

PET PEP: Pets and people education program: responsible animal ownership in primary schools

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the PET PEP education program and explains the basis of the program and its operation and success in implementation, particularly from a Western Australian perspective.

INTRODUCTION

With expanding and more densely arranged populations clustered in a handful of major cities in Australia, the Eighties saw a trend to heightened awareness of community problems associated with pets and pet owners. This trend has continued and with intense media attention on pets in society, problems seem to have escalated in the past five years. The result has been that many individuals and groups pay greater attention to identifying clearly the real issues and to examining possible solutions.

When problems in the community arise, the cry is for more and tighter legislation and very rarely is it for better education. We have for too long looked to governments as law providers and not as education providers. With tougher laws and increases in penalties, have we seen a reduction in dog attacks, straying animals etc? The answer is *no*. Legislation has a role but the key to future attitude and behaviour change must come through awareness and education. Education in schools is one aspect (local community education programs are another approach which is also under-utilised).

The benefits of an educational approach focussed through schools mean longer term changes which are likely to be more effective. Through effective school programs, at least four different audiences can be reached -the first obviously is the children themselves. The next immediate audience is the impact children, particularly primary school children, have on their parents. Children love to relate interesting activities and things they have learned to their parents. Of course as children grow up and become adults they take with them the things they learnt as a child. And finally, they then influence their own children -the next generation of pet owners.

With regard to PET PEP the other advantage is that teachers are receiving consistent and accurate information on a range of issues relating to owning pets. This audience is very influential as teachers are extremely receptive to learning and will often pass new information on to other teachers, their family and friends. Having a ready-to-use package available for teachers also raises the profile of a topic and the issues associated with a particular topic, giving it greater importance and highlighting its importance to the community .

Education has been used in the past to address many community problems including drug abuse, smoking and HIV. These problems are very serious and governments have allocated resources to fund educational programs to help reduce the effects associated with these issues.

Pet care and pet owner responsibility are not as serious as these issues and, from an academic perspective, certainly don't need to be taught in schools. However, the unique feature about pets, and in fact animals in general, is that they can be used as the theme for lessons on a variety of subjects including science, maths, social studies and language.

As children learn about the core curriculum they can also learn about pets. Pets are a winner because children are naturally interested in and generally enjoy positive interaction with animals when given the opportunity .Teachers certainly don't have to force their class to do a lesson activity on pets.

With limited numbers of veterinary practitioners being able to visit classes, it became apparent that the best way to influence children was to provide teachers with a comprehensive and easy to use package. Hence the birth of PET PEP! PET PEP is an investment for the future!

THE AIMS OF PET PEP

As PET PEP was developed, four main aims emerged. These were:

1. To promote pet care

Children are limited in their exposure to instruction on how to treat animals correctly and to properly care for them. PET PEP provides a opportunity for our next generation to receive information which is based on good standards of care. Most children are strongly influenced by their parents who unfortunately in many situations are ignorant of the needs of animals.

2. To promote pet owner responsibility

Teaching responsibility in the classroom not only assists in helping children to understand their obligations when owning a pet but has major benefits in helping them to appreciate that we all have responsibilities to ourselves, our family and the community in general.

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

A positive interaction with animals has been shown to help childhood development. This includes development of better motor skills, observational behaviour, social interaction and a more nurturing attitude. PET PEP can help children learn to love, care for, trust and respect animals and this may lead to a greater appreciation of all living creatures and the environment in which they live.

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

By stimulating contact with special groups which are involved with animals, children become aware of the existence of and gain an understanding of the role these groups play in the community.

The name PET PEP was originally based on the 'PEP' standing for Petcare Education Program. Now with the urgent need to recognise and strengthen the human-companion animal bond, PET PEP stands for Pets and People Education Program which more accurately reflects the focus on the interaction between pets and people.

DEVELOPMENT

A vital key to the success of PET PEP is the establishment and continued maintenance of crucial networks between various groups. An understanding of the education system and the problems facing teachers is also critical. A strong base was founded between the Australian Veterinary Association (A V A), which initiated the program, and the Ministry of Education, the Primary Science Teachers' Association, the Department of Local Government, Local Government Association, RSPCA, Petcare Information Advisory Service and Websters. A steering committee was formed which consisted of representatives from these groups. It is the first time that the Primary Science Teachers' Association has worked with another professional group to develop an educational package for teachers.

By working with the Primary Science Teachers' Association, PET PEP was developed on the basis of the existing syllabus. This meant that teachers could achieve their teaching objectives using pets as the theme of their lessons.

PET PEP was based on the Western Australian K- 7 Science Syllabus but also includes lessons from different subject areas including language, social studies, maths, health, art and drama.

STRUCTURE

PET PEP is really three programs in one, as it provides materials for junior (years 1 & 2), middle (years 3 & 4) and upper (years 5 & 6) levels of primary school. The ten week program has a selection of at least three different lesson plans for each weekly focus question, offering teachers flexibility in choice as whether to expand or reduce the number of lessons.

