

Let That Be a Lesson to You

Humane education programs can support schools, enthrall students, and promote kindness

BY JIM BAKER



Jo Dean Hearn of Wayside Waifs presents a lesson from her “No More Bullies!” curriculum to third-graders in Kansas City, Mo. She often brings Wally, her English cocker spaniel, to help children connect with her message of kindness toward humans and animals.

Humane educators seeking ways to get a foot—or a lesson plan—in the door at their local school can look for inspiration to Jo Dean Hearn. Director of humane education at Wayside Waifs, a shelter in Kansas City, Mo., Hearn wrote and piloted a curricula, the “No More Bullies!” humane education program for grades 3-5, that is now being taught by Hearn and 17 volunteers in 80 area classrooms.

The program—one of 10 curricula that Wayside Waifs offers—is designed to prevent violence by teaching children principles such as compassion, responsibility, self-control, integrity, and respecting the rights of others, including pets.

“No More Bullies!” has been a huge hit locally: Hearn has personally presented the program to more than 8,000 students in the past five years, and she’s had many requests from schools to expand it to other age groups.

Hearn recalls a time when she knew one of the programs she’d created was making a difference. A boy named Michael, a third-grader she later discovered was in an abusive home, wrote her a letter that even now makes her tear up. “The kids were supposed to write a thank-you note, and he wrote this really cool letter, ‘Please, I wish you could just stay one more week,’” she says. “And that’s the thing—[the students] want us to stay, the teachers want us to

stay, because it’s only a week program. [The children say] ‘Miss Jo Dean, please, are you coming back next week?’”

It’s the kind of comment that any humane educator would love to hear. But, as Hearn and others in the field could tell you, it takes a lot of hard work to make those rewarding moments happen.

Confronted with the challenge to create a lesson plan that’s relevant and age-appropriate for students, humane educators might well ask, “Where do I start?”

Demonstrating Relevance

The first thing that humane educators need to do is figure out what the schools need—

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A third-grader at John T. Hartman Elementary School in Kansas City, Mo., cradles humane educator Jo Dean Hearn's dog Lily, during one of Hearn's "No More Bullies!" lessons.

that will help you make your pitch. Start by making sure that any lesson plan you create ties into mandated standards that schools are required to meet. (All states have their own state standards, and most have adopted the Common Core, but Common Core items only apply to two subject areas and are not yet fully instituted.)

Karen Patterson, humane educator for the Humane Society of Huron Valley in Ann Arbor, Mich., looks at her state's grade level content expectations, and finds ways to integrate humane education topics into the standards. Then she tries to create an activity that will engage students, educate them on the required material, and get the humane message across, too.

If, for example, Patterson is going to give a set of lessons to a sixth-grade ecology class, she'll meet with the teacher to find out what the students need to study in relation to that grade level's ecology content expectations, and determine areas the children might still be lacking. "The first step for me is to find out what the need is, what exactly I need to focus on for that particular lesson or organization," Patterson says.

Don't underestimate the importance of the various standards schools have to meet. "If shelters or animal welfare organizations want to work with schools, they have to have something to do with the standards," says Stephanie Itle-Clark, faculty for Humane Society University. "Because if they don't—with No Child Left Behind and all the other mandates—the schools are going to say, 'Oh, you're just a special-interest group, and that's nice, but ...'"

Visit the school's website, Itle-Clark advises, and see what its goals are for the upcoming year. Schools will often post the national and state exams that students have to take, as well as the school's test scores. That helps the school decide on its focus—and knowing the school's focus can help a humane educator figure out her own.

A great entry point into schools is to talk about character education, an area of instruction that many states now mandate. "Most schools have started to integrate the importance of [this] into their regular curriculum, and humane education really does focus on some of the key pillars of character education:

respect, responsibility, caring, and citizenship," says Megan Moore, a humane educator at the National Humane Education Society.

"It really does help us get an 'in' with the schools. It shows that we know what we're talking about, we know what their needs are, and that we're willing to meet them."

Bullying has become a major concern in schools these days, and that's provided an opening for humane educators. School shootings around the country first sparked Hearn's desire to write her "No More Bullies!" program; virtually every school shooter had first abused an animal, and that brought the issue home to her.

