Teaching Empathy:

Animal-Assisted Therapy Programs for Children and Families Exposed to Violence

by

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Foreword by Barbara W. Boat, Ph.D.

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Acknowledgements

IN THE PAST DECADE, I HAVE HAD THE PRIVILEGE OF WORKING WITH MANY CARING AND DEDICATED HUMAN SERVICE AND ANIMAL WELFARE PROFESSIONALS. From different perspectives, they all want to make the world a better and safer place. Through overspecialization, though, important things sometimes get overlooked. A humane educator may not understand why presentations about responsible care of pets elicit tales of abuse from children, much less how to handle this sensitive information. A therapist may intend only to provide clients with an opportunity to enjoy the company of a dog and learn safe and gentle touching, and be caught off guard when the dog introduces the subject of nudity into therapy sessions with sexually abused children. This book is an attempt to show both human service and animal welfare professionals how to design humane education and animal-assisted therapy programs that are safe for human and animal participants and that introduce change responsibly and enjoyably.

This book developed from a chapter the authors wrote for Pamela Raphael's book, *Teaching Compassion: A Guide for Humane Educators, Teachers, and Parents,* published by the Latham Foundation in 1999. It is a pleasure to acknowledge and thank the Latham Foundation for its generosity in publishing materials, hosting conferences, and especially in making available the talents and assistance of Judy Johns for this and other projects. Despite the challenges of these projects and the quirky people involved, Ms. Johns has never gotten to the end of her rope with us. The authors would like to express their gratitude for Ms. Johns' very long rope.

Jane Tamagna edited this book, as well as several others published by the Latham Foundation, all with dazzling clarity and none with remuneration. Ms. Tamagna embodies the components of effective intervention this book extols: mastery through incisive editing; empathy and literacy through gentleness to the authors' egos while allowing their meaning to emerge more clearly through her improvements to their text; future orientation and social conscience through her chronic and now predictive refusal of compensation for her priceless labors.

Many people have given generously of their time and talents to the Strategic Humane Interventions Program (SHIP), the animal-assisted therapy program which this book describes, and to help this book take form.

Karen Pryor and Barbara Boat, my friends and colleagues at the Pryor Foundation, always provide insight and good humor and make learning a pleasure. Karen Pryor's book, *Don't Shoot the Dog!,* is the foundation on which this book is based. Her introductory guides on clicker training led to the development of the materials for children that are published in this volume. Barbara Boat's inventories to structure conversations with people about their experiences with animals elicit information crucial to safe participation in animal-assisted therapy programs and are included here with her permission.

Randall Lockwood, vice president of research and educational outreach, the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), who pioneered the field of animal cruelty and human violence, generously allowed the instruments he designed to be reproduced here.

Steve Eckert, executive director of North Peninsula Family Alternatives, San Mateo County, CA, and former clinical director of the Community-Based Sex Offender Treatment Program at San Quentin State Prison, designed the offender risk assessment and intake materials that are reproduced in this book.

Marcia Mayeda and her wonderful dogs Carlisle, Montana and Henry co-facilitated the pilot project that later became SHIP. Her insight and gifted way with the first participants created a vision that was a privilege to build on.

Michael Levy and Ann Mizoguchi of the California Governor's Office of Criminal Justice Planning (OCJP) have generously supported SHIP's philosophy and implementation.

Ten years ago, Carol Rathmann, the shelter manager of the Humane Society of Sonoma County and director of SHIP, took an idea for a small intervention and turned it into a wonderful program available to at-risk children in Sonoma County. She has also mastered the behind-the-scenes skills necessary to run programs safely and responsibly. Through her efforts, SHIP has been made available to children and families in both San Francisco and Sonoma counties.

Elaine Pomeroy McKellar, the clinical director of SHIP, is the best social worker I know. She is indefatigably optimistic, finding strengths to build on and reasons to be hopeful even in the most difficult situations and the most taxing times. She is gentle and caring in ways that inspire everybody to ask more of themselves and to give more to others.

Donna Duford and Sue Sternberg know dogs, their temperaments and behaviors. They make it safer for people and dogs through their work. Donna Duford wrote the guide to assess dogs' behaviors presented in this book. Sue Sternberg's book *Great Dog Adoptions: A Guide for Shelters,* also published by the Latham Foundation, provided groundwork and guidance.

