

Victorian School Education Program

Rob Morrice and Virginia Soderstrom

ABSTRACT

The State Government Responsible Pet Ownership Program for Schools is a multi-faceted program aimed at educating our next generation of pet owners hence the program's motto — 'Educating today, taking care of tomorrow'.

The two major components of this program are a Teachers Kit, which includes four comprehensive integrated units of work and support materials and an annual visit from a Pet Educator. Since the Program's launch in June 2000, the Educators have delivered the message of responsible pet ownership to 1200 primary and special setting schools, which equates to nearly 180,000 students. A team of 60 trained Pet Educators and their temperament-tested pets have visited schools throughout the State. The Program is committed to visiting all schools regardless of geographical location or size of enrolment and as a result all schools that have expressed an interest in the program have been catered for. This team of Educators has also been instrumental in introducing and unpacking the Teachers Kit, which was distributed free of charge to all Victorian primary schools. As a result schools are introducing the program into their long-term curriculum planning and also implementing it as part of existing animal, pet, safety and community units. These units are structured so they can be introduced at different grade levels. This ensures that the message is reinforced and expanded throughout the student's primary years.

INTRODUCTION

Since before written history companion animals have had a close relationship with people. It has been an equal partnership with each party having responsibilities to the other. Pets provide us with companionship, help, protection and devotion. In turn we must provide love, adequate food, shelter, health care and training.

'The Domestic (Nuisance and Feral) Animals Act 1994' was formulated by the Victorian State Government. It aims to:

- highlight the importance of being a responsible pet owner;
- promote animal welfare;
- protect the natural environment and its fauna from the increasing problems associated with stray and feral animals; and
- introduce a registration and identification scheme for cats and dogs.

This legislation was enacted with a commitment to introduce a public awareness and education program. The 'Responsible Pet Ownership Program for Schools' is an integral part of this commitment. The program consists of comprehensive teacher's manual, which contains sequential integrated units of work specifically designed to address the Victorian Curriculum Standards Framework II and The Domestic (Feral and Nuisance) Animals Act 1994. This ensures that the program is as relevant as possible to its audience. The program has been designed so that it can be adjusted to meet the needs of other State Legislation and Curriculum if required. The authors strongly believe that the success of such a program is based on its relevance and ease of implementation. Teacher reference materials, a video and relevant resource materials, reference guides and an Internet site support the units. A large team of trained Pet Educators, with their temperament-tested pets, is available to visit every Victorian Primary School on an annual basis, to further reinforce the message of Responsible Pet Ownership.

The Program's slogan, 'Educating today, taking care of tomorrow' highlights the Victorian State Government's belief that it has a civic responsibility to proactively educate future generations to become responsible pet owners. Patterns of pet ownership, as well as community attitudes about what constitutes responsible behaviour, have changed significantly over the past few years. The Government believes that all animals must be treated with the utmost respect and acknowledges that some animals can be unpredictable and display unfriendly behaviour. It also acknowledges the fragile balance between native animals, their habitat and the impact of un-owned and feral animals. It is therefore extremely important that the Government provides all members of the community with adequate knowledge and skills to positively address these issues.

Further, the State Government acknowledges the importance of the educational partnership between the home and school. The 'Responsible Pet Ownership Program for Schools' has therefore been designed to utilize this valuable communication structure by empowering the children to share the message of responsible pet ownership with their families.

Educating children to become responsible pet owners is not an overnight process. Changing community attitudes and understandings in relation to responsible pet ownership is a long-term undertaking, which will require both effective education and legislation working in tandem. The current program must therefore be seen in its entirety rather than compartmentalised. The Kit is designed to provide primary students with meaningful units of work which will allow them to thoroughly explore and understand the issues and concepts related to responsible pet ownership over seven years of schooling. The school visit is an excellent introduction to the program and is used as a springboard for many schools to explore the units. As the schools become more familiar with the units it is anticipated that they will move away from the more generic talks to issues related to their classroom units.

The program's mascots, Victoria the Cat and Victor the Dog, are quickly developing a high profile in the schools and wider community. They are the central characters appearing throughout the kit, Internet site and promotional materials. These larger than life characters have been a huge draw-card when appearing at pet, local government and community events.

THE TEACHER'S KIT

The 'State Government Responsible Pet Ownership Program for Schools Teacher's Kit' has been specifically designed to provide teachers with relevant units of work, which are closely linked to the Victorian Curriculum Standards Framework II. As experienced primary educators, the authors are acutely aware of the curriculum pressures schools face and have made every endeavour to make the program as teacher friendly as possible.

The Teacher's Kit is based around eight key concepts:

1. Choosing a Pet.
2. Registration.
3. Security and Housing.
4. Native Flora and Fauna.
5. Exercise.
6. Training.
7. Feeding and Health.
8. Unfriendly Dogs.

