



School-based humane education as a strategy to prevent violence: Review and recommendations

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ABSTRACT

Children who are cruel to animals may have witnessed or experienced family violence and are at risk of engaging in human-directed aggression during adolescence and adulthood. To prevent or interrupt a developmental trajectory leading to aggressive behavior, humane education uses animal-related lessons and activities to teach respect, kindness, and compassion. As part of a violence prevention program, humane education can foster empathy and reduce the likelihood of aggression toward animals and people. Implementation of humane education programs not only prevents violence, but also increases the likelihood of detecting and intervening early in violence that is already occurring in children's home environments.

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1. Introduction

A growing body of research demonstrates the connections between animal abuse and interpersonal violence (Ascione, 2005; Faver & Strand, 2008). Despite this evidence, most school-based violence prevention programs have failed to consider the prevalence of children's exposure to animal abuse and the connection between juvenile animal abuse and other forms of violence during adolescence and adulthood. Moreover, while animal-assisted interventions are increasingly used to help at risk youth (Loar & Colman, 2004), the potential of universal humane education programs as a prevention strategy has been largely ignored.

To address these gaps, this paper will (1) provide a research-based rationale for using humane education programs as a strategy to prevent violence, (2) review the history, methods, and evidence of effectiveness of humane education, (3) explain how humane education programs serve not only to prevent violence, but also to detect and intervene early in violence that is already occurring in families, and (4) offer recommendations for implementing humane education programs in elementary schools.

2. The rationale for humane education

Humane education is a form of character education that uses animal-related stories, lessons, and activities to foster respect, kindness, and responsibility in children's relationships with both animals and people.

Using lessons linked to state educational standards, humane education programs (HEP) foster empathy while reinforcing basic academic skills and encouraging strength of character. By facilitating the development of empathy and pro-social behavior, humane education can help to prevent violence among children and youth.

There are several reasons to make humane education an integral part of the elementary school curriculum. First, because most children have an affinity for animals, humane education lessons are more likely to capture children's attention than other types of character education and violence prevention programs (Thompson & Gullone, 2003a). Second, humane education builds on children's interest and experiences with animals to enhance intellectual and social development. Research indicates that animals can contribute to children's development (Melson, 1991), and a strong bond with a companion animal is positively associated with empathy in young children (Poresky, 1990, 1996; Poresky & Hendrix, 1990). Not all humane education programs involve interactions with real animals; nevertheless, animal-related lessons, stories, and activities are used to increase children's ability and willingness to understand another's perspective (cognition), share another's feelings (affect), and help others (behavior). It should be noted that perspective-taking and sharing another's feelings comprise the definition of empathy (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Maszk, 1996). Empathy, in turn, is a central component of pro-social behavior, that is, behavior that is intentional, voluntary, and aims to benefit others (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987).

Third, by fostering empathy, humane education programs may prevent or interrupt a pattern of development that results in violence against people. To understand the significance of humane education programs in preventing human-directed violence, we must explore several interrelated areas of theory and research.

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To begin, the study of empathy and pro-social behavior indicates that empathy is inversely related to aggression (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988), and that empathy for animals is positively associated with empathy for people (Paul, 2000). In the typical developmental trajectory of childhood, normative levels of empathy emerge and serve as a protective factor against engaging in aggressive behavior (Thompson & Gullone, 2003a,b; Hastings, Zahn-Waxler, Robinson, Usher, & Bridges, 2000). Exposure to violence, however, can disrupt the development of empathy, resulting in “empathy deficits” or “compromised levels of empathy,” which make aggressive behavior more likely (Ascione, 1993; Flynn, 1999; Thompson & Gullone, 2003a,b). Indeed, empathy deficits are characteristic of children with the most serious behavioral problems, including Conduct Disorder (Hastings et al., 2000; Luk, Staiger, Wong, & Mathai, 1999; Thompson & Gullone, 2003b). Given that empathy serves as a protective factor against aggression, and that empathy toward animals is correlated with empathy toward people, humane education can play a significant role in violence prevention through its use of animal-related activities to foster empathy and pro-social behavior.

Another major area of research that supports the need for humane education programs focuses on children's cruelty to animals and the link between cruelty to animals and human-directed violence. It should be noted that although definitions of the terms “animal cruelty” and “animal abuse” vary in society, most studies of the connections between animal abuse and interpersonal violence are based on definitions similar to the one proposed by Ascione (1993, p. 228), who defined animal abuse as “socially unacceptable behavior that intentionally causes unnecessary pain, suffering, or distress to and/or the death of an animal.” For a discussion of the limitations of this definition, see Beirne (2004) and Faver and Strand (2008).

Cruelty to animals is one of the diagnostic criteria for Conduct Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) and is often the first symptom to occur in the emergence of this behavioral disorder. Children with serious conduct problems are at risk for antisocial behavior in adolescence and adulthood (Ascione, 2005). Moreover, some researchers believe that cruelty to animals may be an indicator of a subgroup of children within the diagnosis of Conduct Disorder who have the poorest prognosis (Luk et al., 1999).

