

Education will be our salvation - responsible pet ownership starts with the young

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ABSTRACT

By working with the young we will achieve greater impact than by preaching to the already converted or the life-time disinterested. This paper relies on past experiences and current research to fix the best time to start educating and with which groups.

EDUCATION WILL BE OUR SALVATION

My father was a lawyer and, before him, his father was a teacher. Each time I was setting off from the breakfast table to do my matric and law exams Dad would offer the same advice. "Kingsley", he'd say, "Read the questions carefully before you write a single word, make sure you understand what it is they are expecting of you".

To my delight I found this principle worked, not only for exams but also later on in my professional life, as well not. However when I was first asked to speak at this conference on the topic of 'Education' my first thought was, why me? The answer came easily. At meetings of the Dog and Cat Management Board, I'm always the one saying "catch them when they're young and you've got them for life" and "an ounce of prevention is worth a ton of cure" and all the other little sayings that helped my mother and her generation to understand and to cope with life around them. After two years of hearing this 'hard sell' my fellow board member and the MC of this conference, Dr Ian McBryde, apparently decided it was time for me to put my money where my mouth is and back rhetoric with evidence.

The next thing I asked was what does 'Education will be our Salvation - responsible pet ownership starts with the young' mean? The implied guidelines seem to preclude me from going into what constitutes responsible pet management and also from talking about what types of programs might achieve the best results. This leaves the bare proposition that educating the young will solve existing problems - a statement so obvious it almost speaks for itself ... or does it ... and has it always been this way?

Thirty years ago I gave a paper to a group of RSPCA country honorary inspectors. The first point I made was to always bear in mind the Society's policy of 'prevention is better than cure'. If the desired result could be achieved by an explanation of the law or an instruction or a caution then, except in serious cases, this approach should be preferred rather than simply reporting everything and expecting the criminal justice system to sort things out.

You see, at the time, it was thought to be necessary to spell this out very carefully because most people were very simplistic in their approach to life. Quite apart from the fact that some folk enjoy the feeling of power that having a little authority gives to them, and may therefore exercise it unwisely or even vindictively, the idea of the state educating people not to offend was almost unheard of. Parliament simply passed laws and the police or some other agency enforced them by taking offenders to court. Ignorance of the law was no excuse. If you broke the law then you got into trouble.

The education system did nothing to equip you for dealing with this side of life. It was therefore the responsibility of your parents to tell you about such matters and if they didn't know the answers or didn't bother to tell you, then you found out the hard way.

I lived in a household where a father and elder brother were both lawyers but discovered I knew almost nothing about the law until I went to the university. As for responsible pet ownership, I didn't learn about that at school but rather from Mum and Dad.

Like most families of the time we allowed our dog and cats to wander at will. Everyone said how smart GYP the dog was. Each morning he walked with me to the tram stop by the Children's Hospital and then returned the length of Kermod Street by himself. He knew when I would be returning and would walk back each afternoon. One day a car knocked him over. He recovered but never came to the tram stop again. Dead dogs and cats were a common sight on Adelaide streets in those days but most people thought this to be unavoidable because it was in the nature of animals to wander about. Even my father, whose first case after completing his law degree was a prosecution for the RSPCA, never thought to put a gate on the back fence to keep the dog inside. No-one did.

In terms of European settlement, we were still a very young country. Our first settlers were renowned for saying "If it moves - shoot it. If it doesn't - chop it down". Horses were overladen and overdriven. Sheep were tied up for hours at the ports of the colony and other acts of cruelty and neglect were common. Almost forty years went by before a public meeting in Adelaide Town Hall established a society for the prevention of cruelty to animals.

Today there are a number of very worthwhile groups who seek not only to foster justice and mercy for animals but to provide education. Legal studies are taught in schools. I think you will agree that great changes have taken place in these areas of our education and that they are changes for the better, but the question I now ask is at what age do you start in order to get the best result? The answer for me is to be found from personal experience and recent studies.

Twenty years ago I found myself working in the State Juvenile Court. No research was done in those days to see if anything the Court did reduced reoffending, however the first thing I noticed was the same faces reappeared over and over again. These people were easily identified because their court files were too big to be put away in the cabinets provided for that purpose. Their files were put onto a large table instead. Most offenders whose files were able to be put away properly only ever came to court once. The 200 or so repeat offenders 'lived on the table' until they turned 18 and moved on.