Hilary Louie and Evelyn Pang worked hard and well in their free time for close to a year to write *Teaching with a Clicker: How to Train People and Animals with a Clicker and Treats* and *Teaching with a Clicker: How to Teach Your Dog Good Manners and Tricks* and to translate them into Chinese. Priscilla Galvez and her mother, Maria Garcia, joined by Lina Tam-Li, devoted much of their summer vacation to the Spanish translation of the texts. Anh Tang drew the delightful illustrations that appear throughout the book. These children's names are used with permission and pride because of the excellence of their work. All other names and identifying details have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

Dinora Castro and Jackie Kan are bilingual colleagues who volunteered time to facilitate the translation of the children's writing projects into Spanish and Chinese, respectively. Karin Schlanger and Octavio Garcia proofread the Spanish text. Carl Friedman, Susan Phillips, Mary Tebault and Karen Wood proofread the final draft of the monograph, sparing the readers many typographical errors and the authors much embarrassment.

Lynn Loar

Foreword

THE YEAR WAS 2000. The Colorado wind was whipping our coats as we walked to dinner following a meeting on working with children who abuse animals. I was straining to hear what Lynn Loar was saying (she is rather short, you know) because I did not want to miss a word. Lynn was talking about her new and amazing intervention called SHIP: Strategic Humane Interventions Program. I was immediately smitten with the project. SHIP worked with caregivers and children from high-risk backgrounds. SHIP solved the problem of cultural, racial, educational and language barriers simply by using dogs and clickers and treats as the main intervention tools. SHIP taught skills in observing carefully the behaviors of other beings, marking behaviors that were desired with a click and rewarding those behaviors with a treat. Children and their caregivers from destitute and traumatized backgrounds could learn these skills. They could teach shelter dogs behaviors that would enhance the dogs' adoptability. They could interact with each other, using these same skills, to become more empathic, tolerant, observant, generous and effective. And all of this could occur while having FUN! What a win-win for everyone involved! At that moment I became Lynn's disciple and later developed a SHIP program in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Now you can share in Lynn's and her colleague Libby Colman's knowledge and expertise. *Teaching Empathy: Animal-Assisted Therapy Programs for Children and Families Exposed to Violence* is a repository of practical skills and interventions. You can select from a rich menu of ideas, assessment tools, worksheets and resources to design humane education and animal-assisted therapy programs that are safe for both the human and animal participants.

One powerful message of this book is that children live in families, not with their therapists or humane educators. You will be encouraged, and provided with resources, to involve parents and caregivers whenever possible. As we partner with parents and caregivers, we acknowledge that it is their positive attention and generosity to their children that is primary in promoting growth.

The shared impacts of abuse and neglect on children and animals are skillfully and eloquently interwoven. The humane educator and animal-assisted therapist are on the same team as human service professionals and have similar responsibilities to children, animals and society. Thus, information about mandated reporting, managing disclosures and reporting pet abuse is relevant for all readers. You will not take an animal into a classroom again and be ignorant of the possible impact of your words and the animal's behaviors on certain children. In reading this book, you will learn more than you wanted to know and more than you wanted to take responsibility for. However, all of this knowledge is essential to safeguard the welfare of both humans and animals and to promote the best that the fields of humane education and animal-assisted therapies have to offer.

Barbara W. Boat, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, Department of Psychiatry
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Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center

Table of Contents

Introduction

OVER THE PAST 10 YEARS, ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY AND HUMANE EDUCATION PROGRAMS HAVE GROWN IN NUMBER, QUALITY, AND SUCCESS. These programs bring animals into classrooms, therapy sessions, after-school programs, and homeless shelters to support a therapeutic or educational goal. One program focuses on wildlife rescue, teaching adjudicated inner-city youth how to care for and rehabilitate injured animals. Another program teaches sexually abused adolescent girls how to care for horses and other farm animals. Yet another program brings abandoned animals into homeless shelters where families work together to train dogs so they are more adoptable. These and similar programs help children and their families increase sensitivity, self-control, and the ability to develop attachments to animals as well as people.

This book is intended to support the development of animal-assisted therapy programs, whether they serve therapeutic or educational ends. If you work as a teacher, an animal-assisted therapist, or a humane educator, you are probably familiar with these programs and may have thought about creating a program of your own. If so, this book can help. It is intended to provide you with the information, examples, and tools you need to create a safe and successful program. To support your efforts, this book answers three basic questions:

- What is the link between children and animals that underlies humane education and animal-assisted therapy programs?
- What do I have to think about and do to create a successful program?
- What proven tools and resources exist that I can draw on?

