

Educating the Young Child 8
Advances in Theory and Research, Implications for Practice

Mary Renck Jalongo *Editor*

Teaching Compassion: Humane Education in Early Childhood

 Springer

Teaching Compassion: Humane Education in Early Childhood

EDUCATING THE YOUNG CHILD

VOLUME 8

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Editor

Teaching Compassion: Humane Education in Early Childhood

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Foreword

Teaching Compassion: Humane Education in Early Childhood is a timely and urgently needed book. We, all seven billion of us on earth, are at a pivotal moment in history (McKibben, 1998). We are on course to outrun our ability to produce food, provide adequate water, control carbon and nitrogen gases that heat up the planet, and protect the other beings with whom we share the planet. It is estimated that there will be nine billion of us by 2050. Children who are here now as well as those yet to be born are the inheritors of our dilemmas and will be bound to the solutions we now struggle to devise (U.N. Panel on Global Sustainability, 2012).

“Humane” has traditionally meant being kind to animals. “Hurt no living thing,” advised the nineteenth-century poet, Christina Rossetti. Now it is extended to all living things. “Use your words . . . hands are not for hitting . . . gently, gently” are caroled and commanded through many young children’s lives. There is a new emphasis on empathy, self-control, and kindness because children and all of us are living in a changed and changing world. The world we evolved in is gone.

Some scientists call this time the “Anthropocene” meaning the age/era/epoch when humans have had the biggest effect on the planet (Zalasiewicz, Williams, Steffen, & Crutzen, 2010). After the last Ice Age ended, many humans made settlements and became farmers as well as hunters, changing the surface of the land by clearing it, building irrigation systems and dams, and breeding useful plants and animals. Then trade routes over land and seas brought new items and plants to different places. Columbus’ connecting of the Eastern and Western hemispheres brought enormous changes to the plants and animals of the continents. The industrial revolution, dating about from 1800, speeded up everything. With trains, then cars and trucks, and then airplanes, practically everything and every person could travel around the world. To fuel these travels and manufacture goods, we took coal then oil from under the surface, processed, and burned it, creating the excess carbon and nitrogen concerning us now. Coal and oil are the basis of manufacturing and agriculture. Furthermore, what we are doing is not sustainable—pesticides, fertilizer, and farm equipment deplete energy at a rate that far outstrips the energy of the food produced. Each of us in the industrialized parts of the world consumes

enormous amounts of energy with our food, houses, cars, computers, clothes, hospitals, schools, and so on. Not only is the energy imbalanced, but the pollution from pesticides and fertilizer is tremendous.

In addition, the industrial model has, in the last half century, come to dominate agriculture. Meat animals—cattle, chickens, pigs, and horses—endure well-documented misery (Pollan, 2006). Despite being sentient beings, their lives are harsh. The injunction “hurt no living thing” conflicts with our meat production. This is a dilemma for humane education.

Furthermore, the majority of the seven billion people on earth aspire to a more abundant standard of living. Yet collectively, we do not know how to have material abundance be sustainable. If what we are doing is not sustainable, what is the compassionate path toward more equitable distribution of perhaps fewer goods and services? How do we teach fairness to children?

Another crisis is the worldwide destruction of species, the Sixth Great Extinction. Not since the era of dinosaurs ended has so much biodiversity been lost. Much of this destruction is from the loss of habitat—our seven billion have very successfully colonized the world, marginalizing the animals. So the dilemma is how to share the world with the wild organisms. Sharing the world requires more than saving individual species; it is also saving places for them to live. How do we educate our children in stewardship?

Environmental activist and author Bill McKibben (2011) states that

Earth has changed in profound ways, ways that have already taken us out of the sweet spot where humans so long thrived. We are every day less the oasis and more the desert. The world hasn't ended, but the world as we know it has—even if we don't quite know it yet. (p. 2).

This radically changed Earth is where our children are growing up and will become the adults in charge. How do we educate them and ourselves as well?

Humane educator Zoe Weil (2003) advised in the title of her first book, *Above All, Be Kind*. This is a good starting place. A leading expert on relationships between children and animals, Gene Myers (2013), notes that, universally, children are interested in animals and often empathize with them. I once witnessed the anguish that a child may experience when first realizing that an animal must be killed to become food:

Jesse, my son, was three when he caught a 10" bass and followed me to the kitchen where I smacked it on the head. Jesse shrieked, horrified. Fortunately, he was consoled as I ran to the pond and put the fish back in where it swam groggily away.

