

# Teaching Compassion: Humane Education in Early Childhood

# EDUCATING THE YOUNG CHILD

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VOLUME 8

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Editor

# Teaching Compassion: Humane Education in Early Childhood

 Springer

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# Foreword

*Teaching Compassion: Humane Education in Early Childhood* is a timely and urgently needed book. We, all seven billion of us on earth, are at a pivotal moment in history (McKibben, 1998). We are on course to outrun our ability to produce food, provide adequate water, control carbon and nitrogen gases that heat up the planet, and protect the other beings with whom we share the planet. It is estimated that there will be nine billion of us by 2050. Children who are here now as well as those yet to be born are the inheritors of our dilemmas and will be bound to the solutions we now struggle to devise (U.N. Panel on Global Sustainability, 2012).

“Humane” has traditionally meant being kind to animals. “Hurt no living thing,” advised the nineteenth-century poet, Christina Rossetti. Now it is extended to all living things. “Use your words . . . hands are not for hitting . . . gently, gently” are caroled and commanded through many young children’s lives. There is a new emphasis on empathy, self-control, and kindness because children and all of us are living in a changed and changing world. The world we evolved in is gone.

Some scientists call this time the “Anthropocene” meaning the age/era/epoch when humans have had the biggest effect on the planet (Zalasiewicz, Williams, Steffen, & Crutzen, 2010). After the last Ice Age ended, many humans made settlements and became farmers as well as hunters, changing the surface of the land by clearing it, building irrigation systems and dams, and breeding useful plants and animals. Then trade routes over land and seas brought new items and plants to different places. Columbus’ connecting of the Eastern and Western hemispheres brought enormous changes to the plants and animals of the continents. The industrial revolution, dating about from 1800, speeded up everything. With trains, then cars and trucks, and then airplanes, practically everything and every person could travel around the world. To fuel these travels and manufacture goods, we took coal then oil from under the surface, processed, and burned it, creating the excess carbon and nitrogen concerning us now. Coal and oil are the basis of manufacturing and agriculture. Furthermore, what we are doing is not sustainable—pesticides, fertilizer, and farm equipment deplete energy at a rate that far outstrips the energy of the food produced. Each of us in the industrialized parts of the world consumes

enormous amounts of energy with our food, houses, cars, computers, clothes, hospitals, schools, and so on. Not only is the energy imbalanced, but the pollution from pesticides and fertilizer is tremendous.

In addition, the industrial model has, in the last half century, come to dominate agriculture. Meat animals—cattle, chickens, pigs, and horses—endure well-documented misery (Pollan, 2006). Despite being sentient beings, their lives are harsh. The injunction “hurt no living thing” conflicts with our meat production. This is a dilemma for humane education.

Furthermore, the majority of the seven billion people on earth aspire to a more abundant standard of living. Yet collectively, we do not know how to have material abundance be sustainable. If what we are doing is not sustainable, what is the compassionate path toward more equitable distribution of perhaps fewer goods and services? How do we teach fairness to children?

Another crisis is the worldwide destruction of species, the Sixth Great Extinction. Not since the era of dinosaurs ended has so much biodiversity been lost. Much of this destruction is from the loss of habitat—our seven billion have very successfully colonized the world, marginalizing the animals. So the dilemma is how to share the world with the wild organisms. Sharing the world requires more than saving individual species; it is also saving places for them to live. How do we educate our children in stewardship?

Environmental activist and author Bill McKibben (2011) states that

Earth has changed in profound ways, ways that have already taken us out of the sweet spot where humans so long thrived. We are every day less the oasis and more the desert. The world hasn't ended, but the world as we know it has—even if we don't quite know it yet. (p. 2).

This radically changed Earth is where our children are growing up and will become the adults in charge. How do we educate them and ourselves as well?

Humane educator Zoe Weil (2003) advised in the title of her first book, *Above All, Be Kind*. This is a good starting place. A leading expert on relationships between children and animals, Gene Myers (2013), notes that, universally, children are interested in animals and often empathize with them. I once witnessed the anguish that a child may experience when first realizing that an animal must be killed to become food:

Jesse, my son, was three when he caught a 10" bass and followed me to the kitchen where I smacked it on the head. Jesse shrieked, horrified. Fortunately, he was consoled as I ran to the pond and put the fish back in where it swam groggily away.

Another 3-year-old, Katie, was relishing Easter dinner and heard she was eating “leg of lamb.” Unlike the fish, the lamb was distant, and Katie imagined it. “Oh, the poor lamb,” she sighed, “now it has only three legs and it has to hop” (Polly Greenberg, personal communication, February 1, 2012). What does an educator make of these early sensitivities? These ordinary stories indicate, I think, that children are born primed for humane education.

