such repulsive acts could be perpetrated by ones so young. It's not always a matter of what went wrong; sometimes it's a matter of what didn't go right.

Barbara Boat, Ph.D., Executive Director of The Childhood Trust in Cincinnati, notes that some children who abuse animals have themselves been abused. As an associate professor of psychology at the University of Cincinnati, Boat began studying the links between child abuse and animal abuse in 1991. Back then there was little literature on the topic, but in recent years more attention to the subject has resulted in a better understanding of what may lead children to perform abusive acts. Since it is not uncommon for domestic violence to involve a family's animal companions, Boat says, "I think what children can tell us about their pets is a window on their world."

Boat is a consultant for a program that uses supervised, hands-on contact with animals as a means of therapy for about 50 abused children at a residential facility. She tells how some of the children's initial fears or wariness of the dogs they encountered turned to eager curiosity and interaction after only a few sessions. Sometimes opening up to an animal leads abused children to open up

to counselors who can help them with their healing process.

Boat says that although the concept of empathy doesn't develop until a child is about five years old, even very young children can benefit from positive examples, large and small. "We never stop learning, or changing our minds about ways of being," she says. Although her own granddaughter is not yet two years old, Boat teaches her by example by making a point of rescuing ants from the swimming pool.

Nancy B. Miner, a researcher and writer in the field of family violence, is herself an abuse survivor. She believes that a child's feelings toward his or her self and family play a large role in the subsequent treatment of animals. How a child treats animals, she says, 'is an indication of how the child was treated himself and how he feels about himself.' She firmly advocates empathy training, whether it's organized instruction or simply teaching by example. "All adults are responsible for all children," she says, whether "at school, at church, or walking down the street with your dog."

DDAF's "Violence Connection" campaign is part of YHC efforts to make the public as well as judges and prosecutors more aware of the incidence of animal abuse as a predictor of childhood violence toward people. Just as many of the country's most notorious serial killers were known to have abused animals early on, several of the boys involved in numerous school shootings in recent years also had histories of cruelty toward animals.

Another DDAF program will be a series of workshops developed in conjunction with prominent child welfare



Research shows that the positive relationships children develop with animals fosters respect for mankind.

advocate Judge Sol Gothard of the Louisiana Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals. The workshops will be held in conjunction with training programs already used by various national legal associations, making judges and prosecutors aware of the link between human and animal violence so that offenders receive both effective punishment and counseling.

A video produced by PSYeta called "Beyond Violence: The Human-Animal Connection" is also related to abuse issues. The 13-minute presentation focuses on children in eighth grade or higher, and can be used by parents, teachers, clergy, counselors, and law enforcement officers to explain how the treatment of animals impacts children. Its narrative notes that "children who are cruel to animals usually show other aggressive tendencies as well," and reiterates the link between abuses committed against women, children, and animals. But "Beyond Violence" also notes that animals can have a healing effect as well. It states, "There are children whose trust in human beings has been so shattered that they cannot form or keep a healthy relationship. For kids in trouble, animals can help them develop a sense of personal worth and identity." The video is accompanied by a discussion guide that can be used interactively to encourage dialogue and provoke thought.

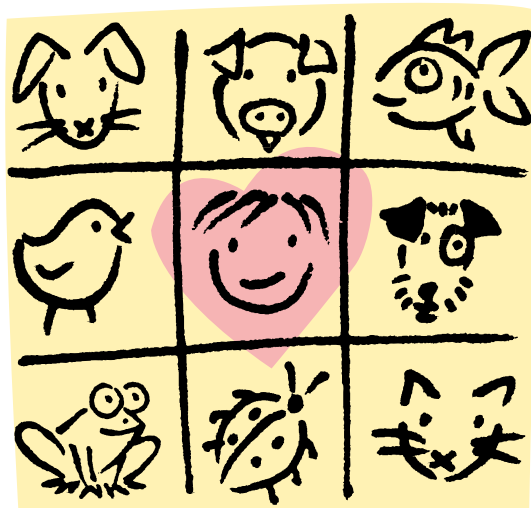
Professionals who deal with children can see firsthand how knowing animals affects young people's lives. Erin Wilkins, who teaches second grade in Murrieta, California, says that "Children are all naturally very caring and concerned about animals and the environment." She is a strong advocate of field trips and other hands-on experiences to give humane education more than just superficial treatment. "Children who become educated about the plight of animals while visiting an animal

shelter often want to take personal action in their communities as a result," she says. "It is important for young children to be taught kindness toward animals and all living things, as it is the way of becoming a whole person."