The programs you create from this information will serve diverse needs and may look very different. Fundamentally, however, all successful humane education and animal-assisted therapy programs share certain basic characteristics of content and structure. They are carefully planned with a curriculum that creates safe environments and positive learning experiences in which vulnerable children and families can develop skills sustainable beyond the humane education or animal-assisted therapy experience.

Whether you are thinking of a program involving dogs, horses, or wildlife rehabilitation...whether you are focusing your program on self-control, attachment, literacy, or skills that build confidence...whether you are just starting or are reviewing an existing program, this book offers a guide to the characteristics of sound humane education and animal-assisted therapy programs and provides resources to help you build and sustain your program.

1 The Connection between children and animals in good times and bad:

Why humane education and animal-assisted therapy programs work

Understanding the connection between children and animals

Overview

CHILDREN HAVE AN INHERENT FASCINATION WITH AND AFFECTION FOR ANIMALS. Both children and animals hold positions of vulnerability in families, and both children and animals can benefit from the kindness and suffer from the abuse and neglect of a family. For this reason, therapeutic and educational programs that responsibly include therapy animals benefit from the affection and bond children feel for animals.

At the same time, this bond can involve violence and neglect. Both children and animals can be the observers or targets of abuse and neglect. Both children and animals can be used as pawns in violent activities, and, eventually, both children and animals can become aggressors toward one another or toward others. For this reason, animals in a therapeutic or educational program with children and families can generate reactions of fear and anger.

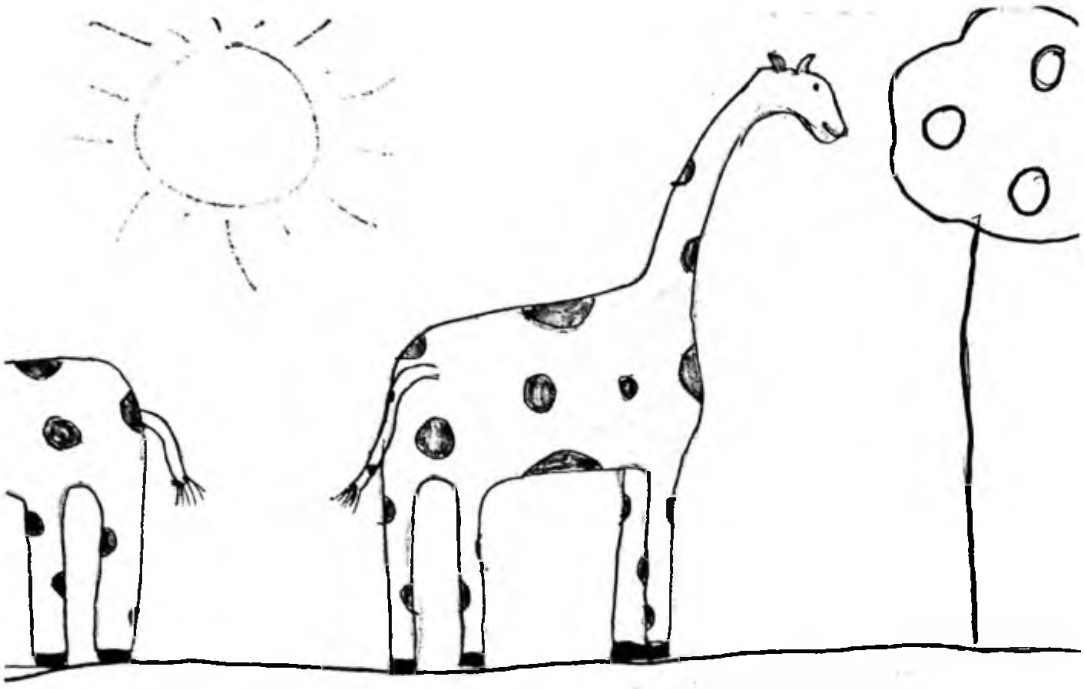
Understanding the relationship between children and animals, especially in abusive or neglectful circumstances, can help us understand the power of humane education and animal-assisted therapy programs and the importance of thoughtful planning and careful program construction.

