

cultivating



kind kids

notes from a
humane educator in the field

By Freeman Wicklund, Bridges of Respect

Throughout 2000, “The Year of the Humane Child,” we need to remember the importance of Humane Education as a vehicle for instilling youth with the values of respect and compassion for animals. In this article I would like to share with you what humane educators do, why it is important, and how you can get involved.

Traditionally, humane educators volunteer or work at humane societies and visit local schools, churches, and other groups to give presentations on caring for companion animals. Over the past few decades, however, more and more pioneering educators have broadened Humane Education into a holistic concept that teaches respect and empathy for all non-human animals, the environment, and people. Thankfully, many humane educators — myself included — have followed their lead.

So how do humane educators teach respect for animals and the environment? We challenge the mind, inspire the heart, reveal the truth, and empower students to action while developing their critical thinking skills and providing an exciting presentation that leaves them wanting more. And we do all of this in under an hour.

In order to challenge the mind, we have to encourage students to see animal issues from different viewpoints and confront their prejudices. Using creative roleplaying, I often invite Nagev from planet Noissapmoc to temporarily “inhabit” my body so he can question the students about how he should treat the many beings of planet Earth. At appropriate times in the discussion, Nagev may say, “You don’t treat animals as your equals!,” “You eat animals!,” and “Is the reason cows, chickens, and pigs don’t have the same protections as dogs and cats because they do not feel pain?” His questions and comments encourage students to try to explain our society’s treatment of animals, while helping them see how contradictory, prejudicial, and arbitrary it is.

In order to inspire the heart, we must help students develop empathy with animals, and model compassionate living. One of the exercises I do helps students empathize with hens who live their lives confined in a battery cage. Two volunteers are asked to remove their shoes and stand on top of two metal milk crates that are side-by-side on the floor. After the volunteers have stood there for several minutes, I ask them

to imagine walls extending up from the sides of the crates and tubes that bring them food and water. I also inform them that if they need to go to the bathroom, they can just go where they are and let the waste fall through the cracks in their wire floors.

Having set up this scenario, I ask them a series of questions: would you like to live there for 17 months? Can you lie down without bumping into each other? Can you exercise? After 17 months, how would your feet feel? How would you feel towards each other? What emotions would you feel while confined like this? These questions further help students explore their thoughts and feelings about living life in confined and overcrowded conditions. Afterwards, it is easy to point out the similarities between how our volunteers reacted to their situation and how animals react to and suffer from living on factory farms.

In addition to helping students empathize with the plight of animals, another way for the humane educator to inspire the heart is to model compassionate living. Students often ask about the educator's personal habits. When a humane educator practices what they preach — by wearing vegan clothes, eating only vegan foods, buying cruelty-free products, and boycotting animal acts — they add much integrity to the presentation as a whole, and help students realize the compassionate alternatives from which they can choose.

Humane Education also reveals the truth about the way animals are used in our society. This means that we use accurate and current information. It also means we do not “water-down” the reality of animals suffering. I often show high school students PETA's new “Meet Your Meat” video which shows recent, US footage of routine practices used on animals in factory farms and slaughterhouses. This video depicts mutilations, confinement, disease, beatings, transport, and slaughter. Students may also hear me read excerpts from Gail Eisnitz's powerful book *Slaughterhouse*, which contains testimony from slaughterhouse workers telling of pigs and cows being fully conscious while stuck with a knife, submerged into scalding water, and dismembered.

Humane educators also help develop the students' critical thinking skills so they can chal-

lenge information that is given to them, and develop methods for testing its factual accuracy. In one activity every student is given a National Pork Producers Council (NPPC) coloring book entitled “Learning About Pork.” They are allowed to see its pictures of smiling pigs in clean uncrowded pens and read the text which includes comments such as, “Farmers take good care of their animals and animals give us food in return.” I then ask students how we could verify the truthfulness of this information. Responses may include visiting hog farms, interviewing the farmers, and reading farming magazines.

Students are then handed brochures, obtained at the Minnesota Pork Conference, on hog confinement facilities, farrowing stalls, drugs and hormones, specially bred pigs, incinerators, and electric prods. They are able to compare and contrast the new information with the coloring book. Through this exercise, students discover on their own how the NPPC acts as a public relations arm of the pork industry, to hide its cruelty and promote its products.

Finally, Humane Education empowers students to action. At the end of a presentation, I take one dollar from my pocket, hold it up, and explain how every dollar they spend is a vote. Whatever we buy, we also endorse. When we make purchases, we have a choice between voting for cruelty or voting for compassion. Shopping guides, vegan nutrition information, suggested reading lists, and other resources are also made available for students so that their education and activism does not have to end when the class period does.

In the last few months I have had the pleasure of giving more than 50 presentations and speaking with nearly 700 different students. It is rewarding to see how frequently students decide to boycott animal acts, adopt a vegetarian or vegan diet, buy cruelty-free products, refuse to dissect, only support charities that do not vivisection, get active with a local animal protection or environmental group, or start up one of their own at school. Humane Education has the power to change lives, and to save them.

If you are interested in becoming a humane educator, purchase *The Sowing Seeds Workbook: A Humane Education Primer* (available from AAVS). It contains information on communication strategies, ways to get invited

into schools, and sample program outlines and exercises including the alien visit to earth and the battery chicken activities described above.

It is my sincere wish that Humane Education within our movement grows, so that we can reach more students across the continent in the hopes of raising a new generation who respects and appreciates animals for the miracles of life that they are. In the year 2000, let's help every child be a humane child.



Far left: Humane educators learn how to do the “crated chicken” exercise at a conference the author sponsored.

Left: The program brochure sent by the author's organization to teachers in the Twin Cities area.

Below: The author gives a presentation to high school students.

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