Comprehensive Scope and Sequence Charts have been developed to ensure that the program is relevant to its audience. These charts incorporate the learning outcomes outlined in Victoria's current curriculum documents (Curriculum Standards Framework II) and the key components of the Domestic (Feral and Nuisance) Animals Act 1994.

There are four integrated units of work that relate to levels one to four of the Curriculum Standards Framework II. The Key Learning Areas of Health and Physical Education, Science and Studies of Society and Environment provide the knowledge components. In line with recent developments in the areas of numeracy and literacy, the units provide a wide range of opportunities to develop relevant skills, concepts and genre.

Like all generically produced units of work it is impossible to cater for the individual needs of each child. Care has been taken to provide a range of activities, which will allow students, at all levels of understanding, to actively participate and experience success. Teachers are encouraged to refine the units in order to address the specific needs of their students and where they live.

It is not designed to be a static program and teachers will be able to download new support materials and resources as they come to hand through the Teachers Section on the internet site. There is a range of support materials included in the kit which include:

- **Teacher Reference Materials**

One cannot assume that teachers are experts in the area of responsible pet ownership therefore basic information relating to the following areas are included.

- Choosing a pet
- Dogs
- Cats
- Feeding and health
- Training
- Native flora and fauna
- Dangerous dogs

- **Big Book**

The Big Book is an oversized picture storybook, which is based around twelve pictures, each dealing with a particular concept relating to responsible pet ownership. These pictures are an integral part of the junior units, which can be used as a springboard for discussion. Relevant discussion points and questions are included in the Teacher Resource Section.

- **Teacher Resource Section**

The Victorian State Government has developed a wide range of written material, which have been included in the kit. This section also has relevant literature reference lists and big book discussion points and questions. A wide range of relevant Internet sites has been included and will be continually updated.

- **Video**

The video is a compilation of the materials produced for the community advertising campaigns. These are referred to throughout the units of work.

- **Internet Site**

An Internet site (www.pets.info.vic.gov.au) has been developed to specifically support the school program. There is a junior and senior primary path for the students to follow.

THE SCHOOL VISIT

Each Primary school in the State of Victoria is entitled to an annual visit from the program. It is important to note that the Department of Education, Employment and Training recognizes the program, however it does not mandate any outside program and therefore the Program attends the schools by invitation.

Trained Pet Educators, who visit the schools with a temperament-tested pet, are an integral component of the program. These Educators are from wide and varied backgrounds, including retired teachers and principals, social workers and animal control officers. Most importantly these people are passionate about responsible pet ownership.

The units in the Teachers Manual suggest appropriate times to use the Pet Educators to enhance student learning. It is strongly recommended that schools who are not using the units invite a Pet Educator to work with the children on the safety and community aspects of living with pets, on an annual basis.

All educators undergo a police check and training program prior to working within the program. They also undertake on-going professional development to ensure the highest quality presentations. These presentations are scripted to ensure consistency of message throughout the State. A team of sixty Educators and their temperament-tested pets are located throughout metropolitan and country Victoria and are managed on a regional basis. This allows the program to deliver a more personalised and flexible service.

An excellent rapport is being developed with local government personnel, which is ensuring that the presentations are relevant in relation to local orders and issues. A growing number of Animal Control Officers are involving themselves in the visits. The Program is also supporting local government initiatives such as registration and community days. Each school visit may involve a number of talks, which are individually tailored to the age of the children and their prior understanding of the topic.

The talks are centered on the same key concepts as the Teacher's Kit to ensure consistency of message.

The information is presented with the aid of child-friendly stimulus pictures, which help to provide the children with an attractive visual cue. These pictures have been extremely well received by both students and teachers. The temperament-tested pet has proved to be an integral component of the presentation particularly in demonstrating the correct way to approach a dog and giving both the Educator and the students an attractive vehicle for discussing the concepts and issues relating to responsible pet ownership.

DELIVERY OF THE SERVICE

In order to ensure that each of Victoria's 2000 primary schools could be serviced, the State was broken into its nine education regions, four metropolitan and five country. Each of these regions has a team of Educators whom live and work within its boundaries. Each of the regions is headed by a Regional Coordinator who is responsible for the management of the Educators and facilitating the bookings with the schools. The Regional Coordinator also liaises closely with local government personnel and all other interested parties such as local animal welfare shelters, vets and animal behaviourists.