Children and Their Connection to Animals

CHILDREN ARE FASCINATED BY ANIMALS. Infants pay rapt attention to the puppets and live animals on popular videos from *Bugs Bunny* to *Baby Mozart.* Two-month olds coo at a stuffed bear, and 2-year olds toddle around the house with a patient dog or cat draped in their arms. Folk tales of cultures throughout the world and across time feature animals wise and foolish who teach children the ways of life. From the simplest bunny rabbit to the big bad wolf, from friendly Dino to scary Tyrannosaurus Rex, children's yearnings, joys, and fears are enacted through animals in books, puppet shows, theater, television, movies, videotapes, and computer games.

Perhaps children are drawn to animals because of their emotional candor. Like young children, animals express their emotions directly and are not misled by words. They are earnest and attentive, and respond honestly and consistently to the approaches of others. 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 behavior.

Children seem to understand intuitively that there is a connection between the way the world treats animals and the way it treats children. Some animals are cherished pets; others are beasts of burden or future food for the table; some are objects of contempt and abuse. Similarly, some children are cuddled and adored; some serve a family function as a farm hand or errand runner; still others are beaten or ignored. Children, like domestic animals, depend on the adults of the family to take care of them. They cannot be economically independent in the adult world. Without a benevolent caregiver, they would not survive. With a negligent, cruel or sadistic caregiver, they cannot thrive.



The lives of young children, like those of domestic animals, are circumscribed by the families with whom they live. Like any weak or dependent household member, children and animals may become victims of neglect or abuse. Both often are at risk in the same ways and for the same reasons: they are trapped in a relationship with a more powerful and potentially dangerous person in a private place – the home. No one outside the home knows when a severely depressed parent fails to get out of bed for days and the children and pets go without food. No one knows when a parent comes home after being humiliated at work and takes out frustration and rage on the weaker members of the household. Neglect and abuse occur because they can, because there is no one around to see it or stop it.

In the United States, approximately 75 percent of families with children also have pets. Healthy and troubled families own pets at the same rate, but the similarity ends there. Healthy families adopt a pet or two and make a lasting commitment to each animal for the pet's life. The message to the children in these homes is that life is precious and living creatures should be cherished. Troubled families, in contrast, cannot create a stable enough environment in which pets grow to a ripe old age. Even if they are not abused, the pets may run away, get lost, be hit by cars, be injured, or suffer from malnutrition or disease. Children in these homes realize quickly that life is cheap and short. They learn that those who cannot fend for themselves are at great risk of harm or abandonment as they see pets get injured, die, or disappear.

These lessons become visible when neglected or abused children write about their pets as part of humane education and animal-assisted therapy programs. Children write compelling poetry and stories, often describing the death or disappearance of a pet and their own reaction to the loss. In one example, an elementary school student described the devastating impact of the loss of many pets in this poem:

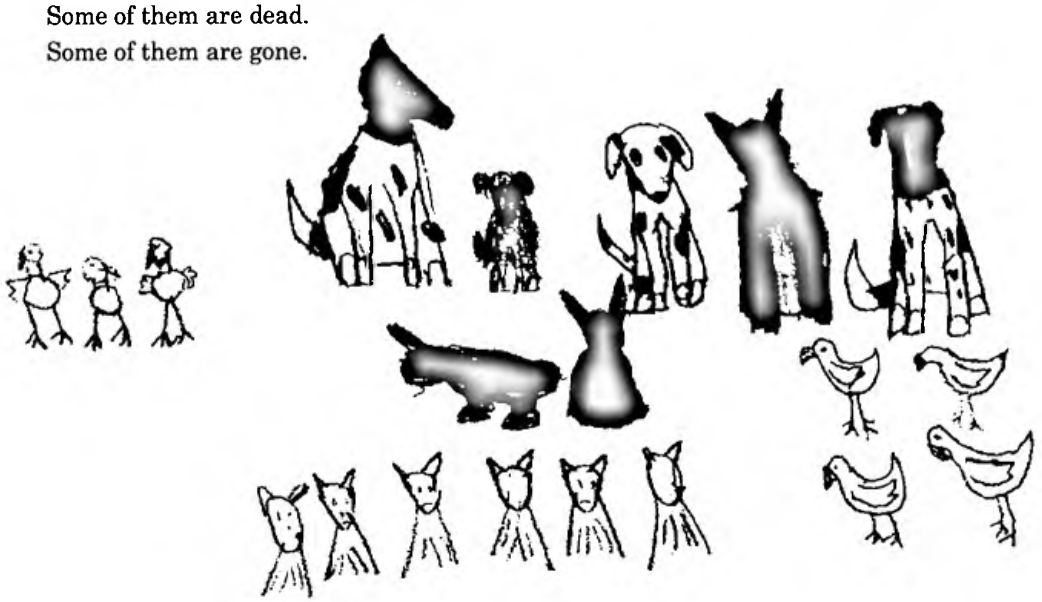
I had too many pets that died.
I really don't want to write about it.
I can't tell you about them either.
I just don't want to.
It makes me too sad.
Don't ask me any more.
I will cry into the ocean.

