

Pet PEP: the pets and people education program

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ABSTRACT

Pet PEP, the pets and people education program for primary school children, has been presented at urban animal management conferences in the past and has been well received. This paper gives a background to the program and an update on activities. It also addresses the implementation of Pet PEP in schools and emphasises the fundamental importance of the active involvement of veterinarians and animal control officers in the success of this very worthwhile educational program. Pet PEP is an investment in socially responsible pet ownership for now and for the future.

INTRODUCTION

Pet PEP is an Australian Veterinary Association initiative and has been introduced to primary schools in WA, SA, ACT, Victoria and Queensland. NSW is launching the program this year with introduction into the classroom in 1996. Tasmania and the Northern Territory are expected to commence Pet PEP in schools in 1996 also. There has been considerable overseas interest in the program and in its success in Australia. Interactive multimedia presentations of Pet PEP are planned to utilise this growing and exciting form of education delivery to primary school children.

BACKGROUND

Pet PEP was developed in response to increasing urbanisation and population densities throughout Australia. These trends brought problems with the management of pets in order for them to live in harmony with the urban environment. The response to nuisance animals seemed aimed at tougher legislation with insufficient consideration being given to the education of owners so they could successfully integrate their pets into the changing environment.

Dr Dianne Hopkins (now Evans), a Western Australian veterinarian, believed a large part of the solution to the pet problem lay in educating the children of today (who are the decision makers of tomorrow) in responsible pet ownership. To do this, Dianne knew a program that could be easily used in schools and importantly, was fun, was the answer. She recognised that understanding the education system and teacher concerns was crucial in formulating the program.

To develop Pet PEP, a close and cooperative network was established between the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA), the Ministry of Education, the Primary Science Teachers' Association, the Department of Local Government, Local Government Association, RSPCA, the Petcare Information and Advisory Service and Arthur Webster Pty Ltd. Pet PEP evolved through this cooperation into a comprehensive, professional program which was introduced into Western Australian primary schools in 1991. Cooperation between similar groups in other States and Territories has enabled its introduction to most of Australia.

Recognising that the success of Pet PEP was dependent on its practical application in primary schools, the program underwent a major rewrite in 1994 to tailor it to the newly introduced national curriculum in primary school education. Pet PEP then became a fully national resource which incorporated the objectives of the national science syllabus.

Innumerable hours of work and resources have gone into the development of Pet PEP. Much of this has been provided by voluntary labour (and continues to be), but the program could not have reached fruition without the foresight and generous donations of sponsors who believe in the long term benefits of the program. Sponsors include: individual veterinarians, veterinary practices, local government, pet industry bodies, animal welfare agencies and State government departments, to name a few. The Australian Veterinary Association has been a solid sponsor and supporter since the inception of Pet PEP. This reflects the AVA's (and therefore its veterinary members') commitment to the goal of socially responsible pet ownership so the community can fully enjoy the benefits afforded through the human animal bond.

PET PEP IN SCHOOLS

An educational approach in schools to the subject of socially responsible pet ownership facilitates effective, longer term changes in behaviour and attitude. With effective school programs, different audiences can be reached. Firstly, the children themselves, many of whom are directly responsible for their pets. The next audience is the parents via the impact which children, particularly primary school children, have on them. Children tell their parents and friends about interesting activities and facts they have learnt. Pet PEP certainly provides a stimulating topic. When children mature they retain what they learnt as children. Finally, the children's attitudes influence their own children so the message spreads to the next generation of pet owners.

Pet PEP has a further advantage in that teachers are given consistent and accurate information on many issues relating to owning pets. Teachers are very influential, are extremely receptive to learning and will relate interesting information to other teachers, their families and friends. Being a fully integrated, ready-to-use package raises the profile and acceptance of Pet PEP and the issues it contains which, in turn, increases its importance to the community.

Education programs have been used to address community problems including drug abuse, smoking and HIV. Governments have allocated resources to educational programs to help reduce the adverse effects associated with these serious problems. Pet care and pet owner responsibility are not so serious. However, the issues involved in these topics go further than an appreciation of pet ownership. They engender care for others and consideration of the needs of others (for example the elderly, the disabled and the peace and quiet required by neighbours). These are truly invaluable lessons to learn in a child's formative years.

Animals are unique in that they can be used as a basis for lessons in many subject areas, including science, maths, social studies and language. Whilst covering the core curriculum, children also learn about pets. Children are naturally interested in animals and enjoy interacting with them. Teachers have a more enjoyable job in that they certainly do not have to coerce their students to do a lesson activity on pets.

THE AIMS OF PET PEP

The main aims of Pet PEP are:

1. To promote pet care

Children have little exposure to instruction on correct animal treatment and care. Pet PEP allows the next generation to receive information which is based on sound and practical standards of animal care. There is, unfortunately, widespread ignorance of the real needs of animals and without programs such as Pet PEP, children may not have the opportunity to redress this ignorance.

