What Causes Cruelty?

by Bill DeRosa

T
here are some forms of cruelty that we are familiar with and that occur quite commonly among children. We frequently see or hear about children pulling insects apart or crushing insects or other small creatures under their feet. (Salamanders, snakes, and toads are common victims.) This behavior may simply be the result of children’s curiosity about what animals look like on the inside. Or some children may crush or pull apart small creatures as a way of getting the attention of their peers or even of adults. It may also be that children learn to imitate adult behavior. We frequently see or hear about children pulling small creatures under their feet.

According to Tapia’s findings have been supported by the results of a 1980 study titled "Aggression Against Cats, Dogs, and People," conducted by Dr. Alan R. Felthous and Dr. Stephen Kellert of Yale University. Authorities such as Felthous and Kellert believe that in unstable and abusive home situations, children’s abusive behavior is determined by environmental factors—a background of parental neglect, brutality, rejection, and hostility. Fathers were often alcoholic and physically abusive or separated from their children for long periods of time. In three other cases, a chaotic home environment, combined with biological/psychological disorders seemed to account for the children’s abusive behavior. In most of the remaining cases, brain damage was thought to be the significant contributing factor. More than half of Tapia’s cases involved torture or wanton killing of pets and wild animals. (See our article "From Ick to Listening" in the March 1971 issue of HUMANE EDUCATION.)

The cruelty of children involving torture or wanton killing of pets and wild animals should be treated as signs of a problem requiring professional help. Be sure that your school counselors and administrators are familiar with the study cited in this article. If your school has a list of certain behaviors or conditions to watch for in children—such as indications of child abuse, drug use, or other problems—request that persistent, wanton cruelty to animals be added as an indication of psychological disorders or a chaotic home environment. Finally, encourage your students to report any such acts they witness or hear about. Many of these students that doing so is not an instance of “tattling,” but a means of obtaining help for someone with a serious problem.

Kind to Animals W
et News noticed on a poster at our newspaper office in "Research in Review" or for further information on any topic.

Warning: Like sugar, Kind News can be habit-forming. Once your students get a copy of the newspaper, they may demand more! Subscriptions to Kind News may be purchased at $10 for five bundles of thirty-five copies each. To order, send your check with your name and address to NAHE, Box 362, East Haddam, CT 06423. Be sure to specify which level of Kind News (I or II) you need for your students. You can order Kind News for Halloween by mailing your check for $2.50 each school year. To order, send your check with your name and address to NAHE, Box 362, East Haddam, CT 06423.

Kind News is one animal-focused newspaper containing stories, puzzles, projects, and cartoons. It is written at two levels: Kind News I for grades 1 and 2 and Kind News II for grades 3 through 6. And you can give Kind News to each of your trick-or-treaters for as little as 74 cents—less than a candy bar.

Maryanne Keinen of Osseo, Minnesota, started giving Kind News to her newspaper-trick-or-treaters several years ago. “I’ve had a really good response from the children who come to my door on Halloween and receive Kind News,” she says. “The children learn a great deal from Kind News, as do parents who may pick it up and read it.”

Maryanne finds that youngsters are genuinely intrigued with receiving a newspaper instead of the usual candy. They like it not only for its focus on animals but also because it is something different.

Put a Treat in Trick or Treat

by Vicki Parker

Remember, like sugar, Kind News, our animal-related newspaper for children, can be habit-forming. Try giving students a copy at Halloween—and they may demand more!