(Raphael, 1999, p. 25)

The pain that children feel over the loss of animals is considerable at first, but diminishes as losses accumulate. Children learn there is little point in caring about and attaching to such transient creatures because there is always another one who will come and go. And because children readily identify with animals, they generalize that experience to other living beings and relationships. Serial pet losses lead to social withdrawal, numbing of feelings, and a seeming indifference to the feelings of others.

Such lessons are also evident in the artwork of neglected and abused children. A child living in abusive circumstances drew her experiences with animals:

These are all the
Animals I had.
Some of them are dead.
Some of them are gone.



(drawing and poem from Raphael, 1999, p. 95)

The poetry and artwork of children in humane education and animal-assisted therapy programs often reveal neglect or abuse. These poems, pictures and stories show that the strong, natural ties between children and animals are altered by neglect and abuse. Children who experience neglect or abuse themselves or witness its impact on their pets learn lessons from these experiences. At the same time, they fail to learn other lessons commonly absorbed by children in healthy family relationships.

Because of children's connection to animals, humane education and animal-assisted therapy programs provide a tool to challenge these negative lessons and begin to replace them with healthier lessons about empathy, compassion, self-discipline, and patience. To create a successful humane education or animal-assisted therapy program, teachers and therapists must begin with an understanding of the reality, experience, and impact of neglect and abuse.

Families Who Neglect Animals

MANY PARENTS BUY, ADOPT, OR OTHERWISE ACQUIRE A PET TO SHARE THE JOY OF ANIMAL COMPANIONSHIP WITH THEIR CHILDREN, TO TEACH RESPONSIBILITY AND RESPECT FOR LIFE. They think carefully before choosing a pet and make sure their home and lifestyle can accommodate the needs of a creature who cannot care for itself. Other parents simply begin feeding a stray animal who becomes a member of the family more casually. Nevertheless, they take adequate care of it and make a life-long commitment to it.

Still others see animals as undeserving of much care or attention. They may buy a Dalmatian puppy after seeing the movie about Dalmatians, or buy a bunny or chick for Easter without giving much thought to the needs of such a fragile young animal. It is simply a toy or decoration acquired on a momentary impulse and kept because it is cute and the adult wants to be loved. The adult may have given little thought to the care the pet will need over time or to the adult's ability to allocate time, skills and resources to provide adequately for the animal. Or, the adult may expect the child to assume full responsibility for the care of the animal, something children are not mature enough to do.

But animals are not mere decorations. They can be noisy, barking at passers-by or howling when lonely. They can be destructive, especially when young or left unattended for long periods of time. They need exercise and attention. They may eat food that is not theirs and chew up shoes that are left lying around. They may have housebreaking accidents and be unable to go an entire day without being let out to relieve themselves. They may not always come when called or obey commands that have not been systematically taught.

These are normal and predictable behaviors recognizable as such to a sophisticated pet owner who expects to train an animal to be a good member of the household. Less knowledgeable or experienced pet owners may have less realistic expectations and find these behaviors hard to tolerate. They may decide that the animal is bad or does things just to create more havoc for the caregiver. They blame the animal for misbehaving instead of taking responsibility for teaching the animal more desirable behaviors.

Children demand even more care and attention than animals. They are often noisy, messy, destructive, oppositional, incontinent, and otherwise annoying. They, like young pets, are energetic and need constant supervision. They toilet-train relatively late and frequently have bed-wetting accidents at night long after they are dry during the day. Defiance and disobedience are normal parts of the limit-testing that healthy children engage in, especially when they are toddlers or teenagers.