"Once I began presenting the program, teachers became very excited about it. ... Children don't know how to get respect in the right way, and that has helped open the door to our program," Hearn says.

On Their Level

Schools want to see that the lesson plan or curriculum that you've created is relevant and accessible to their students, worthwhile, and engaging—and that means the message you're sharing has to be age-appropriate. Humane educators can't go in and talk over the heads of their students, or to fail to connect to their needs and problems. In short, children have to understand what's being said to them.

The key here is to know your audience, and one way to do that is to return to your state's standards to see what children at particular grade levels are learning. Both the academic and emotional content of a lesson have to be appropriate for them. If they're not, students won't be able to meaningfully participate, or be able to handle the material.

"If these kids are just focusing on how to read or how to understand simple concepts, then you really need to [keep] your objectives pretty clear-cut and simple, such as being kind to animals," Moore says. "A kid who is a younger elementary age is only really going to be able to grasp more of the simple topics, such as the proper way to treat their companion animal. They're not going to be able to really discuss the psychological impacts of animal cruelty."

The topic of spay/neuter is important to humane educators, but presenting a first- or

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Including animals in lessons is a good way to engage students. Karen Patterson snuggles with Pearl, a sweet pit bull mix from the Humane Society of Huron Valley who accompanied her on humane education sessions before she was adopted.

second-grader with a full-on lesson about that issue isn't age-appropriate; kids won't learn about reproduction until at least the end of elementary school, according to Itle-Clark.

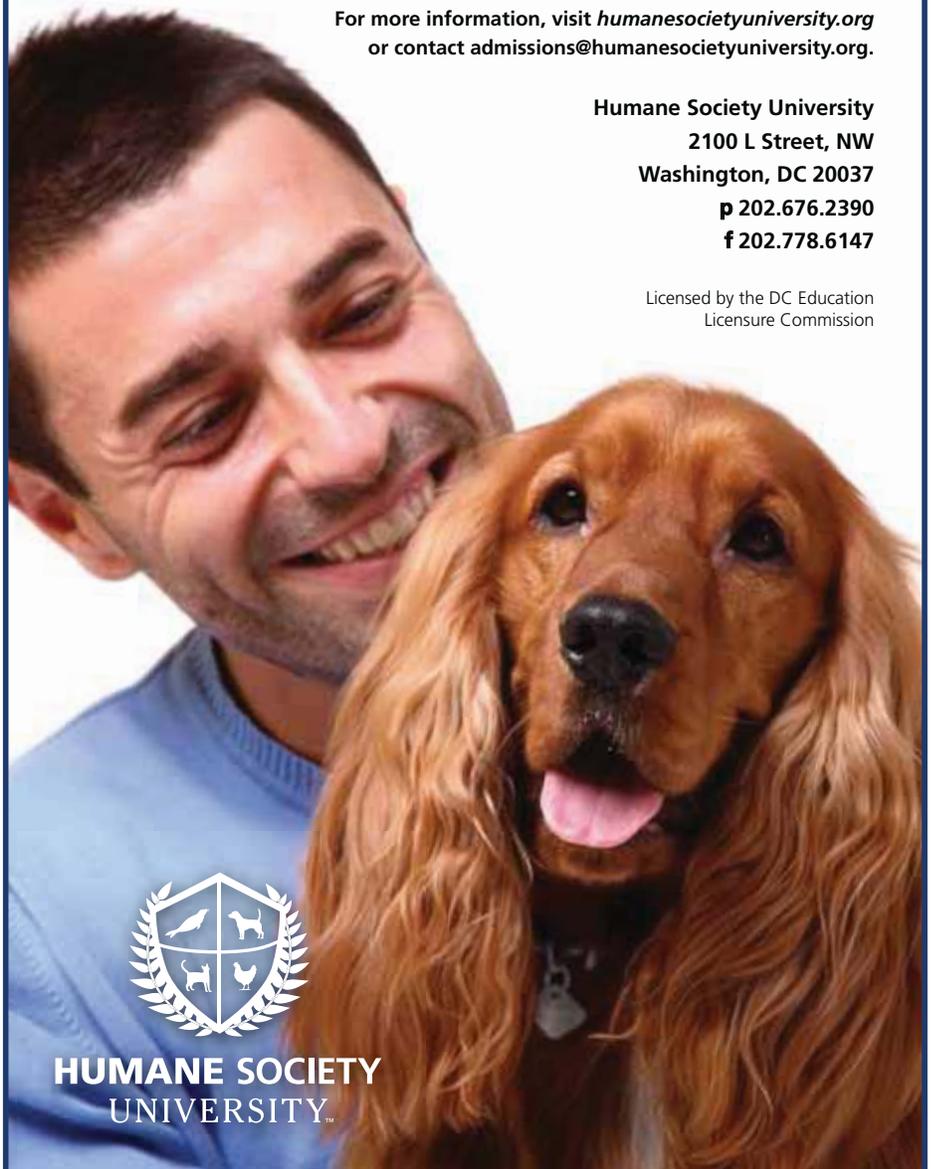
"We say the best way to approach spay/neuter with the little ones is just to mention the words. [Explain that] it's one of the things that's very important for a happy, healthy pet, and put it in there with other things like vaccination and grooming," she says.

