

Super-Humane Kids

Do you know an “animal kid”? A boy in your class who loves to show you pictures of his dog? A girl whose favorite T-shirt reads “I ♥ Hamsters”? If so, then you might know the kind of young person Northeastern University sociologist Arnold Arluke calls a *supernurturer*.

In his study “Childhood origins of supernurturance: The social context of early humane behavior” [*Anthrozooös* 16 (1), 2003], Arluke went in search of clues to what makes young animal lovers tick. His interest wasn’t purely academic. Arluke believes that if we understand the social psychological factors associated with certain children’s humane tendencies, we could apply that knowledge to developing ways of instilling a humane ethic in *all* children.

Veterinary Adventurers

Arluke’s first challenge was to identify a study sample, a group of kids who exhibit extraordinary humaneness in their everyday lives. To do that, he went straight to the mother lode of young supernurturers: Tufts University’s one- to two-week Adventures in Veterinary Medicine program.

To say that the kids in the Tufts program love animals is like saying Yo-Yo Ma likes the cello. All participants had pets—*lots* of them. An average of seven pets per student was reported, with one student reporting 19. The majority had volunteered in veterinary offices or animal shelters, and about half were vegetarians. They saw themselves as animal lovers and were known as “animal crazy” among their peers. To get at the roots of their intense connection with animals, Arluke conducted rigorous, formal interviews with 30 students (ages 11 to 16) and their parents.

Good Things Come in Packages

What Arluke found suggests that there is no one, dominant social psychological factor associated with supernurturance. Rather, the Tufts students shared a set of circumstances and characteristics—a kind of “supernurturance package”—linked to their animal-loving ways.

For starters, they had a strong self-image as “animal people.” According to Arluke, “being an animal person was master status for students, serving as their basic and most important self definition.” They also saw their relationship with animals as reciprocal. Students reported “feeling better” after assisting animals, and for some, caring for animals was a way of coping with family or personal problems. Finally, Arluke’s supernurturers felt a powerful

sense of responsibility for protecting animals. They showed acute awareness of signs that animals might need their help and often viewed themselves as uniquely suited to looking out for their nonhuman friends.

Family Values

Not surprisingly, Arluke found that parents played a pivotal role in cultivating and reinforcing their children’s interest in animals. Most supernurturing kids had at least one parent who identified himself or herself as an “animal person” and provided a range of animal experiences from an early age. Parents consistently supported their children’s early attraction to animals and typically allowed them to care for at least one animal on their own, facilitating a sense of responsibility and bonding. Further, they treated pets as family members by including them in domestic rituals such as family picture-taking and validated their children’s grief when a pet died—arranging ceremonial pet burials, sharing their own grief, and sometimes getting their children new pets to ease the pain. In doing so, Arluke observed, “parents... may have enabled children to convert traumatic, animal-related experiences into catalysts for supernurturance.”

Parents also modeled supernurturance (e.g., by rescuing stray or injured animals), gave their children books about animals, and encouraged them to volunteer for animal shelters and advocacy groups. When it came time to get a new pet, families often framed the act as a way of helping or rescuing animals, not just a means of acquiring companionship.

The Supernurturing Classroom

Though Arluke’s study focuses on family, the role of teachers in molding children’s attitudes and actions cannot be overlooked. See, for example, how fourth-grade teacher Cory Chimka (*KIND Teacher*, page 51) weaves a humane ethic into lessons for his inner-city students—and how they, in turn, have influenced his knowledge and perception of animals and



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behavior toward them.

So, how can you structure a classroom environment where humane values prevail and supernurturers shine?

- Capitalize on teachable moments—natural opportunities to include animals in your activities, informal discussions, and sphere of caring. When you remove a spider or a lizard from your classroom, for instance, articulate the act as a way of saving the animal. Divide your class into “rescue squads.” Have them use the cup-and-cardboard method to gently catch and release uninvited guests. “Katcha Bug,” a great tool for this purpose, is available at petacatalog.org.

- Kindle children’s interest in animals by keeping a supply of pet-care guides, wildlife encyclopedias, and humane-themed storybooks handy. You’ll find great titles on page 52.

- Do you have a classroom pet? Refer to her lovingly as part of your class and include her in the class picture. Model humane behavior by providing the care she needs. Under close supervision, give students a sense of responsibility by entrusting them with some of the animal’s day-to-day care. Invite students to express their grief over a pet’s death, and don’t be afraid to show yours. Have your class create a scrapbook of favorite memories of their pet.

- Provide avenues for students to get involved more formally in animal welfare. Guide them toward service learning that puts their love of animals to good use on behalf of animal shelters or animal advocacy groups. Encourage them to turn their passion for animals into meaningful action by participating in KIND Club Projects featured in *KIND News*.

- Help your students identify themselves as “animal people” in any number of ways. Form a classroom KIND Club and distribute KIND ID cards (bound into *KIND Teacher*) to every child. Acknowledge children’s concerns about animals and affection for them and extend opportunities for your class to make a difference—by planting a butterfly garden, filling schoolyard bird feeders, “adopting” a manatee or other endangered animal, or raising funds to outfit a local service dog with a bulletproof K-9 vest. Your students will begin to feel a connectedness with the animals they have personally fostered and gain an interest in seeing them thrive.

For more on the impact and implications of humane education, visit www.nahee.org. Click Research and Evaluation. ■