2. To promote pet owner responsibility

Learning about taking responsibility for another life helps children to understand their obligations when owning a pet. This education also has the major benefit of allowing children to appreciate that everyone has wider responsibilities - to themselves, their families and to the community.

3. *To promote a positive interaction between children and pets which should lead to respect and understanding of animals and other people*

Studies have shown that positive interactions with animals assist in childhood development. This includes development of better motor skills, observational behaviour, social interaction and a more nurturing attitude than those observed in children growing up without pets. Pet PEP can help children learn to care for, trust and respect animals. This should lead them to an appreciation of all living creatures and the environment they share with them.

4. *Encourage contact with community groups such as veterinarians, animal control officers, RSPCA and animal conservation groups*

Through direct contact with groups involved with animals, children can gain an understanding of the role these groups play in the community. They can be exposed to many unselfish people who actively care for others and the environment.

DISTRIBUTION OF PET PEP

The aim is to give every school in Australia access to a free copy of Pet PEP. Originally Pet PEP was sent direct to all schools in WA and SA. This obviously was a very costly exercise and could give no guarantee that the program would even be read by the appropriate teachers, let alone used in the classroom. Various avenues to add value and appeal to Pet PEP were considered. The chosen distribution system had to be flexible and produce a database to monitor uptake while still providing the program free of charge.

Satisfactory systems include:

- a. Promotion and presentation of Pet PEP to schools by veterinarians, animal control officers and animal welfare groups. Many of these people already regularly visit schools.
- b. Storage of Pet PEP kits at local councils and AVA offices. Once teachers are made aware of the program, they can easily obtain copies from these sources.
- c. Through a commercial distribution company. This latter option is working very successfully at present in Queensland. A flyer was sent to all schools advertising Pet PEP and using a freecall number to obtain a complimentary copy. At present, 35% of Queensland schools have received Pet PEP because they are interested in the program and responded to the flyer. Information is collected for the database when applications are made. To increase this (already excellent) response rate, veterinarians and others will promote the program at a local level in Queensland. This format will be followed for future distribution of Pet PEP, whether as a new introduction to primary schools (as in NSW) or as a relaunch with the revised national edition (as in WA and SA).

The role of veterinarians, animal control officers, welfare groups and other interested parties cannot be overemphasised. They are vital to generate and maintain enthusiasm for Pet PEP once initial interest has been shown by teachers. They are also an instrumental part of the structure of Pet PEP.

STRUCTURE

Pet PEP provides three discrete programs with material for junior (years 1 & 2), middle (years 3 & 4) and upper (years 5 & 6) levels of primary school. Each ten week program has a selection of different lesson plans for a weekly focus question. This gives teachers the flexibility to decide whether to expand or reduce the number of lessons.

The weekly focus questions belong to one of three categories:

- A. **Preparing for my pet.** Focus questions are: 'What are pets?', 'Why do we have them?', 'How do we choose the right one?' and 'What must we do to prepare for owning a pet?'
- B. **Caring for my pet.** Focus questions cover the physical and behavioural needs of pets. Activities include contact with the local veterinarian to organise a visit to the classroom or a visit by the class to a local veterinary practice.
- C. **Being responsible for my pet.** In these focus questions children examine the responsibilities of pet control, legislation relating to keeping pets, why pets should not be allowed to breed and the role of animal control officers in the community. Lessons include writing letters to local government authorities for information relating to dog exercise areas, fines for infringement of dog control legislation plus arranging a visit by an animal control officer.

Teachers commend Pet PEP as it is easy to use and has lesson plans, worksheets and information sheets as well as a resource section. This contains valuable additional information on the more common types of pets and contact details of veterinary practitioners, local government authorities, animal welfare and conservation groups, pet clubs and others. Resource sections are written specifically for each State or Territory.

ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT IN PET PEP

Because those concerned with all aspects of urban animal management must endorse the concept and long term benefits of Pet PEP, it is essential we become actively involved in the program's promotion and implementation. Support from teachers is essential to Pet PEP's success, so promoting the program to them is a fundamental strategy.

Methods to achieve this may differ in each State or Territory. All have conferences, journals and in-service training for teachers where advertising Pet PEP can be helpful. The process may be slow and not all teachers will be interested, but the goals of Pet PEP are long term and awareness raising is an ongoing, steady process.

There is no doubt that the most successful avenue for promotion is face-to-face contact, where enthusiasm for Pet PEP can be felt and the teacher is keen to find out more. To do this the presenter must: believe in the program and its long term benefits, be gregarious and able to establish rapport, be enthusiastic, know the program and be prepared to explain it in a short, friendly discussion.