Some parents resent the demands and feel depleted by the need to care for others. In neglectful households, neither the pets' lesser needs nor the children's greater needs for physical and emotional care are met. The result is that the animals and the children live together in a filthy household, often denied clean water, adequate nutrition, attentive companionship, or medical attention. Sometimes it is even worse. The annoying pet or child may be locked away without food or water.

For example, when 4-year-old Jamie was removed by the juvenile court from his family because he had been left home alone for extended periods of time, he told his social worker about his puppy who whimpered and urinated in the kitchen. His father put duct tape over its muzzle, shoved it into a kennel, and left it on the back porch. Jamie did not know what happened to the puppy after that, but he never forgot what he had seen and learned from the experience.

Like Jamie, all children learn from their life experiences – whether healthy, neglectful, or abusive. Children who do not experience or observe healthy, supportive treatment learn instead through neglect and abuse.

What Children Learn (or Fail to Learn) from their Experiences of Neglect

NEGLECT IS TAUGHT ACCIDENTALLY, SIMPLY BECAUSE ITS OPPOSITE, ADEQUATE CARE, IS NOT PRESENT. Neglected children learn a pattern of helpless submission, resigning themselves to the only world they know. Neglect may not be sadistic or malicious, but it is nevertheless emotionally and physically devastating to children.

In attentive families, there is much hoopla when children take their first steps – flash bulbs, video cameras, phone calls to grandparents, emails to everyone in the address book. Such attention and encouragement are necessary to children's growth and development, especially because children are apt to fall more often than stand for the first few steps. Encouragement by parents gives children the fortitude and motivation to pick themselves up and try again.

In inattentive families, parents are overwhelmed or unavailable (not home, drunk, high, hung over, or passed out), so children's first steps go unnoticed. So do their cries when they fall on the second step. Or, worse still, these cries may disturb or anger the parent who dislikes noise and activity. Soon, the children realize that safety lies in being quiet and staying still. Learning, however, involves activity and exploration, which may create mess and noise and require encouragement when things go poorly.

Neglected children are not encouraged to try new things. They are not reinforced for babbling, for grabbing at things, for trying to roll over, for scooting across the floor. Instead of associating new activities with excitement and adventure, they learn that safety and a small measure of parental approval lie in passivity. They fall behind their more active and inquiring peers in the development of fine motor skills, the ability to concentrate and develop a long attention span, the appreciation of cause and effect, the art of problem solving, the capacity to tolerate frustration, and the ability to read social cues and develop interpersonal skills. Neglected children rarely learn hope or autonomy, much less initiative or mastery. At every stage of development, they tend to fall further behind other children of the same chronological age.

In spite of these deficits, neglected children grow up. Most of them will eventually learn to walk and to talk. They will go to school where teachers and other children expect things of them. This may be confusing and frightening to undersocialized and inexperienced children. They are likely to have trouble being successful.

But what if a neglected child has a friendly dog in the household? When that child takes his or her first step, the dog responds enthusiastically, reinforcing the stride and the effort behind it. When that child stumbles, the dog is there to lick his or her face and watch to see what will happen next. The child is not alone; another living being cares about what he or she is doing and reinforces attempts to explore the world and figure out how to do new things.

Despite parental neglect, these children learn they matter to another living creature. Both may be hungry and scared, but they are less likely to be lonely because they have each other. Even children from healthy homes have occasion to feel that they have been misunderstood or unfairly treated and often turn to a patient pet for solace.

A pet may represent earlier stages of development to school-age children. They may identify with both the animal's helplessness and freedom from responsibility. That is why many school-age children adore books and movies about animals in difficult situations. They identify with the creature's inability to help itself; they long to help it get to safety and freedom. Children who have some hope will feel compassion for the animal, will yearn to comfort it and strive to rescue it. This empathy encourages children to think about ways to help an animal in distress. Thus, they develop strategies to protect and soothe themselves as well.