Robert Agnew, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology at Emory University and the director of its Violent Studies Program, concurs that all of society benefits when

taught. He notes that although child/animal issues have not traditionally been a major topic among sociologists, there is currently a dedicated effort under way to create a section within the American Sociological Association that would specifically study animal abuse and the role of animals in society.

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children have positive relationships with animals. "I believe that it's important to treat animals humanely, not only for their own sake but because it also makes children better people." He and his wife, Mary, are vegetarians, and are raising their two young children vegetarian as well. Although their five-year-old son doesn't yet grasp all the underlying philosophy of leading a non-violent lifestyle, Agnew says that children who grow up with positive attitudes may be more likely to resist negative peer pressure later on. He believes most children are born with rather neutral attitudes toward animals, and can be swayed either way by what they see and are

The Year of the Humane Child program wants to build upon the successful programs and ideas already making a difference in many parts of the country. In Chicago, the 100-year-old Anti-Cruelty Society has a large outreach program that serves approximately 40,000 students a year. John Caruso, Director of Humane Education, says that his department's various programs all have the underlying message that 'all beings deserve our respect and regard.' The Society has a junior volunteers program, a community service program, and even brings students to the shelter to see how various professions ranging from computer technology to medicine can be applied to animal-related jobs such as those needed at shelters.

The Society employs two educators who focus on elementary education and another who works with secondary school and even some college students. It has produced four educational films, each concentrating on different age groups and different types of animal/human relationships. Topics range from pet care, overpopulation and euthanasia to more sophisticated issues about the interconnectedness of all life. The most recent film, developed for teenagers, focuses on the link between animal abuse and human abuse, which Caruso says is part of the Society's effort "to reach them before they start their own families and perpetuate these cycles."

Caruso acknowledges that sometimes the outcomes of humane education programs are unknown. “A lot of times we don’t see any of the results, but when we do see things, they’re really heartwarming.” He recalls a series of high school presentations he made several years ago during which one particular student refused to participate at first, sitting in his chair with his arms crossed defiantly and not even removing his jacket. “By the eighth program,” Caruso says, “he was always the first one in the room to help. The more time he spent with the animals, the more he found out about them, and the more he started seeing them as entities and not items,” Caruso explains.

Another program in Fairfax, Virginia, called The Shiloh Project brings homeless dogs in contact with teenage juvenile offenders at a residential probation facility. Two boys are paired with each dog to teach basic obedience and socialization before the dogs are placed with carefully screened families. Nancy Katz, a former high school counselor who serves as the volun-

teer group’s executive and program director, began the program in 1995. She believes positive experiences with animals help teach the boys life skills and mitigate their aggressive behavior. She says boys who have admitted to shooting squirrels, fighting dogs, and other abuses often change their attitudes toward animals after experiencing close relationships with dogs in need – animals whose vulnerable circumstances they can often relate to. “Once they start making the emotional connection with the dog, they don’t think cruel acts are so cool anymore,” she says.

The Year of the Humane Child program is working to provide as many means as possible for children of all ages and backgrounds to share the warm, trusting, loving and enriching experiences that relationships with animals bring. Whether the message comes from a book, a teacher, a field trip, a celebrity, a video or the animals themselves, it’s up to caring adults to lead the way. 🐾



Teaching children to respect animals promotes respect for all humanity.

Read On!

Look! Up in the sky! It’s a bird!... It’s a plane!™... It’s a...*super-humane superhero!*

One of the most exciting elements of the Doris Day Animal Foundation’s involvement with the **2000: Year of the Humane Child** program is the development of a special Superman® comic book. Co-produced by DDAF and DC Comics, the *Superman for the Animals* comic book will debut in early 2000. The story features a boy named Tommy who learns the importance of defending animals and resolves the conflicts he faces by using Superman’s example.

Richard De Angelis, director of DDAF’s “Comics for Compassion” campaign, says that DC Comics has enthusiastically devoted some of its top writers and artists to this project. Between 50,000 and 100,000 of the special comic books will be packaged free with a regular DC Comic title, giving young readers an exciting story with an important – but not preachy – message. “A superhero comic book is something that boys can relate to and respect,” notes De Angelis. “This is important

since boys are the primary perpetrators of childhood violence to animals,” he adds.

For younger readers, another DDAF program called AnimalsAloud! is being introduced in elementary schools for children in kindergarten through third grade. The goal is for teachers and children to read aloud as many animal-friendly books as possible in one month, and for parents to continue the effort at home. Books can be chosen from the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals’ list *Kids, Animals and Literature*. The program will begin in Maryland and Virginia before being launched nationwide later in the year.



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