Another 3-year-old, Katie, was relishing Easter dinner and heard she was eating “leg of lamb.” Unlike the fish, the lamb was distant, and Katie imagined it. “Oh, the poor lamb,” she sighed, “now it has only three legs and it has to hop” (Polly Greenberg, personal communication, February 1, 2012). What does an educator make of these early sensitivities? These ordinary stories indicate, I think, that children are born primed for humane education.

Relationships with animals and relationships with other people are the developers of children's brains. Neurons and synapses are created from experiences.

Experiences of kindness and fairness leave their lasting mark—they help make us kind and fair (Gordon, 2009). As children grow into the increasingly populated, increasingly diverse world, their kindness and fairness will be valued. The disposition to be active in the cause of kindness and fairness rounds out the development.

The changed Earth has daunting challenges including “bad news” that even young children can recognize. Wild fires, tornadoes, floods, and droughts are experienced by children around the world. Gene Myers (personal correspondence, January 19, 2012) advises us that the role of parents [and teachers] is paramount. They should live

a life dedicated visibly and collectively to making the world better . . . and taking some joy in that and the meaning derived from working on something bigger than yourself . . . [if there is bad news], if it is just how the world is, the way we live is an engagement with that.

This volume is a thoughtfully assembled collection of perspectives which sets the contours of humane education, explores the relationships between children and animals, illuminates the family context for compassion, and offers constructive curriculum suggestions. This is welcome guidance for engagement with a difficult world.

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Introduction

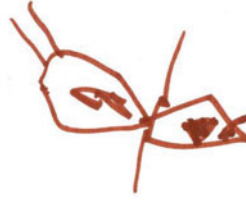
“But Aren’t They Too Little?” Challenging Assumptions About Young Children’s Capacity for Understanding Humane Education Concepts

“You’re too little to . . .”—that phrase can spark powerful emotions in children, and with good reason; one sentence can sweep aside the young child’s eagerness to be included. My experiences with the burgeoning field of humane education as a speaker, writer, editor, and community member have been marked by a similar phenomenon. Over and over again, I meet adults who presume that humane education concepts are too abstract, too complex for little minds to comprehend. To illustrate, a speaker at a national humane education conference stated that their organization “never” makes presentations to children younger than 4th or 5th grade because they “just don’t get it”—and the audience laughed. I made it a point of taking the person aside and gently suggesting otherwise. Such attitudes seriously underestimate not only young children’s intellects but also their capacity for deeply felt emotion. As the experts in this volume have so amply demonstrated, this dismissive attitude toward young children is entirely wrongheaded. It is not that young children are incapable of learning the skills of kindness, altruism, and compassion. It would be more accurate to say that the thinking of the adults frequently is too limited and developmentally inappropriate to communicate effectively with the very young. In many ways, educating misguided adults is far more challenging than educating young children about these matters.

In 1960, constructivist Jerome Bruner challenged prevailing assumptions about children’s capacity for learning when he wrote that “Any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development” (p. 33). Effective early childhood educators know this. We must begin “where the child is” and guide her or him in building enriched understandings; both content and pedagogy need to be matched to young children’s developmental levels. To illustrate, a group of us met with 3- and 4-year-olds to share a program on interacting safely with dogs. One of the rules was that you should never tease a dog, so I asked



"A big spider and a pig. They are friends" by Xander, age 4



"A flying dog. He flies around everywhere" by Chelsea, age 3



"This is a walking, talking kitty" by Mareya, age 4

Children's ideas about living creatures blend the real with the imaginary to create personified animals

them if they had been teased. Several children commented about family members who teased them, all in good fun. Then a boy shared that older kids would steal his winter cap and throw it against the school building (where it would stick to the rough surface of the bricks) and he could not reach it. With that, the conversation turned to mean-spirited types of teasing, and a solemn young girl recently immigrated from China defined teasing this way: "It's when someone says, 'Here is a very nice toy for you' and then, 'Nya nya nya—you can't have it!'" From that starting point, preschool children could say what would constitute teasing of a dog as well as why you should not do it. At another such presentation, we role-played, with dogs, the recommended ways to interact. We had emphasized that you should ask before petting a dog, so a person stood with her dog, and an adult came up and asked to pet it. "No, I'm sorry," the owner replied, "he has been playing very hard and wants to get a drink and rest—maybe come back in a little while." The inquirer walked away, looking dejected, and then whipped around to energetically ruffle the fur on the dog's head. With that, there was a collective, audible gasp from the preschool audience. When asked what was wrong, children said, "That's not what she said!" "She didn't listen to the lady!" "Some dogs don't like that." and so forth. Young children can "get it"—it simply needs it to be more *real* than what might pass as instructive for adults. When adults neglect to educate young children about kindness to all living things merely because it requires something different from them as communicators, an irreplaceable opportunity to foster humane education concepts early in life is missed.