The challenge is to keep the students engaged; the whole point of your message will be lost if they aren't interested in your approach.

"If it's too simple, then your kids aren't going to be paying attention. They're not going to take you seriously because you're not taking them seriously, and then you'll just lose them. They'll be twiddling their thumbs, talking to neighbors, and staring at the ceiling. So it does have to be right on target with what they're learning in class," Moore says.

Aren't You Curious?

Tell stories, not statistics—that's one piece of advice that Marsha Rakestraw likes to



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Resources

There's no need to reinvent the wheel—there are many great resources that humane educators can draw upon. It's all there—lesson plans and curricula, online courses, certification—for anyone from newbies just getting their feet wet to old hands in the field.

Here are some good resources to consult:

- Order the prepackaged curriculum for “No More Bullies!” at waysidewaifs.org. For more information, email jdhearn@waysidewaifs.org.
- Check out Humane Society University for Certified Humane Education Specialist (CHES) courses (humanesocietyuniversity.org/ches). At The HSUS's site, find lesson plans and worksheets (humanesociety.org/parents_education/lesson_plans_for_teachers.html); service-learning activities (humanesociety.org/parents_educators/service_learning_animal_protection); and *Kind News* classroom magazine (humanesociety.org/kindnews).
- Institute for Humane Education, humaneeducation.org/sections/view/resources.
- National Humane Education Society, lesson plans, nhes.org/sections/view325.
- Association for Professional Humane Educators, aphe.org.
- Look for state standards at either your state department of education's website, or Education World (educationworld.com/standards).



Kimberly Korona—humane education instructor and program coordinator for New York City-based Humane Education Advocates Reaching Teachers—gives a lesson called “whale stomach” during a summer camp with seventh- and eighth-graders. The assortment of trash on the floor represents the kinds of debris that have been found in the stomachs of dead whales. It’s an activity that conveys the message about ocean pollution better than citing statistics.

give to humane educators learning how to prepare a lesson plan or curriculum.

“Studies show that people get compassion fatigue when you confront them with all these big numbers and statistics, so getting your point across through stories is really important,” says Rakestraw, director of online courses, online communications, and resources at the Institute for Humane Education.

That’s the thinking behind “Whale Stomach,” one of many activities the organization’s website offers to humane educators looking for ideas. Instead of reciting a bunch of facts, a humane educator dumps the contents of a garbage bag onto the classroom floor, and then asks the children, “What do you suppose this is about?”

“Then you tell them that those pieces of plastic and rubber ... were found in the stomach of a dying whale, and so you’re

telling the story of that particular whale, instead of telling them all these statistics,” Rakestraw says.

“You’re starting with a story, so you’re grabbing their curiosity, and you’re not overwhelming them with numbers, but you’re also teaching the lesson.”

But how do you know if it’s all really working?

“You get lots and lots of requests for it,” Hearn says, laughing. “I have not advertised for any of our programs, other than on our website. But even before we had our website, I had not advertised for over six years. [And then] it was word-of-mouth.”

The secret to her success: “Research as much as you can, talk to as many people as you can, look at the state curriculum. The more solid base you have, the better your program’s going to be.” **AS**