After I became senior judge I began research in this area and, in 1991, in a paper given in Onati, Spain, I was able to report that 96% of South Australian juveniles had no occasion to appear before courts or their alternatives. Of the remaining 4% who did, the majority never reoffended. Significantly, however, the research told us that 16% of the 4% who did come to official notice, those who returned 4 times or more, were responsible for more than half of all juvenile crime.

A survey of all convicted adults in South Australian prisons revealed a whopping 72.4% of those in prison were graduates of the Juvenile Justice System. In other words the intervention by the courts, for those who constantly reappeared before it, had been a total waste of time. The official policy of the Welfare Department was to intervene as little as possible in the mistaken belief that young people aged out of crime. These figures suggested the exact opposite to be so. The less that was done, the worse the problem became.

From that time on, I became a firm advocate of the earliest intervention possible, but was not exactly sure when was the best time to start. To get the answer I turned to well known Adelaide Psychologist, Dr Tim Hill. He told me that years ago Piaget and others thought that it was not much use trying to 'get through' to children under ten years of age because they were believed to be so totally self absorbed as to be incapable of caring about other humans, let alone animals. However this line of thought has been disproved. It is now known that positive social behaviours such as cooperation, kindness, helping and sharing begins early in a child's life. Children in their first 6 months will respond positively to others, participate in social games and react emotionally to distress. By 12 months of age children are able to take an active role in social games, exhibit sharing behaviour and display affection towards others. By 2 years of age, children show knowledge of care giving skills and will comfort others or animals in distress.

There are major differences across cultures in the emphasis placed on pro-social activities and in the way in which people view and behave toward animals. In one study by Beatrice and John Whiting (1975) there are large differences amongst children's altruistic behaviours in these cultures. The conclusion of the study was that children who were assigned important responsibilities such as caring for other children and animals are likely to develop a cooperative and pro-social orientation where they are likely to be more aware of the needs of others and display kindness to others at an early age.

Parents and care givers who explicitly model these behaviours and at the same time provide opportunities for children to perform these actions are likely to be very successful in promoting altruistic behaviours. Studies have found that, amongst 12 month infants, simple modelling was not particularly effective. However when this was combined with providing opportunities for children to behave that way there were very significant effects.

Studies indicate that probably one of the most effective ways for promoting positive attitudes and kindness toward animals is to provide children with opportunities to take some responsibility for looking after and caring for animals. Research indicates this is most effective if begun at a young age, at home and in childcare centres. It shows that merely telling children through stories or through explanation is unlikely to have a powerful affect. It is where children have opportunities to learn through their own actions, in addition to seeing positive models, that change is most likely to occur Rheingold (1982).

Another potential source for learning positive social behaviours amongst young children is television. Freidrick & Stein (1975) found that 5 and 6 year old children who watched television programs which modelled sharing, kindness and other positive social behaviours not only learned the content of the programs but were able to apply their learning to other situations. The study found that children's positive social behaviours following viewing of television behaviour was increased even more when combined with other training, such as role playing and what is called verbal labelling. Thus various behaviours such as kindness, sadness, happiness, sharing etc. were labelled and children were asked to give examples of other situations where the same behaviour could be applied.

The conclusions to be drawn from this are that important development regarding children's attitudes and behaviours to others and to animals starts at a very young age. The focus on making a significant impact should therefore ideally be amongst parents, people who work in childcare centres and other care givers and teachers in the very early school years. Baumrind (1971) found reasonable stability between children's nurturance, sympathy, thoughtfulness and their understanding for others' viewpoints when assessed at 4 years of age and again when the children were 9 or 10 years of age. More recent studies have found evidence that children's learning in general can be enhanced through having pets in the classroom.

Tomorrow, Ken McCann will tell you of the Dog and Cat Management Board's efforts so far to educate the young. For the reasons just given I hope that the Board continues in this direction and will in future put even greater effects into targeting the groups identified by these findings.

To conclude I cannot do better than quote David Suzuki when he says:

"No one can persuade another to change - learning transforms attitudes and understanding" and also my mother who would have said "What is the only gift you can give a child that lasts a lifetime?" And the answer ? Education ... Education ... Education.

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