

Educating for today - taking care of tomorrow

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The Victorian State Government's Responsible Pet Ownership Education Program for Schools was launched in 2000. The Program's motto is "Educating today, taking care of tomorrow" reflecting its long term vision of ensuring a more knowledgeable and skilled future generation of pet owners. The Program's key objectives are to:

1. Establish the Program as a medium for delivering the message of responsible pet ownership to primary and preschool aged children and their families.
2. Reduce the risk of dog attack in both the home and wider community.
3. Educate families and in particular the next generation of pet owners as to what is required to be a responsible pet owner and their rights and responsibilities as outlined in the Domestic (Feral and Nuisance) Animals Act 1994. (DFNA)

Within six years the Program has established itself as a valued educational experience within the primary and preschool curriculum and has grown to the point that it is the second largest primary and the largest preschool in-house visitation program in the State of Victoria, delivering over 2400 visits to over 120,000 children and 25,000 preschool parents each year. Longui, Cassell and Ashby's report "Hospital-treated Dog Bite Injuries in Victoria, July 1998 to June 2004 highlighted, *"There was a statistically significant decline in the trend of 0-4 year old admissions for dog bite injury over the five-year period July 1998 to June 2004, which provides preliminary evidence for the effectiveness of child dog bite prevention campaigns(1)"*. Evaluation Reports conducted by Coleman, Hall and Hay (2002) indicated that the Program *"adequately communicated (2)"* the information to preparatory-aged children and Coleman, Hay, Toukhsati and Greenfield (2004) *"In relation to grades two, three and four children, the findings reveal a significant learning gain following exposure to the RPOP.(3)"* Arguably the Program is well on the way to achieving its key objectives.

The Responsible Pet Ownership Education Program for Schools followed an extensive community education campaign which incorporated a range of television commercials. Funded through the Education and Management Fund of the DFNA, the Program is provided free of charge to ensure all schools and preschools regardless of their size, socio economic background or geographical position, have the opportunity to access it on an annual basis. To date the Program has been able to meet all requests from Victorian Primary and Preschools and as a result it is as statistically strong in country Victoria as it is in metropolitan Melbourne. This was a key objective in the delivery plan as research carried out by Ashby had highlighted *" a higher all-age rate of dog bite amongst residents of non metropolitan Victoria, 7.1-7.8 per 100,000 compared to residents of metropolitan Victoria, 6.7 per 100,000. For young children hospitalised dog bite rates were lowest for young child residents of metropolitan areas (23.1/100,000) and highest for those residing in rural centres (37.9/100,000) (4)"*. A team of seventy Pet Educators and their temperament tested dogs, which are situated throughout the State, have been the key factors in ensuring a strong presence in the rural regions. The Educators are divided into teams supporting four geographical regions, each under the administration of a Regional Coordinator who reports directly to the Program Coordinators.

The success of this Program can be attributed to the fact that it is structured around an action research model. The process of constant evaluation and refinement has ensured that the message has stayed fresh and relevant to the needs of its audience while reinforcing the key messages outlined in the Domestic (Feral and Nuisance) Animals Act. The Program is evaluated in a variety of ways ranging from direct feedback from the classroom teachers and Pet Educators, to independent evaluations of the effectiveness of the program by Monash University. The Program has grown to accommodate the increasing knowledge base of its audience, changes to the legislation and new understandings gathered through the delivery process.

There has been strong debate within education circles relating to the crowded curriculum and the pressure schools and teachers are under to work through it. Teachers are struggling to find time within the 25 hours face to face to teach the allotted core subjects without taking into consideration extra curricular programs such as responsible pet ownership education or the like.

Curriculum documents such as the VELs and the CSF acknowledge that schools face pressure to give attention to an ever wider range of curriculum priorities. They emphasise the development of a strong foundation in literacy and numeracy skills in the early years (prep to Grade four). *"Literacy and numeracy development are of paramount importance in the early years. Language and mathematical skills, concepts and processes are developed across the curriculum. At the same time there needs to be discreet teaching of specific content in English and Mathematics to provide students with the tools necessary to develop understandings in all key learning areas (5)"*

The Program's Teacher's Kit is designed to support this priority by providing relevant resources for teachers which meet their current curriculum priorities rather than create another subject and potentially further congestion. The fact that 70% of teachers who completed the visit evaluation indicated that they were using the curriculum package either as a major unit of work, for pre visit preparation or post visit consolidation, supports the Program's belief that the package is both teacher and curriculum friendly.

Pet Educators play a significant role in the evaluation process. Many of the operational and procedural changes that have been implemented over the past six years have come from Educator feedback. Working with their highly able canine companions requires a high level of presentation management to ensure a safe environment is maintained for both children and dog. Their work has led to a number of important changes in managing children during the meet and greet, particularly with smaller children and the way they are instructed to approach the owner of a dog on leash. Most programs ask the children to walk up calmly and ask the owner's permission prior to offering the dog the back of their hand to smell and then stroking. Our experience quickly taught us that the children in their eagerness were walking right up to the owner prior to asking permission, potentially coming into contact with the dog.