Each of the Regional Coordinators meets with the State Program Coordinators on a regular basis to ensure a consistency in approach

EVALUATING THE PROGRAM

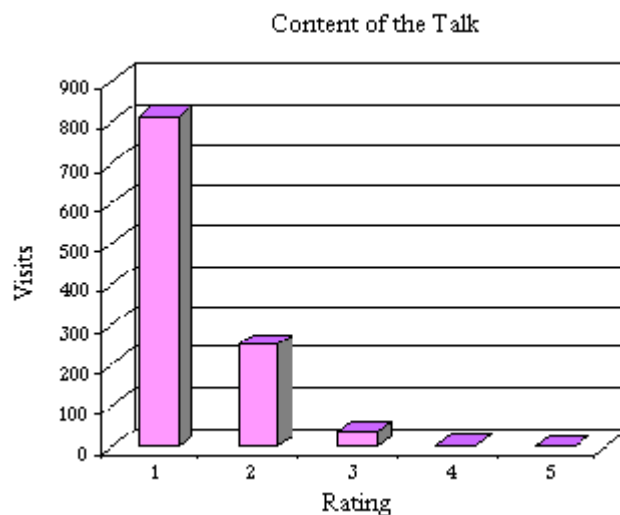
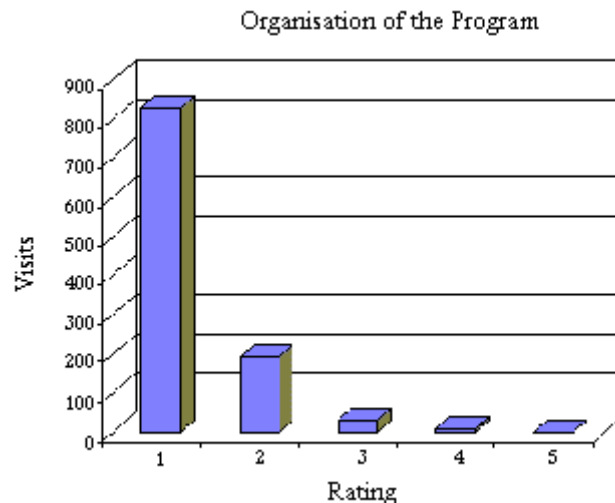
All components of the Program are being closely monitored. At this point it is far too early to evaluate the effectiveness of the Teachers Kit however initial anecdotal evidence indicates that the schools are finding the structure and content relevant and teacher friendly.

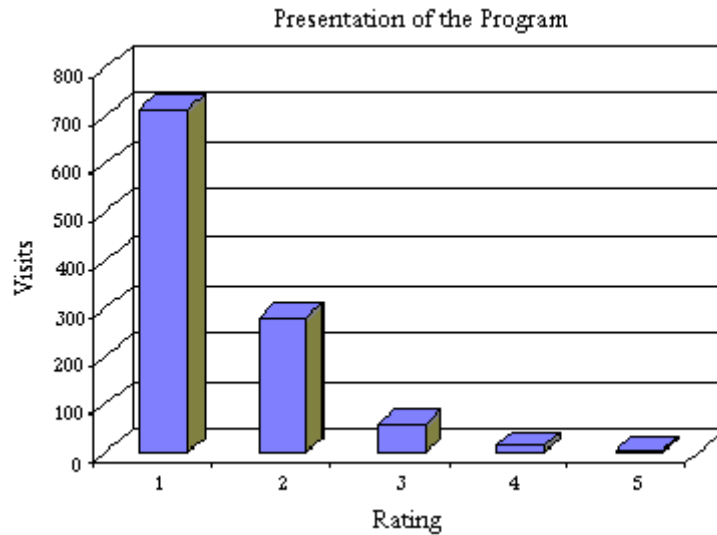
Both the teachers within the school and the Pet Educator evaluate each school visit. The schools are asked to comment and rate the following:

- the organisation of the program;
- the content of the talk; and
- the appropriateness of the presentation.

The following graphs reflect the information collated from teacher's evaluations. (The rating system is 1 = most appropriate, 5 = least appropriate.)

The results of the teacher's evaluation forms clearly reflect that the program is well organised, the content is appropriate and the presentation is of a high quality.





ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Virginia Soderstrom

Rob Morrice

PO Box 2100

Greenvale Vic 3059

Ph. 03 9333 2022

Fx. 03 9333 2011

Email. vicpet@iprimus.com.au

Virginia and Rob are the State Program Coordinators of the State Government Responsible Pet Ownership Program for Schools. Together they developed and wrote the all components of the Program. Both are primary teachers with over twenty years classroom experience. Virginia has had extensive experience in the development and implementation of curriculum, particularly literacy and has held various positions of leadership including Deputy Principal. Rob similarly has held numerous curriculum and leadership positions including Deputy Principal and Curriculum Advisor for the Catholic Education Office.

[UAM 2001 Index Page](#)