

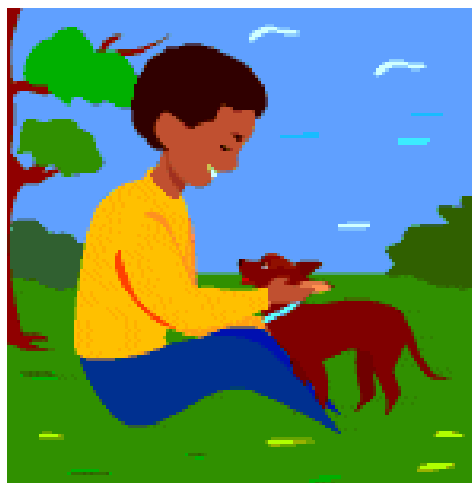
COMPANION ANIMAL ISSUES

Even though the world is teeming with well over a million different species of animals, most children learn about the animal world through the 20 or so animals embraced as companions in their homes. In no small way, how our children treat our companion animals establishes how they will treat most of the other animals in the world--including humans.

When our children learn to love and care for the companion animals in their homes, they learn many valuable skills. Children learn responsibility and long-term rewards. They can learn patience and that coaxing can be more effective than coercing. They learn that animals have feelings. They learn that animals can not only love, but can love us without prejudice and with few “strings attached.”

On the other hand, children can also learn bad things. There is strong evidence animals are abused in homes with domestic violence. It appears that the violence often works its way down in these dysfunctional families; when children witness domestic violence, they may learn to treat their companion animals the same way. These children may also grow up to be violent towards other people, too. Less dramatically, when a child watches his or her parent trying to teach their dog with punishment, the children will probably believe that this is a right and effective way of treating others. When children are told their family loves and is caring for a dog, but the dog is actually left chained in the yard in all weather, they may feel that that is all a dog needs to be happy.

In short, companion animals are Nature’s ambassadors. How we teach our children to treat our companion animals sets the stage for how they will treat other animals, as well as other people and the environment. When we treat companion animals well, they can teach us boundless love, respect, and responsibility. When we treat companion animals poorly, we can learn apathy and cruelty.



All children can learn about responsibility from companion animals. For elementary school children, companion animals provide a powerful and accessible model for understanding the need and feelings of others. Older students can learn more about social, cultural, and environmental issues that involve companion animals. Students of all ages can learn self-efficacy and the joys of helping others through age-appropriate activities.

Companion Animal themes can be easily integrated into traditional content areas. Here are some examples (many of which will be explored further in the lessons in this resource guide):

- Language Arts--In addition to the many excellent books available about companion animals, students can write about their own companion animals and what they can do to care for them. Older students can write newspaper articles about the lives of real animals in a local shelter and what they and others can do to help them.

- Social Studies--Younger children can learn about the roles of companion animals in their families and communities (as police dogs, service animals, etc.). Students can learn ways that companion animals have helped and worked with humans for thousands of years. They can also learn about the problems companion animals face now (blood sports like dog and cock fighting, overpopulation, stray animals) and how they affect communities.



- Science--Younger students are better able to learn about what animals need to survive through the concrete examples their pets provide more than through trying to abstractly think about other animals. Through inquiry-based activities, older students can learn about animal behavior, and then consider the adaptiveness of the behaviors. Discussing how companion animals experience the world can also give older elementary students an exciting way to learn about the senses.
- Math--Overpopulation can give older elementary children a concrete example of multiplication and even a glimpse at geometric progression. Figuring out how much it costs to care properly for a companion animal can be a fun and relevant exercise for teaching arithmetic.
- Visual Arts--In cooperation with local animal shelters and rescue organizations, students can make toys, dog biscuits, adoption cards and “adopt me” bandanas. These activities can help students learn about animals’ needs and age-appropriate issues facing animals in shelters.
- In addition to helping meet state standards, our personal experience has found that many students are very interested in the following companion animals issues. Middle and high schools students’ moral reasoning and critical thinking skills can be sharpened when they discuss these issues in “Socratic” dialogues: where students explore the issues and ways to address them.

- Blood Sports--An embarrassing part of many human cultures for centuries, many people are now looking at them for what they really are--and for the damage they cause not only to the animals forced to fight, but to the communities in which they happen.
- Breed-Specific Legislation--Time to time, different areas of the country seek to address dog bites or dog fighting by proposing that certain breeds be banned. Informed discussions about these bills can not only help students understand the real problem (the deeds, not the breeds), but also be motivated to learn about the legal process--from how a bill becomes a law to how laws affect society.
- Exotics as Pets--What makes a pet a pet? Are all animals equally suited to be companion animals? What does it mean to be adapted to an environment, and what happens when an animal is in a different environment? Why is it dangerous to have exotic animals in a different environment? Are there examples of animals brought into an environment that have hurt the environment? What responsibilities does this impose on us?
- Service Animals-- Companion animals help us more than most students realize. Even if you cannot invite a guest speaker who works with a service animals (seeing-ear, assistance, rescue, etc.), you can open the eyes of your students with current news clippings and stories. What does it take to train these animals? What does it mean that they have the minds to learn these tasks? Are these animals getting enough in return?
- Stray companion animals -- Of course stray companion animals are in danger, but what can be done about them? Students can explore why this is a problem, the reasons for spaying/neutering to prevent it, and what they can do (personally and as a society) to intelligently help homeless companion animals -- such as through education and trap-neuter-return programs.

Additional information can be found at:

- www.animalessons.org
- www.animaland.org
- www.aspca.org
- www.nahee.org
- www.hsus.org
- www.aphe.org
- <http://www.latham.org>
- <http://nyshumane.org>



The following lessons cover some of the most basic lessons we can learn from our relationships with our fuzzy and feathery and scaly friends.