If children were consistently responding this way in a controlled environment, it would be safe to assume that this behaviour would be transferred when approaching dogs in the home or wider community.

An interim step was introduced instructing the children to stop three big steps short of the person, allowing for the length of the lead, prior to asking permission. This gave the child and, just as importantly, the dog owner the chance to assess the situation before proceeding. This pause in the process should help to further reduce the risk of a child being bitten. It would be reasonable to assume that a five year old child would believe that the dog owner knows the correct way to be approached and greeted when walking a dog because they know the correct procedure. By providing a space the dog owner has a more reasonable opportunity to assess the situation.

Another example was where the children were instructed to stroke the dog. Pet Educators were observing young children stroke the dog on the shoulder using a downward motion. This action caused the children to bring their face in close proximity to the dog's face. Some were also nervous about stroking the dog under the chin due to the proximity to the mouth. Accordingly the procedure was changed to have the children move to the side and stroke the dog from the collar down the back with a long arm. This process should greatly reduce the opportunity for the dog and child to come face to face. This is particularly important when considering the work of Ozanne-Smith, Ahby and Stathakis which indicated that "51% of bites to children were to the face and scalp (6)"

Each visit is individually evaluated by the classroom teacher, using a rating system, in order to determine whether:

- The concepts are relevant to the children
- The presentation format is suitable.
- The language used is suitable for the age group
- The teaching aides are suitable
- The degree of interest/ attention shown during the session.

Teachers also have the opportunity to provide feedback on any component of the program and it is often this expertise that has helped us to refine components of the program. Increases in the amount of role play and the introduction of a safety song were partially due to anecdotal teacher feedback.

Monash University has been contracted on two occasions to independently evaluate the effectiveness of the school visits. In 2002 the aim of the study was to assess the immediate and longer term outcomes of the Program delivered to young children in their first year of formal schooling. The major finding of this report was that "*the program adequately communicated the information to preparatory- aged children in a manner that is understood(7)*" They also found that "*little longer-term retention (especially 4 months post RPOP) was evident indicates the need for follow up instruction to improve the longer term learning outcomes of the program. Interestingly in the case of children's role play responses to interacting with a dog and its owner, the effect persisted for four months after the RPOP(8)*" This information, coupled with the teacher observations saw the introduction of a number of strategies to encourage teachers to revisit the message on a regular basis. The introduction of two safety songs, reinforcing the key safety messages and recently the introduction of two interactive computer games are all in response to achieving a longer period of retention.

The format of the preschool and the junior primary presentations were also adjusted in order to maximise the impact and retention of the message by using a variety of stimuli to engage the children. The decision was made to base the presentations around a story to help provide the children with an appropriate context. The Pet Educators are able to relate experiences of humour and fear to further stimulate their senses. The stories are punctuated with stimulus pictures, factual information, role plays and song in order to maximise the children's opportunity to absorb the message.

The opportunity to approach and greet a dog is also a very powerful learning experience. The Regional Coordinators are continually amazed by anecdotal reports detailing the number of children and teachers, who can remember the name of the dog when rebooking a visit, or while on a return visit, but can't remember the name of Educator.

The children are also provided with take home materials and were strongly encouraged to share the information with their parents in the belief that the learning would extend outside the classroom. Using children as the medium to educate parents is to a major degree an untapped resource. Research by Connor, Hay and Coleman investigated children's ability to educate and influence adults in regard to land and natural resource management issues. One of the key objectives was to determine whether parents would change their behaviour as a result of learning new information from their children. "*Out of the sample, 14% of the parents reported that they would change their animal management due to the new information they learnt from their child or from reading the written material sent home. Of the parents surveyed 65% were not aware of the existence of the animal welfare codes of practice prior to the program being conducted. Parental awareness of the codes of Practice increased by 30% as a result of the program being conducted in schools*" "*The study found that a third of parents changed their behaviour as a result of the Program being conducted at their children's schools(9)*" If the Responsible Pet Ownership Education Program was able to change the behaviour of 30 % of the parents of the 120,000 children who experience the Program each year it would indeed be a major tool in reducing the risk of serious dog attacks and educating them in the key messages of the Domestic (Feral and Nuisance) Animals Act

In order to further reduce the risk, a parent information session was also introduced at the Preschool level. The aim was to provide them with some factual information in relation to dog attacks, dog behaviour and management, and their responsibilities as a pet owner. Importantly it was an ideal opportunity to dispel some long standing myths. Even though the take home parent reference material was provided for each family, the importance of the message for this group of parents warranted a separate session. They needed to understand the breadth of the problem and the importance of their role in diminishing it.

This was further highlighted during the preschool pilot program where parents were asked to complete a quick questionnaire. Over six hundred parents, 50% of whom were dog owners, participated. In summary the participants confirmed the public's perception that dog attacks were basically someone else's problem. The most pleasing fact was that 98% of the respondents acknowledged children between the ages of 0 and 10 were most vulnerable age group, even though 50% rated the 5-10 age groups as more vulnerable. Concerns arose from the fact that 50% rated their own home as the least likely place for their child to be when bitten giving rise to the misconception that, "My dog is fine, it would never bite anyone. I trust it implicitly"

When they were asked to write down three things they could do to make their dogs less likely to bite there was only 846 out of a possible 1890 responses. This may suggest a general lack of knowledge in relation to dog behaviour and management. This was further confirmed by the fact that only 21% of the total response indicated supervision and 8% indicated confinement or forms of separation as effective ways of making their dogs less likely to bite. Accordingly the parent presentation focuses heavily on providing parents with the facts in relation to dog attacks and the types of behaviours which may put their children at risk. The presentation focuses on two key messages, "Active supervision is the key" and "Supervise or Separate".