Relationships with animals and relationships with other people are the developers of children's brains. Neurons and synapses are created from experiences.

Experiences of kindness and fairness leave their lasting mark—they help make us kind and fair (Gordon, 2009). As children grow into the increasingly populated, increasingly diverse world, their kindness and fairness will be valued. The disposition to be active in the cause of kindness and fairness rounds out the development.

The changed Earth has daunting challenges including “bad news” that even young children can recognize. Wild fires, tornadoes, floods, and droughts are experienced by children around the world. Gene Myers (personal correspondence, January 19, 2012) advises us that the role of parents [and teachers] is paramount. They should live

a life dedicated visibly and collectively to making the world better . . . and taking some joy in that and the meaning derived from working on something bigger than yourself . . . [if there is bad news], if it is just how the world is, the way we live is an engagement with that.

This volume is a thoughtfully assembled collection of perspectives which sets the contours of humane education, explores the relationships between children and animals, illuminates the family context for compassion, and offers constructive curriculum suggestions. This is welcome guidance for engagement with a difficult world.

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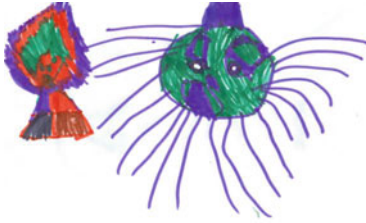
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# Introduction

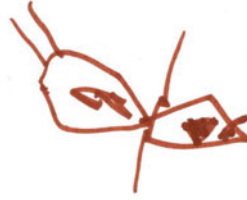
## **“But Aren’t They Too Little?” Challenging Assumptions About Young Children’s Capacity for Understanding Humane Education Concepts**

“You’re too little to . . .”—that phrase can spark powerful emotions in children, and with good reason; one sentence can sweep aside the young child’s eagerness to be included. My experiences with the burgeoning field of humane education as a speaker, writer, editor, and community member have been marked by a similar phenomenon. Over and over again, I meet adults who presume that humane education concepts are too abstract, too complex for little minds to comprehend. To illustrate, a speaker at a national humane education conference stated that their organization “never” makes presentations to children younger than 4th or 5th grade because they “just don’t get it”—and the audience laughed. I made it a point of taking the person aside and gently suggesting otherwise. Such attitudes seriously underestimate not only young children’s intellects but also their capacity for deeply felt emotion. As the experts in this volume have so amply demonstrated, this dismissive attitude toward young children is entirely wrongheaded. It is not that young children are incapable of learning the skills of kindness, altruism, and compassion. It would be more accurate to say that the thinking of the adults frequently is too limited and developmentally inappropriate to communicate effectively with the very young. In many ways, educating misguided adults is far more challenging than educating young children about these matters.

In 1960, constructivist Jerome Bruner challenged prevailing assumptions about children’s capacity for learning when he wrote that “Any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development” (p. 33). Effective early childhood educators know this. We must begin “where the child is” and guide her or him in building enriched understandings; both content and pedagogy need to be matched to young children’s developmental levels. To illustrate, a group of us met with 3- and 4-year-olds to share a program on interacting safely with dogs. One of the rules was that you should never tease a dog, so I asked



*"A big spider and a pig. They are friends" by Xander, age 4*



*"A flying dog. He flies around everywhere" by Chelsea, age 3*



*"This is a walking, talking kitty" by Mareya, age 4*

Children's ideas about living creatures blend the real with the imaginary to create personified animals

them if they had been teased. Several children commented about family members who teased them, all in good fun. Then a boy shared that older kids would steal his winter cap and throw it against the school building (where it would stick to the rough surface of the bricks) and he could not reach it. With that, the conversation turned to mean-spirited types of teasing, and a solemn young girl recently immigrated from China defined teasing this way: "It's when someone says, 'Here is a very nice toy for you' and then, 'Nya nya nya—you can't have it!'" From that starting point, preschool children could say what would constitute teasing of a dog as well as why you should not do it. At another such presentation, we role-played, with dogs, the recommended ways to interact. We had emphasized that you should ask before petting a dog, so a person stood with her dog, and an adult came up and asked to pet it. "No, I'm sorry," the owner replied, "he has been playing very hard and wants to get a drink and rest—maybe come back in a little while." The inquirer walked away, looking dejected, and then whipped around to energetically ruffle the fur on the dog's head. With that, there was a collective, audible gasp from the preschool audience. When asked what was wrong, children said, "That's not what she said!" "She didn't listen to the lady!" "Some dogs don't like that." and so forth. Young children can "get it"—it simply needs it to be more *real* than what might pass as instructive for adults. When adults neglect to educate young children about kindness to all living things merely because it requires something different from them as communicators, an irreplaceable opportunity to foster humane education concepts early in life is missed.