Children acquire gentle, supportive ways of interacting with others by modeling the kindness they observe from their parents and other role models



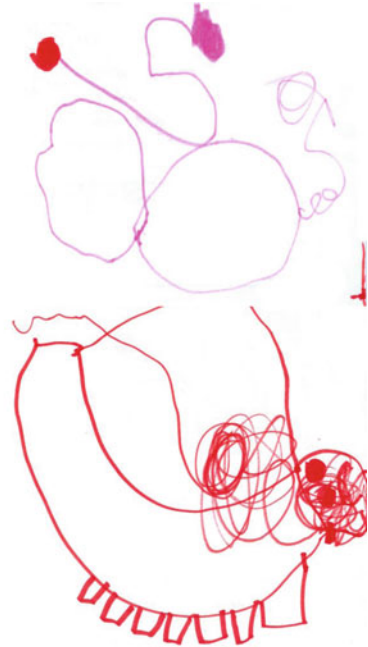
Indeed, there is a growing body of research to suggest that social and emotional learning occurs much earlier than previously thought (Gunnar, Herrera, & Hostinar, 2009). As young as 3 months, infants can reproduce an action they have observed up to 2 weeks later if they are given opportunities to practice (Rovee-Collier & Cuevas, 2009). Children as young as 1 year show “empathic distress” and cry when they see others cry or look sad if a caregiver is unhappy (Quann & Wein, 2006). By 14 months, they may try to help—bring a tissue to someone who is crying or tug on an adult’s clothing to solicit aid for someone in distress. By 18 months, many toddlers will help a stranger who is having difficulty, for example, picking up an object if the adult seems unable to do so (Warneken & Tomasello, 2006). During preschool, children become more intentional, and the behaviors associated with empathy, helpfulness, kindness, and concern for others can emerge well before that terminology becomes part of the child’s vocabulary. With positive adult role models to follow, they learn prosocial behavior, defined as “voluntary behavior intended to benefit another” (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006, p. 646). Prosocial behaviors are foundational in any high-quality early childhood program; they include such things as sharing toys, negotiating disagreements peacefully, comforting others in distress, giving others a chance to play, giving and receiving compliments graciously, warning others of danger, and seeking adult assistance if another child is in trouble (Hyson & Taylor, 2011). In the early school years, young children begin to understand others’ thoughts and feelings, regulate their own behavior, and learn socially acceptable coping mechanisms for dealing with powerful emotions (Pizzolongo & Hunter, 2011).



"My Pet. I have a dinosaur at my house. It's outside in the back yard. He likes to play throwing catch ball and volleyball. He went to the beach with me and my parents and he went in the water and floated all the way to Homer City. You can barely see him cus he is so far away." by Aniyah, age 4



"It's a farmer monkey and it's guarding apple seeds" by Janelle, age 5



"A sad elephant with a trunk—but, watch out for a storm! It will turn into a stinkin' frog" by Alex, age 4

Children's initial efforts at narratives often focus on animals

The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) lists key skills that support children's success in school and in the community:

- Confidence
- Capacity to develop relationships with peers and adults
- Concentration and persistence on challenging tasks
- Ability to effectively communicate emotions
- Ability to listen to instructions and be attentive
- Ability to solve problems (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, Santos, & Joseph, 2006)

As this volume will document, there is a growing body of research to suggest that each of these skills can be supported through humane education initiatives.

There is little question that young children have an affinity for and curiosity about the natural world (Stebbins, 2012; Wetzel, Foulger, Rathkey, & Mitchell, 2009; White & Stoecklin, 2008); they also can derive emotional comfort from their relationships with animals (Meadan & Jegatheesan, 2010). Effective early childhood educators use real-world experiences to make abstract concepts such as kindness, caring, respect, responsibility, patience, and helping more understandable (Meadan & Jegatheesan, 2010). Educators build on the young child's intimate knowledge of

the need to have her or his own basic needs for food, shelter, water, exercise, and rest met; they use the pedagogy of humane education to extend that knowledge to a sense of guardianship of and concern for the welfare of all living things and the environment.