The weekly focus questions are designed to fall into one of three categories including:

- A. **Preparing for my pet.** Focus questions in this category concentrate on what are pets, why do we have them, how do we choose the right one and what we must do to prepare for owning a pet.
- B. **Caring for my pet.** These focus questions look at the physical and behavioural needs of pets and includes contact with the local vet, to organise a veterinarian visit to a classroom or a class visit by a vet to the local veterinary practice.
- C. **Being responsible for my pet.** Children examine pet owner responsibilities, pet control, legislation relating to keeping pets, reasons for not allowing pets to breed and the role of animal control officers. Lessons include writing letters to local government authorities for information relating to dog exercise areas, fines for infringement of dog control legislation and to arrange a visit by an animal control officer.

Teachers have found PET PEP very easy to use as it provides lesson plans, worksheets and information sheets as well as a resource section which consists of additional general information on the more common types of pets and contact details of veterinary practitioners, local government authorities, animal welfare and conservation groups and pet clubs.

IMPLEMENTATION

PET PEP was distributed free to Western Australian primary schools in June 1991 and was officially launched on 1 August 1991 by the Minister for Local Government who is responsible for animal welfare legislation.

After negotiations and assessment by state education authorities, to allow necessary modifications to be made permitting endorsement for use in schools, PET PEP was launched in South Australia in February 1992, the ACT in October 1993 and Victoria in April 1994. Launches are planned for New South Wales and Queensland in early 1995.

To assist veterinarians to support the program and undertake school visits or host class visits to their practice, a Vet Schools Kit was developed which contains information on how to talk to school children and puzzle sheets which can be handed out, as well as some giveaways including fluoro rulers, a poster and iron-on transfers. This has been particularly helpful, especially for vets who have not spoken before at schools.

EVALUATION

At this stage there has been one major survey to determine the awareness and use of PET PEP by teachers in Western Australia. It found that despite limited promotion of PET PEP the program was being used by 11 percent of teachers. Of those who had used it, 80 percent said that they would continue to use it in the future.

Three quarters of teachers who used PET PEP had contact with the local vet. Sixty percent of these teachers would otherwise not have had this contact. When asked to rank the vet contact, the teachers found it very positive and a valuable experience for the children. Likewise, visits by animal control officers or members of dog obedience clubs have been very well received by both teachers and students.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

The main areas which have had an influence on the success of PET PEP include:

national and state coordination by a professional body -the A V A is working to improve this important function;

- support by state education authorities;
- support by teacher groups especially the science teachers organisations;
- support by other community groups such as local government authorities. animal welfare groups. government and community conservation groups and teacher groups - this gives a broad base and increased strength to the program;
- financial support - so far. implementation has been on a shoestring budget. For PET PEP to survive, more money is needed;
- strong teacher input to designing the lessons and trailing the program - this was important for credibility and to ensure that the program was relevant and appropriate;
- effective promotion to all groups including teachers, veterinarians, local government and the public in general - this is an area which requires greater resources and activity;
- teacher training - the workshops which have been done have been very well received but there needs to be more of them;
- teacher acceptance of PET PEP - teachers which have used the program have been very pleased with it and intend using it in the future.

FUTURE OBJECTIVES FOR PET PEP

With the introduction of the new national curriculum in primary school education. PET PEP is currently being modified to incorporate the objectives of the national science syllabus. In this way. PET PEP will offer teachers the opportunity to use resource material which is in line with the latest changes in the core curriculum. This will also overcome any differences between the needs of each state. In essence. PET PEP will become a truly national program.

Other initiatives include offering PET PEP in an electronic format. By supplying the program on discs, teachers have more flexibility and greater access to selecting lessons and worksheets. Also, discs greatly reduces printing and distribution costs. Development of some lessons in a multi-media format is also underway.

PET PEP is seen as a dynamic teaching resource which will have updated materials incorporated every five years to ensure that it is in tune with current issues and knowledge. Already, more information about preventing dog bites and special lessons on cat control and desexing have been included in later versions since the Western Australian program was developed. Microchip identification, animal welfare issues and a greater understanding of cat and dog behaviour are future topics which could be included in PET PEP.

To assist in promotion of PET PEP, the AVA is planning to have part-time education officers in each state presenting the program at teacher workshops, professional development days and staff meetings. In addition, articles about the program in education newsletters and circulars as well as articles in local community newspapers should improve the awareness and use of PET PEP.

SUMMARY

I see PET PEP as an unique program, in that it is a positive starting point for children to learn and understand the needs and value of pets, which in turn will help improve the humane treatment of animals. It also provides a base for bringing the community together using pets as a point of contact which can only help foster human-human interaction.

PET PEP is not just an AVA program - it is an initiative which can and should be shared by all concerned with the treatment, role and issues relating to pets in our society .It provides a chance for educators, veterinarians, local government authorities, conservation groups, animal welfare organisations and anyone interested in the well-being and care of animals to collectively pool resources to contribute to the moulding of young minds and attitudes which will have a profound influence on our future.

PET PEP also gives teachers something they want - an easy to use program full of great ideas which fulfils their teaching objectives.

By having a balance of legislation and education, the community will better understand and have a desire to act responsibly to reduce the problems encountered with pet ownership in our society .

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For information on PET PEP please contact the Australian Veterinary Association in your capital city.

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