Even after launches of Pet PEP with wide media coverage, promotion to teachers via newsletters and conferences, it may be the case that teachers are not aware of the program. This is quite understandable when one considers the volume of literature that crosses a teacher's desk and the little time each has to deal with it. However, it has been shown that teachers are very willing to use Pet PEP, once they know about the program. If Pet PEP is shown to them personally, teachers quickly realise it is a very practical, fun and interesting educational resource they can conveniently use as part of the curriculum.

Education officers and consultants employed by the AVA have proved invaluable in promoting Pet PEP to teachers. Most States have employed former teachers part-time for the positions. This is an excellent strategy as they know the education system, have networks of their own and are aware of how to promote to schools and who to target. For example, in the ACT the education officer arranges for a Pet PEP display to be mounted prominently in a school, leaves it there a week to generate interest then talks to teachers about the detail of the program and its effective use as part of the curriculum. This has proved very successful. It admittedly is a fairly slow process but, as mentioned before, there can be no rush to get an enduring message across.

The structure of Pet PEP allows for school children to have direct contact with veterinarians and animal control officers. Children also, through the teacher contact resource section, have the opportunity for contact with animal welfare groups, dog obedience clubs, pets as helpers programs, wildlife and conservation groups - to name a few. Each group has the chance to instil their message of responsible pet ownership and the benefits to the community of healthy, well cared for and trained pets.

It is an opportunity we should all take very seriously if our positions are to retain relevance in the future. Animal control officers do not want to be seen simply as law enforcers, veterinarians do not want to be visited for only emergency treatment and euthanasia, and animal welfare agencies do not want to be seen as solely reacting to problems caused by unwanted pets. We all want to be recognised as instrumental in addressing the problems and working with a knowledgeable community towards the same goals. Education is one basis of long term change in the behaviour and attitudes of the community. Pet PEP is a powerful educational tool which has immediate and future benefits.

To encourage and support veterinarians and others to be involved with Pet PEP, whether by visiting schools or hosting class visits to their workplaces, a 'Schools Kit' has been developed. This has valuable information on how to arrange visits, how to get your message across and how to make the most of the short time available. It also contains a resource section with puzzles, drawings, etc that can be copied and handed out to school children. These kits are available free to anyone interested.

ONGOING SUCCESS OF PET PEP

The most important components of the success of Pet PEP are:

- national and State coordination by a professional body. The AVA is currently responsible for this function;
- support by State education authorities;
- support by teachers and teacher groups, especially science teachers' organisations;
- support and active involvement in the program by veterinarians, veterinary nurses and animal control officers;
- support by local government authorities, State government authorities, animal welfare groups, conservation groups and other community groups. Support from these bodies gives a broad base and increased credibility;
- financial support. Pet PEP is an expensive and ambitious program which relies heavily on voluntary input and sponsorship. To survive and grow, additional and ongoing funds are needed;
- strong teacher input in designing the lessons and reviewing these as necessary and in trailing the program. This is essential for credibility and to ensure that the program is relevant and workable in the classroom;
- effective promotion to teachers, veterinarians, local government and the public. Awareness raising and maintenance are ongoing tasks which require considerable time and resources;
- teacher training in the use of Pet PEP. Workshops have been conducted and well received; and
- teacher acceptance of Pet PEP. This is vital and we know that teachers who use the program are very pleased with it and intend using it in the future.

SUMMARY

Pet PEP was an excellent concept that has evolved into a successful and very worthwhile program. It aims to instil responsible and caring pet ownership into primary school children and from there, to their families, friends and the community. These children are the decision makers of the future and the hope for harmonious human-animal interactions.

Studies increasingly show the positive health and social benefits of pet ownership and the use of Pet PEP in schools will enable future generations to enjoy these benefits. The community will benefit from socially responsible ownership as the incidence of nuisance, aggressive or destructive animals declines. Importantly, the well being of pets increases through ownership by knowledgeable, caring and responsible people. Also, job satisfaction for those working with animals benefits from a positive image of pets. The community will appreciate the constructive work they do to retain and enhance the future balance of pets and people in society.

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Lyndy Scott is a veterinarian who consults to the national office of the Australian Veterinary Association on a range of issues. These include urban animal management, animal welfare and the Pet PEP program. Lyndy has known Di Hopkins (now Evans), the original author of Pet PEP, since veterinary school. She actively encouraged Di in the development and promotion of the program as she also is convinced that the message of responsible pet ownership must be appreciated at an early age for it to continue in later life. If future generations of decision makers and animal owners are well informed and responsible for their actions, the common problems of nuisance animals, strays, cruelty, neglect and indifference will be solved. Lyndy, along with many others committed to Pet PEP, believes that animal wellbeing plus community health and stability are other priceless outcomes of the Pet PEP program.

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