Children learn to protect and care for other living things when they see these behaviors exemplified by adults



Recently, a concept referred to as “a circle of empathy” has captured the popular imagination in conjunction with virtual reality expert Jaron Lanier’s (2010) popular book, *You Are Not a Gadget*. He defines a circle of empathy as an imaginary circle that each person draws around him/herself; things that fall inside the circle are deserving of empathy while those on the margins, much less so, and those outside, beneath consideration. Education can extend the perimeter of those circles as children learn to accept, respect, appreciate, and collaborate with persons very different from themselves (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010) and to protect other living creatures that are neither cute nor cuddly (Randler, Hummel, & Prokop, 2012). As Lanier (2010) points out, “When you change the contents of your circle, you change your conception of yourself” (p. 37). The major mission of humane education is to widen each child’s circle of empathy; to help it grow beyond self and beyond family, friends, and pets; and to lead children to embrace what was categorized previously as “other.” The objective of humane education is an abiding respect for all forms of life, a capacity to identify with suffering, and a sense of responsibility for protecting the environment. In stark contrast to much of the conversation about education today that is dominated by benchmarks and test scores, humane education is predicated on the assumption that a high-quality education

consists of much more than academic achievement. Education could and should be the lifewide and lifelong process of becoming a better human being.

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Part I
Foundations of Humane Education

Chapter 1

Humane Education and the Development of Empathy in Early Childhood: Definitions, Rationale, and Outcomes

Mary Renck Jalongo

Keywords Humane education • Compassion • Empathy • Neuroscience • Aggression • Violence

Introduction

Contemporary conservationist and animal behavior researcher Jane Goodall probably is best known for her extensive study of apes. In *The Ten Trusts: What We Must Do to Care for the Animals We Love* (Goodall & Bekoff, 2002), she shares the story of an early childhood experience that shaped her attitudes toward other living things. As a preschooler, she brought a handful of soil and worms into the house and placed them on her bed. Rather than being repulsed or scolding, Jane's mother gently but firmly stated that these creatures needed to be taken outside because "they need the earth." In 2011, two picture books about Jane Goodall were published. The first, *Me . . . Jane* (McDonnell, 2011), shows her outside, daydreaming of visits to Africa, accompanied by her most treasured toy, a plush chimpanzee named Jubilee. The second, *The Watcher: Jane Goodall's Life with the Chimps* (Winter, 2011), describes the curiosity, persistence, patience, and gentleness that led to her groundbreaking research with animals. Both books help children to see that the way they spend their time today has consequences for their lives tomorrow. These picture books introduce children to a person who has earned international respect because she lives simply, cares deeply, and works tirelessly for humanitarian and animal activist causes. Her life is the antithesis of much of what is celebrated in the media—extravagance, superficiality, and indifference.

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Cruelty and violence are pressing concerns with broad implications for society, so much so, that many recent books have attempted to analyze human kindness, including Marc Bekoff's (2010) *Expanding Our Compassion Footprint*, Frans de Waal's (2009) *The Age of Empathy*, Dacher Keltner's (2009) *Born To be Good*, Jeremy Rifkin's (2009) *The Empathic Civilization*, and an edited book *The Compassionate Instinct* (Keltner et al., 2010). Simons (2005) characterizes the underlying reasons for this surge of interest when she writes:

To navigate the wild changes ahead, decrease the violence of this tumultuous time, and shift our civilization's direction, we will need to invest the same authority and value in our relational intelligence and learning as we've previously given to our intellectual development. If we can do that, we will build a contagious energy that will ultimately lead to real healing and restoration . . . of our deep and fundamental interdependence with each other, other species, and the whole interwoven web of creation. (pp. 8–9)

Many Americans believe that children today are not learning core values such as responsibility, honesty, and respect (Lewis, Robinson, & Hayes, 2011). Where education is concerned, preventing cruelty in school settings has become a major issue for families, communities, and school personnel (Crick et al., 2006; Dupper, 2013; National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). The National Center for Education Statistics reports that bullying occurs daily or at least once a week in 20.5 % of all reporting primary schools.

