Special Children, Special Teachers: Blending Humane Education with Special Education

by Patty Finch

- Proudly, the class stands at the Town Hall ceremony. The students are presenting a copy of the four-page flyer they developed on how to find a missing pet.
- Two children sit huddled over their papers busily writing. They are developing articles to send to the Finnish Humane Society children's newsletter in Helsinki, Finland.
- Last year, a boy's sole interest in animals was "squishing bugs." Recently, at recess, he was overheard explaining to other children how to replace worms in their natural environment.
- Two students, thanks to classroom lessons and experiences, were able to obtain summer positions as veterinary assistants.

These are special children. They've been made fun of by the neighborhood kids. They've failed repeatedly in school. Sometimes they'd rather be thought of as "bad" than "dumb," so they act accordingly. These are special education students. Luckily, they have very special teachers—teachers who have made humane education an integral part of their curriculum.

An Agent for Change

Kathie Pontikes, a doctoral candidate, is in her sixth year of teaching learning-disabled/behavior-disordered children. Her students range in age from seven to ten years. Kathie team teaches with Ken Solomon so that students may experience a more normal class size while benefiting from lots of teacher-student interaction. Kathie sees humane education as a natural for all children but especially appealing to her students at The Miriam School in Webster Groves, Missouri.

"These kids have been the underdogs all their lives. They can relate to animals who are threatened with extinction," observes Kathie. "They know what it's like to be misunderstood and devalued. The suffering of animals gives these kids a cause. For once, the children can be giving help instead of receiving it. That boosts their self-confidence and helps animals."

Humane education is a natural not only for the children but for Kathie as well. A member of numerous local and national animal welfare groups, she is a presenter for a local speaker's bureau concerned with treatment of animals.

Kathie explains, "At first, when I began teaching a humane lesson in my classroom every week, people thought, 'Oh, that's just her. That's her personal crusade.' The other teachers didn't see themselves getting involved at all."

Kathie, however, always invited other classes to join hers for special events. When personnel from a local raptor sanctuary brought a golden eagle and barn owl to her class, all the other classes were there as well. Now, out of the nine other teachers at the school, four have followed Kathie's example of adding a classroom pet, and all use some portion of the humane education materials.

"The teachers saw it was not just my crusade, but a neat way to teach respect for all life," Kathie explains. "I don't just teach about animals but about what's happening to animals. For example, I bring in a steel-jaw leghold trap for the kids to examine. They become very vocal about protecting animals' rights, even if it's a small beetle or worm. Two of my students even wrote articles for a humane society newsletter in Finland. I really feel that these children will have an impact upon our world as they come into adulthood. They are future crusaders in a very important cause."

Opening New Worlds

Mary Thomas is a teacher of educable mentally retarded children at the Skills Center in North Little Rock, Arkansas.
She teaches a four-week unit for eighth- and ninth-grade students who rotate through her classroom. During that time, students spend half a day in Mary’s class. The rest of the day is spent at their home base junior/senior high school or at a job placement.

Mary’s classroom responsibility is to provide education for students referred to as a job station and students learn skills that will help them in future careers. Mary focuses on teaching life skills to her students, providing them with the skills to take care of a pet and teaching them responsibility.

Working to teach an animal care unit has been a long-standing goal for Mary. For seven years in various schools, Mary had tried to introduce humane education. “The principals didn’t understand the potential of humane education,” she remarks.

“Today, however, when Mary walked into the Skills Center, Mary found everyone receptive to the “animal careers job station.” Even the janitor now buffs the floors with Mary’s classroom cocktail perch on his shoulder.

To Mary, it seemed especially important to bring humane education to the students in her current situation. She explains, “Most of my students live in federal housing projects in single-parent families. Pets are not allowed in the projects, and pet food can’t be purchased with food stamps. Many of my students have never been exposed to anything like this.”

Mary has two main goals in teaching humane education. One is to help the students learn work skills and the ability to cooperate with each other. The other is to convey humane attitudes to her students. “I plant seeds,” says Mary, “not only about animal care but also about current issues such as protecting endangered animals and trapping. For Mary, an active member of the Arkansas Humane Association, humane education is very rewarding both personally and professionally. “I just love to come to work,” observes Mary. “I feel as if I’ve reached some pretty unreachable kids and that means so much, doesn’t it?” Mary’s supervisor said she is thrilled with what she’s doing. But she’s finding with the kids that makes it worthwhile.

Centering on Humane Education

Diane Wies teaches primary level learning disabled children at Cicero School by using a self-contained classroom of ten children.

Consequently, the CHERISH program is referred to as reverse mainstreaming. The CHERISH guide, Diane claims, is able to meet the established objectives of the regular school curriculum, while using humane education lessons as the vehicle. For example, a lesson on multiplication also becomes a lesson on the shocking cruelty to animals every day. Diane simply uses the CHERISH index to look up the skill she wants to teach. The index directs her to an activity that teaches not only the like Diane, wrote her own curriculum guide, with an emphasis on humane education materials in her classroom: the lessons are already intrinsically motivating as is Diane explains. “The classes are limited to the children’s innate love of animals.” This usually means that no changes are necessary in the curriculum.