Children acquire gentle, supportive ways of interacting with others by modeling the kindness they observe from their parents and other role models



Indeed, there is a growing body of research to suggest that social and emotional learning occurs much earlier than previously thought (Gunnar, Herrera, & Hostinar, 2009). As young as 3 months, infants can reproduce an action they have observed up to 2 weeks later if they are given opportunities to practice (Rovee-Collier & Cuevas, 2009). Children as young as 1 year show “empathic distress” and cry when they see others cry or look sad if a caregiver is unhappy (Quann & Wein, 2006). By 14 months, they may try to help—bring a tissue to someone who is crying or tug on an adult’s clothing to solicit aid for someone in distress. By 18 months, many toddlers will help a stranger who is having difficulty, for example, picking up an object if the adult seems unable to do so (Warneken & Tomasello, 2006). During preschool, children become more intentional, and the behaviors associated with empathy, helpfulness, kindness, and concern for others can emerge well before that terminology becomes part of the child’s vocabulary. With positive adult role models to follow, they learn prosocial behavior, defined as “voluntary behavior intended to benefit another” (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006, p. 646). Prosocial behaviors are foundational in any high-quality early childhood program; they include such things as sharing toys, negotiating disagreements peacefully, comforting others in distress, giving others a chance to play, giving and receiving compliments graciously, warning others of danger, and seeking adult assistance if another child is in trouble (Hyson & Taylor, 2011). In the early school years, young children begin to understand others’ thoughts and feelings, regulate their own behavior, and learn socially acceptable coping mechanisms for dealing with powerful emotions (Pizzolongo & Hunter, 2011).



*"My Pet. I have a dinosaur at my house. It's outside in the back yard. He likes to play throwing catch ball and volleyball. He went to the beach with me and my parents and he went in the water and floated all the way to Homer City. You can barely see him cus he is so far away." by Aniyah, age 4*



*"It's a farmer monkey and it's guarding apple seeds" by Janelle, age 5*



*"A sad elephant with a trunk—but, watch out for a storm! It will turn into a stinkin' frog" by Alex, age 4*

Children's initial efforts at narratives often focus on animals

The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) lists key skills that support children's success in school and in the community:

- Confidence
- Capacity to develop relationships with peers and adults
- Concentration and persistence on challenging tasks
- Ability to effectively communicate emotions
- Ability to listen to instructions and be attentive
- Ability to solve problems (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, Santos, & Joseph, 2006)

As this volume will document, there is a growing body of research to suggest that each of these skills can be supported through humane education initiatives.

There is little question that young children have an affinity for and curiosity about the natural world (Stebbins, 2012; Wetzel, Foulger, Rathkey, & Mitchell, 2009; White & Stoecklin, 2008); they also can derive emotional comfort from their relationships with animals (Meadan & Jegatheesan, 2010). Effective early childhood educators use real-world experiences to make abstract concepts such as kindness, caring, respect, responsibility, patience, and helping more understandable (Meadan & Jegatheesan, 2010). Educators build on the young child's intimate knowledge of

the need to have her or his own basic needs for food, shelter, water, exercise, and rest met; they use the pedagogy of humane education to extend that knowledge to a sense of guardianship of and concern for the welfare of all living things and the environment.

Children learn to protect and care for other living things when they see these behaviors exemplified by adults



Recently, a concept referred to as “a circle of empathy” has captured the popular imagination in conjunction with virtual reality expert Jaron Lanier’s (2010) popular book, *You Are Not a Gadget*. He defines a circle of empathy as an imaginary circle that each person draws around him/herself; things that fall inside the circle are deserving of empathy while those on the margins, much less so, and those outside, beneath consideration. Education can extend the perimeter of those circles as children learn to accept, respect, appreciate, and collaborate with persons very different from themselves (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010) and to protect other living creatures that are neither cute nor cuddly (Randler, Hummel, & Prokop, 2012). As Lanier (2010) points out, “When you change the contents of your circle, you change your conception of yourself” (p. 37). The major mission of humane education is to widen each child’s circle of empathy; to help it grow beyond self and beyond family, friends, and pets; and to lead children to embrace what was categorized previously as “other.” The objective of humane education is an abiding respect for all forms of life, a capacity to identify with suffering, and a sense of responsibility for protecting the environment. In stark contrast to much of the conversation about education today that is dominated by benchmarks and test scores, humane education is predicated on the assumption that a high-quality education

consists of much more than academic achievement. Education could and should be the lifewide and lifelong process of becoming a better human being.

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