In response to highly publicized incidents of school violence, educators across the country and in nations throughout the world are seeking to find effective ways to modify aggressive and antisocial behaviors in students (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Troop-Gordon, 2010). A research team who conducted a meta-analysis of school violence prevention programs concluded that "Youth violence and related aggressive behaviors have become serious public health issues with physical, economic, social, and psychological impacts and consequences" (Park-Higgerson, Perumean-Chaney, Bartolucci, Grimley, & Singh, 2008, p. 465). Indeed, "challenging behavior"—a general term that refers to externalized behaviors (i.e., disruptive, aggressive, and violent actions that inflict mental or physical harm to others)—has become a major concern of educators throughout the world (Pickett, Iannotti, Simons-Morton, & Dostaler, 2009; Stephenson, Linfoot, & Martin, 2000). Conversely, internalizing behaviors (i.e., depression, anxiety, and withdrawal), while not disruptive, can have equally negative consequences for children (DellaMattera, 2011).

Young Children's Challenging Behavior

Although children's beliefs about socially appropriate behavior are guided by family and faith, research suggests that unprecedented numbers of students are arriving at school with problematic behaviors and attitudes that interfere with their learning and social relationships (Brannon, 2008; Mayer & Patriarca, 2007). At one time, such behaviors were associated primarily with older children; however, challenging behaviors are being exhibited at younger and younger ages (Kupersmidt, Bryant,

& Willoughby, 2000; Ostrov et al., 2009; Zaslow & Martinez-Beck, 2005), and the harmful effects of aggression are well documented (Crick et al., 2006).

Although many schools have implemented anti-bullying interventions, character education programs, and other initiatives designed to teach prosocial skills (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007; DeRosier & Mercer, 2007), the focus has been on older students (Lewis et al., 2011; Sprinkle, 2008). Yet, in a 2006 report from the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the major recommendation was to begin much earlier to *prevent* children from becoming aggressive (Tremblay, 2006).

Across the centuries—whether it was Friedrich Froebel’s kindergarten, Jane Addams’ Hull House, Maria Montessori’s Casa dei Bambini, or Project Head Start—early intervention, teaching social skills, and promoting self-regulation have figured prominently in the field of early childhood education. Olivia Saracho (2011) contends that the early childhood curriculum is an expression of our most cherished beliefs about who young children are and what is most important for them to learn when she writes:

The values that we, as a society, hold also provide us with principles upon which to base our curriculum. We believe that children need to be physically capable, should have good social relations with others, have the right to live in a safe and healthy environment, should be honest and trustworthy, and should respect the individual characteristics of others. These values suggest the things we need to teach young children. We teach about health and nutrition; we help children develop physical skills; we want children to learn how to get along with others, to develop and maintain friendships, to manifest prosocial rather than antisocial behavior, and to resolve conflicts peacefully. We want children to respect their environment and do things to sustain a safe and healthy environment. We want children to be aware of the diversity of cultures. . . . (Saracho, 2011, p. 73)

Modern concepts of humane education surely are foundational to many of the values on this list. This chapter begins with definitions of key terminology, including humane education, compassion, and empathy; next, it supplies a research-based rationale for integrating humane education concepts into the curriculum. It then turns to discussion of the formative role that the child-animal bond can play in building young children’s empathy. The chapter concludes with an analysis of early childhood professionals’ roles in fostering young children’s empathic development and the strategies, resources, and outcomes that promote humane education goals.

Definitions: Humane Education, Compassion, and the Development of Empathy

When most people hear the words “humane education,” they immediately think of the ethical treatment of animals; however, this is just one aspect of the concept. Humane education today not only includes human-animal interactions but also broader humanistic, environmental, and social justice frameworks (Arbour, Signal, & Taylor, 2009) and guardianship of the earth, or sustainability (Jabareen, 2011). As such, humane education is “a process that encourages an understanding of the

need for compassion and respect for people, animals and the environment and recognizes the interdependence of all living things” (World Animal Net, 2012). In addition to being a process, humane education is founded on compassion. The word “compassion” comes from the Latin *compati*, meaning to be conscious and aware of another’s difficulty and distress while simultaneously seeking out possible solutions and alternatives to alleviate anxiety and troubles (Kirylo, 2006, p. 268). Humane education is linked with social emotional learning (SEL), defined as teaching children to recognize and cope with powerful emotions in themselves and others, develop empathy, arrive at good decisions, and establish positive relationships (Gunter, Caldarella, Korth, & Young, 2012). Humane education extends SEL beyond human interactions to encompass all living things; it is predicated on the assumption that “. . . the conditions that lead to the opening and softening of the human heart—for example, a full awareness of how profoundly divided our lives have become, coupled with a capacity to treat ourselves, each other, and Earth with love and kindness—can be cultivated” (Uhl & Stuchul, 2011, p. 15).