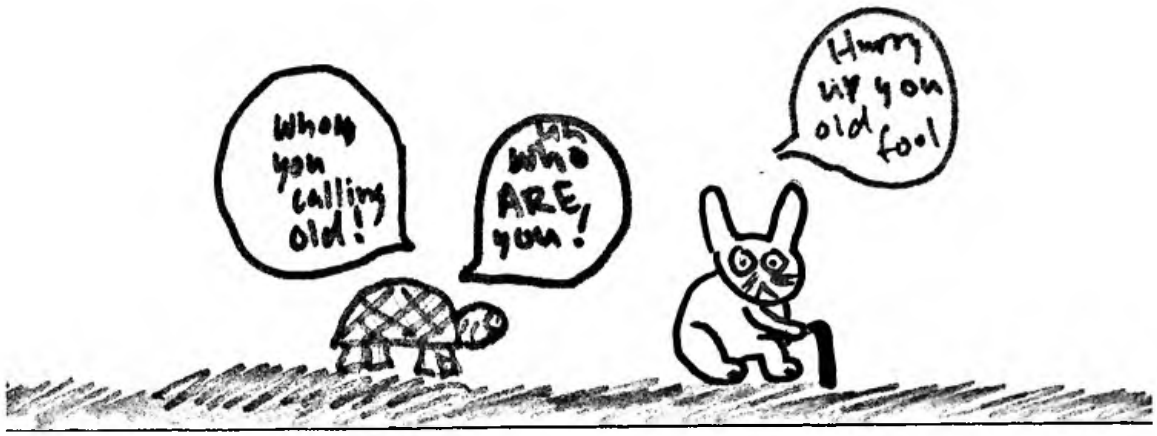
To sustain these lessons of hope, compassion, and self-protection, children need stability and continuity. They need someone who will empathize with their feelings and explain how the world works. In a dysfunctional family, a child may wake up one morning to find a stranger in the house or, conversely, to find the beloved pet gone. The parents may never tell the child what happened. Such fateful – and often fatal – mystery creates fear and insecurity in children. In such families, few pets live to an old age. Many children can rattle off a long list of animals they had, adding, often with little feeling, which ones were run over, which ones they know were killed, which ones are believed to have died, which ones disappeared or were given away. A fifth grader in one of Pamela Raphael's humane education classes wrote about her experience, which is like that of many other children in uncertain circumstances:

> FooFoo got hit by a car.
> I cried.
> Cream, my dog,
> Born with a bad hip,
> Got put to sleep.
> I cried.
> The rat's teeth overlapped.
> She got put to sleep.
> My ferret died.
> All my animals die.
> 3 dogs, 7 cats, 10 fish, one bird.
>
> (Raphael, 1999, p. 94)

The same children may also be able to tell devastating stories about all the humans they have lost. Ten-year-old Tasha can tell you about grandma who died of a heart attack, of Aunty June who died of AIDS, and little brother Andy who got hit by a car when, at eighteen months of age, he wandered into the street while unattended. Thirteen-year-old Velma, living with her aunt and a cousin in a shelter for homeless families, can tell you how much she misses her mother who died recently and her grandmother who died the year before.

Accidents and ill health are the natural companions of neglect. Children learn to expect suffering and loss. They try not to attach to people or animals because they want to avoid the pain of loss. They grow depressed and isolated. They may not only cut themselves off from their own painful feelings, but from their capacity to appreciate the feelings of others. They shield themselves from happiness, which is risky because it gets expectations up, and that leads to inevitable disappointment. They also block out suffering which is all too pervasive and demoralizing.

Children who have surrendered to neglect often feel helpless and numb. They may laugh at the plight of a suffering animal and even taunt it or throw things at it. Without special help, these children are on the way to becoming cruel and abusive adolescents and adults.



Families Who Abuse Animals

FOR SOME CHILDREN, NEGLECT IS COMPOUNDED BY ABUSE. The abuse may occur in many forms: physical or sexual, directed toward the child, or directed toward a pet. The child may be a victim, an observer, or a participant. In any case, an understanding of the nature of abuse against children and animals is critical for successful humane education and animal-assisted therapy programs.

Physical Abuse and the Family Pet

Joey was neglected by his mentally ill mother, then physically and sexually abused first by his grandfather and later by his mother's boyfriend. In the course of several years, he moved from family member to family member. Those who cared for him either abused him or failed to protect him. He had no consistent, benevolent caregiver. At age 12, he was living with his great aunt and a sister. By that time he had set fires in trash cans, tormented the family's small dogs and been explosively defiant with his great aunt and teachers. Left alone to take care of his little sister, he got rough with her. When their great aunt came home and heard the sister's complaints, she said, "this time you have gone too far; I can't take care of you any more." She called Child Protective Services (CPS) to request Joey's removal from her home. Joey begged her not to send him away; others, he claimed, had done worse things to him than he had done to his sister and they didn't get punished. Why was she rejecting him just because he was mean? Everybody else was mean!