
RESEARCH IN REVIEW

Children's Fears of Animals

by Bill DeRosa

Although growing up can be fun, it is also a difficult and sometimes frightening experience. Most of us can remember times during our childhood when we were afraid of something—ghosts, the dark, or maybe even animals. Although there have been relatively few studies on fear of animals, existing research indicates that it is quite common among children. In a 1964 study, one researcher observed that almost all five- and six year-olds reported being afraid of animals. Some children develop these fears as the result of a negative experience with a pet or wild animal. Others become afraid of animals they have never (and likely never will) come into contact with.

Research also indicates, however, that for whatever reason these fears exist, they are likely to occur most often in young children. In a 1976 study, for example, Dr. David H. Bauer surveyed kindergarten, second-grade, and sixth-grade children and found that much lower proportions of sixth-graders expressed fears of animals compared with the proportions of kindergartners and second-graders.

For humane educators, knowing that children fear some animals is important, given that we are trying to encourage children to develop positive attitudes and behaviors toward all living things. But in order to be most effective at helping children overcome their anxieties, we as educators will also want to know specifically why children fear animals and which animals are most commonly feared.

Recently, Dr. Allen Bowd, senior lecturer in educational psychology at the Riverina College of Advanced Education in Australia attempted

to provide some of this information. Bowd conducted a study designed to investigate the relationship between the animals children feared and the animals with which they easily identified and the reasons for their choices. The study sample consisted of thirty-seven five-year-old kindergarten students (seventeen boys and twenty girls) attending school in the Victoria, British Columbia, area. As part of a series of questions, the children were asked, "Can you tell me an animal that you are afraid of?" and then were requested to give reasons for their responses.

What did these interviews show? The bear was the animal mentioned most often as an object of fear (by 18 percent of the students) followed by the tiger (12 percent), snake (12 percent), dog (12 percent), lion (9 percent), and horse (9 percent). Smaller proportions of the children also feared the elephant, cat, and bull. When asked why they were afraid of these animals, all the children indicated fear of physical harm as the overriding reason. Specifically, the most common reason offered was fear of being bitten. Other responses included, "they're mean," "they hurt," and "they're rough." With the exception of dogs, the children had not had specific frightening contacts with the animals they feared.

The results of Bowd's study call into question the explanations of some child psychologists who have attributed children's animal-related fears to variables such as actual contact with pets and zoos, and various internal psychological factors. Bowd suggests that the fear of being hurt or bitten and the fact that children associate this fear with certain animals

may be the result of stories and the prejudices of adult society.

Findings suggest several ways we may be able to help young children overcome their fear of animals. We can begin by portraying a realistic picture of potentially dangerous animals by explaining to children that most wild animals instinctively avoid human contact. Attacks normally occur only if an animal has been provoked, is hurt, or is protecting its young. It is also important to help children distinguish between realistic portrayals of animals in books and movies and those that sensationalize or misrepresent animals and animal behavior.

Finally, we may want to explain to students ways to avoid being bitten by animals with which they have frequent contact, such as domestic animals and pets. Not running away when confronted by a strange dog and avoiding dogs that are protecting their homes or yards are examples of the kinds of advice that may help children avoid negative experiences with animals. By sensitively teaching children about the reasons animals are sometimes aggressive or dangerous and how to avoid being hurt by the animals they encounter, we can help children replace their fears with respect and understanding of animals and animal behavior.

Reference

Bowd, Alan D. "Children's Fears of Animals." *The Journal of Genetic Psychology* 142: pp. 313-14, 1983.