Empathy is the ability to identify with another living thing’s emotional states, both negative and positive (Dewar, 2008; Gordon, 2005); it relies on feeling *with* (rather than *for*) another person (Cooper, 2011). Although there is debate over whether the brain is “wired” for empathy, whether it can be taught and, if so, how early (Zahn-Waxler, 2010), leaders in the field tend to concur that the elements of empathy emerge early. To illustrate, even newborns will join in the crying of their hospital nursery companions, possibly as a result of “mirror neurons” in the brain that prompt imitation—although this line of research is preliminary (Berrol, 2006; Izard, 2009).

David Elkind (2010), a leading expert on child development, explains empathic development in young children as follows:

Empathy is the earliest social disposition to appear in the course of human life cycle. Toddlers will try and comfort another child who is obviously unhappy or in pain. Young children are, however, not yet able to empathize with those who do not give any obvious signs of emotional distress. Preschoolers might, to illustrate, comment loudly on the size of stranger’s nose, or ears, totally unaware of the impact this might have on the other person. This is not cruel, it just represents the fact that young children do not yet understand what another person might be feeling if they have no visual clues to guide them. (p. 1)

There is ample evidence that toddlers respond to other people’s distress if those emotional states are accompanied by the appropriate observable behaviors (i.e., crying, facial expression). Zahn-Waxler and Radke-Yarrow (1990) found that, as early as 2 years of age, children show (a) the cognitive capacity to interpret the physical and psychological states of others, (b) the emotional capacity to experience the states of others on an affective level, and (c) the behavioral resources that enable the possibility of attempting to alleviate the discomfort of others. Thus, empathy has both affective and cognitive components (Goleman, 2006; Zahn-Waxler & Radke-Yarrow, 1990).

Contemporary neuroscience suggests that human empathy begins with a vicarious emotional response, requires an apprehension of emotions in others, and relies on efforts to regulate emotions; as such, it forges links among empathy, prosocial behavior, and regulation of aggression (Decety, 2010). There is little doubt that

complex constructs such as empathy and compassion develop over an extended period of time. New information, concepts, and ideas are integrated with the brain structures formed from past experiences to realize new skills, understandings, and knowledge (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001; Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

As is the case with other complex values and attitudes, empathy and compassion are learned primarily from role models (Arluke, 2003; Dewar, 2008). For example, in an extensive review of the literature on the significant life experiences of environmentalists, Lewis (2007) found that most of their formative experiences occurred during childhood. Adult environmentalists credited such things as (1) frequent interactions with natural, rural, or other relatively pristine habitats; (2) family, adult role models, and school curriculum; and (3) witnessing commercial development of habitats or environmental destruction through war or land exploitation that conflicted with their interest in protecting the environment. Further study of 13 adult animal rescuers from the Chicago area, led Lewis (2007) to conclude that experiences in childhood were the dominant influence; 85 % of the respondents credited having a childhood bond with an animal and having positive adult role models as children with their decision to commit their lives to the protection of animals. Despite the obvious importance that empathy has for society, some researchers have concluded that, in modern western societies that place a high value on individualism, children are at risk of compromised empathy development (e.g., George, 1999; Thompson & Gullone, 2003).

Rationale for Humane Education in Early Childhood

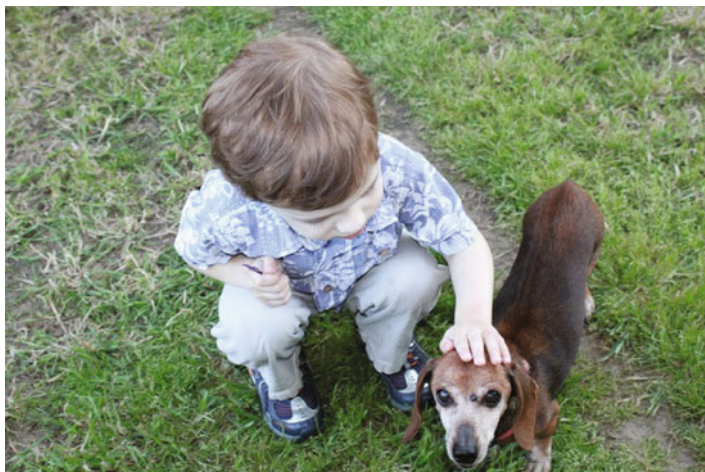
Throughout history and up to the present day, guiding young children's social and emotional development has been a time-honored priority as early childhood educators teach children to look closely, be considerate of others, manage and interpret feelings, and behave in socially acceptable and respectful ways (Miller & Pedro, 2006). Young children must learn "to work with others, care for others, verbalize feelings, support friends, show kindness and exhibit other character skills and traits"; this learning is important because "When these life skills are lacking, it affects the ways in which children interact with one another and form relationships with peers and others" (Priest, 2007, p. 153).

