

Best of Friends

Animals Teach Children Kindness

by Phyllis Ring



Children and animals seem to be one of life's inevitable combinations. Animals heavily populate children's books and other media and commonly appear as decorative designs on kids' clothing, furniture and toys. People often compliment a pet's nature by noting how gentle it is around even rambunctious children.

When asked about his own children's experiences during the year his family toured the world, David Elliot Cohen, author of *One Year Off*, says that what most helped his youngsters relate to the many cultures they saw were the animals. While foreign settings sometimes overwhelmed their sensibilities, any animal, wild or domesticated, would immediately capture their attention and ground them in a sense of connection with their surroundings.

Experts agree that interaction with animals gives children the chance to acquire many kinds of knowledge and develop the two vital qualities of responsibility and kindness.

According to Frank R. Ascione, Ph.D., author of *Child Abuse*, humane education that teaches kindness to animals can also prevent future violence to both animals and humans. A 2003 University of South Florida study led by Linda Merz-Perez and Kathleen M. Heide found that violent offenders incarcerated in a maximum-security prison were significantly more likely than nonviolent offenders to have committed childhood acts of cruelty toward pets.

A pet requires effort on the part of

those who adopt it, like any new family member. Children have a natural inclination to want to help, but as any parent knows, this enthusiasm usually wanes without adult guidance and support.

Young 4-H participants in particular know that

work and responsibility are as much or more a part of having animals as playing with them. When, with a parent's help, children learn to care for animals responsibly, those children typically grow up to be good coworkers, spouses and parents. When parents don't make this effort, too many animals wind up in shelters, and another generation misses the chance to acquire some essential life skills.

Humane education about animals also helps children develop an appreciation and concern for all forms of life.

Interaction with animals teaches responsibility.

While learning to care for dependent animals, children practice and develop the qualities of empathy, awareness, compassion and care, qualities without which most human relationships wither. Children's hearts feel especially tender when young, and animals seem tailor-made to foster caring qualities within them.

The act of caring for animals also enhances children's environmental education by helping them understand the web of life in which every living thing is connected with every other on this planet we share. As they learn to

become decision-makers, the development of a humane character can foster ethical decisions that take into account other people, animals and the environment.

A 10-year-old friend of mine recently demonstrated an intriguing understanding of this interrelationship. He longed to have a dog, but his older brother's severe allergies prevented that possibility. His parents instead encouraged him to save for a bike he'd been admiring and made a generous deposit to get his new fund started. For months he did odd jobs to keep that fund growing.

One day, he and his friend visited the local Humane Society, where he saw many animals in need of homes. When his friend's family brought home two cats, he felt sad that he couldn't help by bringing an animal home too.

The next day he asked his mother if they could drive over to the shelter after school. He told her there was something important he needed to do there.

After school the next day, he raced to his room and brought out the jar with his savings. She had tears in her eyes as they made that trip together.

A few days later, the boy got a call from a young couple in his neighborhood, moved by the story of this boy's spontaneous gift. They'd been concerned about leaving their dog alone all day while both of them worked and wondered, would my young friend like to earn money by spending time with their pet?

Of course, he'd gladly have accompanied the animal *gratis*, but day-by-day, as he plays with his furry new friend after school, his savings jar is gradually filling up again. In his love for animals, he found a step that he *could* take, despite obstacles, and it has led to one of the most rewarding discoveries that interaction with animals can teach – that the reciprocal cycle of life truly is designed to meet everyone's needs.

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