What Causes Cruelty?

by Bill DeRosa

There 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. (Saltandanders, 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 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 behaviors such as fly-swatting and spraying insects with insecticides. Thus, destroying small creatures does not seem objectionable to some youngsters because such behavior is often condoned by adult society.

What Research Tells Us

Research has primarily centered on other forms of cruelty, which, though less common than the insect-crushing variety, receive a great deal of publicity. Such cruelty often involves pets or farm animals, such as Felthous and Kellert believe that in unstable and abusive home situations, psychopathological disorders seemed to account for much of the cruelty. In most of the remaining cases, brain damage was thought to be a significant contributing factor. Many of 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 of the C. F. Menninger Memorial Hospital in Topeka, Kansas. In order to determine possible causes of childhood cruelty to animals, Felthous looked at the childhood histories of a group of male psychiatric patients. Of those who had histories of cruelty to animals, most had been subjected to brutal punishments by their parents. In addition, those in the animal cruelty group tended to have alcoholic fathers and high incidences of separation from father figures. The significance of a violent, chaotic home life, including parental alcoholism and paternal separation, was also brought out in the preliminary results of a 1984 study conducted by Felthous and Dr. Stephen Kellert of Yale University. Authorities such as Felthous and Kellert believe that in unstable and abusive home situations, animal cruelty serves two functions for the child:

(1) Cruelty is used to express frustrated aggression toward another person, such as an abusive parent; and/or (2) children model or imitate violent parental behavior by being cruel to animals. Authorities also suggest that separation from a father figure may contribute to cruel behavior in boys by depriving them of an effective male role model for learning to deal with anger and appropriatively channeling aggressive impulses.

What Teachers Can Do

As educators, the type of cruelty we will encounter most often will be of the psychologically speaking, less serious variety—acts such as children's occasionally crushing insects or other small creatures. To discourage students from such behavior, Dr. Michael Fox, Scientific Director for The Humane Society of the United States, suggests that they need to learn to empathize with the animals. Pointing out to children that animals are similar to humans in many ways may encourage youngsters to refrain from violent behavior toward the creatures they commonly encounter. In addition, you may want to provide new ways in which children can relate to small animals. For instance, try taking students on an insect safari to observe the animals in their natural habitats. (See our article "From Ick to Listening" in the March 1983 issue of HUMANE EDUCATION.)

Cruelty is used to express frustrated impulses. Try giving students a copy of Kind News, the young people's newspaper from The Humane Society of the United States.

Kind News is the 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¢ apiece—less than a candy bar.

Maryanne Keen of Osseo, Minnesota, started giving kids trick or treats, etc. a double opportunity to distribute Kind News. Like Maryanne, you can give copies of the newspaper to your neighborhood trick-or-treaters. You can also give Kind News to your students at your classroom Halloween party.

As a classroom teacher, you have a double opportunity to distribute Kind News. Like Maryanne, you can give copies of the newspaper to your neighborhood trick-or-treaters. And you can also give Kind News to your students at your classroom Halloween party.

Party Time!

You can plan a unique Halloween party with an animal theme. Invite youngsters to come to the party costumed or made up as their favorite animals. Plan activities and games with a humane message. (See our article "Parties With a Purpose" from the September 1984 issue of HUMANE EDUCATION.) Provide your own nutritious homemade refreshments. Then send your students home with goodie bags containing animal stickers, animal crackers, small rubber animals, (available in museum gift shops), and their own copies of Kind News. What better way to help your students celebrate the occasion and promote animal welfare at the same time? Individual bundles of one issue of Kind News may be purchased for $2.50 each. Each bundle contains thirty-five copies of the newspaper—enough for all your students. You can order Kind News for Halloween by mailing your check for $2.50 per bundle to NAAHE, Bros 362, East Haddon, CT 06423. Please indicate whether you want Kind News I or Kind News II.

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