Empathy deficits can be regarded as both a cause and consequence of children's cruelty to animals (CTA). Childhood CTA is associated with several family risk factors (Duncan, Thomas, & Miller, 2005), including child physical abuse (DeViney, Dickert, & Lockwood, 1983), sexual abuse (Henry, 2006), and domestic violence (Ascione, 1998; Currie, 2006). In families where there is interpersonal violence, pets are usually threatened or harmed as well (Ascione & Arkow, 1999; Becker & French, 2004), and children in these families witness the abuse of pets and sometimes perpetrate it (DeViney et al., 1983; Ascione, 1998; Currie, 2006). Indeed, witnessing animal abuse increases the likelihood of perpetrating animal abuse (Baldry, 2003; Henry, 2004a; Thompson & Gullone, 2006).

According to some theorists, the developmental mechanisms that explain the connection between witnessing or experiencing violence and perpetrating cruelty to animals include (1) role modeling, that is, imitating violence that has been seen or experienced (Duncan & Miller, 2002), and (2) desensitization to violence, which impedes the development of empathy and makes subsequent aggression more likely (Ascione, 1993; Flynn, 1999). In short, exposure to violence increases children's risk of perpetrating violence, and vulnerable animals are likely targets. Perpetrating animal abuse reinforces and further contributes to empathy deficits, desensitization to violence, and attitudes of callousness, which may increase the risk of engaging in aggression against humans (Ascione, 1993; Flynn, 1999, 2000; Thompson & Gullone, 2003a, 2006).

Thus, it is not surprising that witnessing or perpetrating animal cruelty is associated with bullying (Gullone & Robertson, 2008) and with engaging in other delinquent behaviors during adolescence (Henry, 2004a,b). Moreover, a study of college students indicated that males who had engaged in animal abuse were more likely than their

non-abusing peers to approve of engaging in aggressive behaviors in families (Flynn, 1999). In addition, numerous studies of adults indicate that cruelty to animals is associated with perpetration of child abuse (DeViney et al., 1983; Zilney, 2007), intimate partner violence (Ascione, 1998; Faver & Strand, 2003; Faver & Cavazos, 2007; Zilney, 2007), and other violent and nonviolent crimes (Felthous & Kellert, 1987; Kellert & Felthous, 1985; Arluke, Levin, Luke, & Ascione, 1999; Merz-Perez, Heide, & Silverman, 2001; Miller & Knutson, 1997; Wright & Hensley, 2003; Hensley & Tallichet, 2005).

At this point it should be noted that the connection between animal abuse and interpersonal violence discussed in the literature is based on studies showing positive correlations, not causal relationships, between these two types of violence. Moreover, there is a debate about the validity of the “graduation hypothesis,” which states that animal abuse in one stage of life generalizes to violence against humans in a later stage of life (Arluke et al., 1999). A competing hypothesis, the “deviance generalization hypothesis,” maintains that animal abuse and other forms of antisocial behavior are positively correlated because they both emerge from common factors in childhood and because one type of antisocial behavior is likely to lead to engaging in other forms of antisocial behavior (Arluke et al. 1999). For a review and critique of the relevant research on the nature of the association between animal abuse and human violence, see Beirne (2004) and Zilney (2007).

While the debate about a causal relationship continues, the consistency and strength of the correlations between animal abuse and other forms of antisocial behavior have sparked anti-violence campaigns utilizing strategies based on the many ways that animal cruelty and human violence intersect. Humane education is one such strategy. Reaching children at an early age, humane education strives to prevent violence by fostering empathy for animals and people and thus reducing the likelihood of aggression.

Ideally, humane education programs should be universal; that is, they should target all school children, not just those identified as being “at risk” of perpetrating violence. The reason for universal programs merits explanation. As noted previously, normative levels of empathy should emerge in the typical developmental trajectory of childhood. However, witnessing or experiencing violence can disrupt this pattern. In recent studies of children and young people in community samples (as opposed to samples of children with known risk factors), estimates of the percentage of children who have witnessed animal cruelty range from 37.3% to 77.6% (Gullone & Robertson, 2008; Henry, 2004a,b; Thompson & Gullone, 2006; Zilney, 2007).

Young people who witness cruelty to animals are at risk of perpetrating animal cruelty and engaging in other delinquent and antisocial activities (Gullone & Robertson, 2008; Henry, 2004a,b). In light of this risk, all children need to learn that hurting animals intentionally or through neglect is wrong, and that the vulnerability of other living beings—whether animal or human—should be met with kindness, compassion, and responsibility. There is evidence that humane education programs can effectively deliver this message. Evaluations of humane education programs will be discussed in a subsequent section of this paper; in general, however, the findings indicate that humane education programs have enhanced children's empathy toward animals and people (Arbour, Signal, & Taylor, 2009; Ascione & Weber, 1996; Nicoll, Trifone, & Samuels, 2008; Sprinkle, 2008).

In summary, to be effective, violence prevention programs must attend to the connections between exposure to violence, cruelty to animals, and aggression toward humans. Addressing these links, humane education aims to reduce violence by fostering empathy and making explicit connections between empathy and responsibility toward animals and people.

3. History, structure, and purpose

Humane education is an old concept that has evoked new interest in light of the current levels of violence in our society. The belief that

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