Hyson (2002) contends that childhood educators have an important responsibility to help young children understand and regulate emotion by modeling genuine, appropriate emotions and responses to emotions, to teach about emotions and coach children in appropriate behaviors, and to use positive emotions as a means of fostering student engagement in learning (e.g., Denham, Bassett, & Zinsler, 2012). Humane education has special significance during early childhood because young children's experiences are formative and often set a lifelong course of beliefs, values, and attitudes in motion (Arluke, 2003; Jalongo, 2004a, b; Lewis, 2007). As the next section discusses, positive interactions with animals are an important way of furthering the socioemotional development of the very young.

Human-Animal Interaction (HAI) as a Route to Empathy

The American Veterinary Medical Association defines the human-nonhuman animal bond as “a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and other animals that is influenced by behaviors that are essential to the health and well-being of both” (Wollrab, 1998, p. 1675). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the phenomenon variously referred to as the “human-animal bond” (HAB) or “human-animal interaction” (HAI) was the focus of numerous national and international studies and conferences (Blazina, Boyraz, & Shen-Miller, 2011; Hines, 2003). In a recent book published by the American Psychological Association (McCardle, McCune, Griffin, & Maholmes, 2010), there is a growing body of evidence that human-nonhuman animal interaction affects the course of development in general (Esposito, McCune, Griffin, & Maholmes, 2011; Kruger & Serpell, 2010) and expressions of empathy in particular across the human lifespan (Daly & Suggs, 2010; Ellingsen, Zanella, Bjerkas, & Indrebo, 2010; Taylor & Signal, 2005).

Studies suggest that ownership of dogs and cats during childhood and adulthood is associated with higher empathy scores in later life (Daly & Morton, 2009). Whereas positive role models and interactions with companion animals are linked to compassion for animals, witnessing adult carelessness and cruelty toward animals is a powerful predictor of later conduct disorders that is well documented, both in the United States (Ascione, 2005; Flynn, 2000) and other countries (Yamazaki, 2010). In fact, cruelty toward animals and violence toward human beings are so strongly connected that it has resulted in mandatory reporting of animal abuse perpetrated by children or families in the United States (Arkow, 2012; Baron-Cohen, 2011).



Young children can relate to an animal’s vulnerability and dependence on others to have basic needs met

In many ways, healthy and positive connections between children and animals are the “ideal” first relationships because animals are comparatively more forgiving, expressive, and nonjudgmental than people (Fawcett & Gullone, 2001). Animals also are more accessible as companions; 75 % of children in the USA are more likely to grow up with a companion animal than with both parents in the same household (Melson, 2001). Thus, many children spend more time in the company of an animal than with any other living creature (Melson). As further evidence of children’s fascination with animals, they predominate in children’s dreams, hopes, fantasies, and fears as well as in their drawings and writings (Crawford & Mutuku, 2004). Perhaps young children form bonds with other species because they identify strongly with the animal’s vulnerability, innocence, and dependence on others for care, all things with which the young child has extensive personal experience (Ross, 2005). In addition, animals can play a key role in the young child’s construction of self, those ideas that describe and define the kind of person they believe themselves to be: “We are who we are as much because of our relationships with non-human animals as because of the human ones, and we do ourselves a great disservice—and probably great harm—by denying or ignoring this” (Podberscek, Paul, & Serpell, 2000, p. 2).



Events, such as this Bible school summer camp, promote behaviorally healthy and positive interactions with community members—both human and nonhuman

Children who forge positive relationships with companion animals and accept responsibility for pet keeping tend to have more opportunities to practice social behavior, develop tolerance, form friendships, and learn sensitivity to the needs of another living creature (Berkinblit, 2004), and the presence of animals may aid focus