The 2002 Evaluation report by Coleman, Hall and Hay helped in determining the type of materials that would be developed as part of the Preschool Kit. The Program could not rely on a visit being enough for the children to maintain their understanding between annual visits as the study clearly showed that children were not able to retain the information for this length of time at the prep level so the preschool children would clearly fall into this category. The key was therefore to develop a range of activities and materials which could easily be incorporated into the daily routines of a preschool. As a result, songs, role play, jig saws, posters and a big picture story book complete with the safety messages, formed the nucleus of the Preschool Program. The aim was to provide a range of varied activities which would involve the children in a range of stimulating learning situations rather than rehash more of the same.

The introduction of the safety songs as key resource in reducing the risk of dog attack is supported by the work of Dr Bruce Perry, a senior fellow at the Child Trauma Academy based in Houston, Texas. His work deals with children exposed to life threatening trauma such as physical and sexual assault. Few would be prepared to argue that a child would not see being rushed by an aggressive dog as a traumatic and/or life threatening event. Notably he concludes that even if the child has been exposed to safety procedures which have been well rehearsed this information will not necessarily be accessible during periods of anxiety or trauma. *"If a child has information stored in the cortical areas but in the specific moment is very fearful, this information is inaccessible. In this regard, cognitively stored information does little good in the life threatening moment (10)"*. Programs which deal with high anxiety incidents must therefore ensure that they are not relying simply on the imparting of knowledge and skills as the only strategy for learning appropriate safety responses. *"Information learned in song, rhyme and rap is more easily recalled when in a state of high arousal (anxiety) this is due of course, to the fact that this information is stored in a different fashion than traditional verbal cognitive information.(11)"* The Academy's "Yello Dyno" Program uses music as its medium for delivering its critical personal safety message. Children have a greater chance of a positive outcome and reducing the potential of a serious attack if they have been provided with a variety of strategies, which have been regularly practiced, to draw on at that critical moment.

Monash's second report in 2004 investigated the learning outcomes of single, dual and triple exposures to the Program. Using the same test measures used by Coleman, Hall and Hay in 2002 the report found that the findings were consistent with those of the 2002 report, *"that is preparatory students demonstrated significant learning gains in the correct identification of dog emotions, appropriate approach behaviours towards dogs and knowledge of ownership responsibilities in comparison to children who had not participated in the RPOP(12)"*

"Similarly, the findings demonstrated evidence of a significant improvement in the correct identification of dog emotions in grade one children who had been exposed to the Program twice.(13)" Interestingly the results showed little advantage in a third exposure. From a Program perspective this supported the belief that over the six years the Program has been in operation the audience's level of knowledge and understanding had grown to a point which required it to further develop and enrich their understandings by aligning the presentations much closer in content to the curriculum units. Initially the presentations, regardless of grade level, were quite similar in content, reflecting the prior understandings that the students brought to the sessions. It would have been unrealistic to assume that students in grade six would have a greater understanding of dog behaviour than a group of preps if they had not been exposed to the content. Having a clear understanding of the audience is crucial to the success of any education program.

Prior knowledge cannot be assumed, particularly if the content matter is outside the prescribed curriculum.

A key role of the regional coordinators and booking officers is to ascertain the prior knowledge of the group and be aware of any cultural, religious or social issues which may impact on the presentation. The presentations can therefore be tailored to match the audience. In today's multicultural society we can no longer assume that children have similar life experiences or beliefs for that matter. For example, when delivering the program to groups of children with a Moslem background the educators have encountered a reluctance to engage with the dog because it is seen as "dirty". Others are reluctant to engage if they have come from a country where rabies is prevalent. One of the most interesting observations that has been reported by the Pet Educators, particularly in the Preschool setting, is the number of children who have had very little or no opportunity to pat a dog prior to the visit. Considering that over half of our households do not own a dog, coupled with the introduction of legislation in relation to confinement to the property and off leash regulations, it is quite feasible that four and five year old children of today may not have had the opportunity to experience patting a dog. From a risk management perspective it is even more crucial that all of these children and their parents experience the program in order to ensure a basic understanding of dog safety and behaviour which can be applied if necessary.

In today's educational market place there is much more to a successful education program than meaningful content. Teacher reference sections in school libraries are littered with programs which are all vitally important issues and all competing for limited curriculum space. Education programs today need to be highly sensitive to the needs and working environment of their target audience. In Victoria, the Responsible Pet Ownership Education Program has been successful in establishing itself as key participant in the primary and preschool curriculum and as a result has the privilege of accessing our next generation of pet owners. "Educating today, taking care of tomorrow"

References

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