Other adaptations, however, are needed. Diane uses a tape recorder to record weekly writing assignments that might normally be required of special education students. And the CHERISH program, as designed by Diane and her fellow teachers, offers unique opportunities for students. Wherever a teacher can pair a reader, a note taker with a writer, and a nonverbal with a speaker.

“Last year, the kids wrote, designed, and published a four-page typed flyer on Mustard. The four-page typed flyer on Mustard off a dog named Mustard. The incident, which seemed to help them recover from their grief. A funeral was held as well. Nonetheless, the loss was dealt with in a way that was compassionate.

Two days later, the janitor walked into the classroom and with a baby parakeet he had purchased for Mary and the students. “I’m going to bring a baby parakeet to the class.”

It’s obvious that the pets in Mary’s classroom are not just for entertainment, therapy, or to create a nice atmosphere. Besides being valued as individual animals with intrinsic worth, the pets also play a major role in Mary’s humane education program.

Classroom pets, however, are not needed to teach humane education. There are effective, with her program’s success is an outstanding example of a high-quality humane program with no pets. Because of established policies, Diane is not allowed to have any animals permanently in the classroom. Field trips to the Brookfield Zoo and the Willowbrook Wildlife Haven have provided students with some contact with animals. But with or without those kinds of outside experiences, humane education can thrive in a classroom without pets. The flyer on lost pets produced by Diane’s class is an excellent proof of this.

Humane Actions, Humane Attitudes

“The students’ awareness of animals has really changed,” remarks Diane. "Since they were introduced to the animals, they've really changed. They've become more caring and compassionate towards other living things. They're more understanding and empathetic, and they're more respectful of the animals they encounter.”

Kathie Pontikes has seen the same kind
of change in her students. "The children’s growth just from September to May is incredible. They take the issues about animals to heart. This caring extends to even the smallest of creatures. It was one of Kathie’s students who was upset one day at recess because the playground was being sprayed to exterminate bees. As he explained to a teacher, "The bees worked hard to make what they had, and now they’re all going to die." Prior to Kathie’s class, this student’s only interest in insects was killing and collecting them!

These kinds of changes in student attitudes are the result not only of formal lessons but of teacher example as well. Kathie remarks, “What I do as far as respecting life is something they can incorporate into their own lives.”

Mary Thomas recalls she found it hard at first to believe that her tough-talking boys were baby talking to the classroom birds, openly showing their affection for these pets. “I mean, these are t-o-u-g-h kids,” Mary emphasizes. She has also seen her humane lessons produce a growing awareness in students. For example, one girl noticed that the guinea pig’s fur felt just like her friend’s coat and demanded an explanation. Mary, prepared to tackle any topic, told her the facts about furs.

**Side Benefits**

When humane education is incorporated into the special education classroom, the side benefits can sometimes be just as rewarding to witness as the changes in attitudes toward animals.

"The development of interpersonal skills is so heartwarming," says Diane Wiet. In using the CHERISH program, Diane has found that when regular division students work on humane lessons with her special education students, some of the stigma attached to being special ed is lost. The attitudes not only of the regular division students but of their teachers as well seem to change. “We become accepted,” states Diane, “and not thought of as a different kind of class.”

Kathie Pontikes is a firm believer that students learn to be kind to people as they learn to be kind to animals. “They learn to respect life, no matter whose life it is,” she observes. Kathie sees this as especially important for her students who have short fuses and limited coping skills.

In addition, Kathie also sees humane education as helping her students with expression of feelings. “When I ask ‘How do you feel when a pet dies?’ I’m not just teaching a pet unit,” Kathie explains, “but rather coping skills for life.”

Humane education can also help in the development of motor skills. For some children in Kathie’s room, being able to get the litter box out of Brunie’s rabbit hutch is a challenge. Brunie also enhances the children’s self-help skills by indirectly reminding students to keep track of their pencils, erasers, and crayons. If any of these land on the floor, Brunie is right there ready to chomp away. Her particular favorite is red crayons. Brunie further earns her keep by pulling on and untying shoelaces, which results in extra tying practice!

Parents are now coming to Kathie and asking about the benefits of pets in the home. Kathie, in giving a presentation at one of the school’s weekly parent association meetings, emphasized that a child’s special needs can cause stress in the family. When this happens, a pet could represent security to the child, someone who will joyfully greet him or her, no matter what. After listening to Kathie’s presentation, three parents added pets to their homes.

Mary Thomas has noticed increased student interest in school since she began teaching her animal care unit with pets in the classroom. “Students who never took an interest in anything, now beat me to school in the morning,” she points out.

The chance to interact with animals also makes Mary’s after school pet club a success. Mary uses the club as another vehicle for humane education. With field trips to the zoo and pet shops, her club quickly became an overnight hit, with participation zooming from 30 to 111!

**Special Needs and Humane Values**

Can humane education provide a successful focus for special education? The answer is a resounding yes, according to Kathie, Mary, and Diane. Their efforts to help special education students through teaching about animals have provided numerous benefits all around.

For further information on these teachers’ programs, contact the teachers directly.

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Editor’s Note: Since this article was written, Brunie the rabbit has passed away. She died quietly in her sleep at the beginning of this year. We’d like to extend our sympathy to Kathie Pontikes, her students, and all who befriended Brunie.

**About the author...**Patty Finch directs a Pet Grief Hot Line in Reno, Nevada, and develops humane education materials.