

Pet PEP — the Pets and People Education Program

Madonna Taylor

ABSTRACT

Education is a key factor in addressing critical issues relating to companion pets and animals that exist in the community. Pet PEP (Pet and People Education Program) author, Dr Di Evans, stated that the prime motivation for the development of Pet PEP was "... I saw so many animals being brought in that were in a terrible state — obviously neglected. Yet when I questioned the owner, it wasn't because they didn't love their pets. It was just that they didn't know any better".

Pet PEP — is a unique primary school curriculum program designed specifically to:

- improve the understanding and welfare of the animals with which we live;
- improve responsible pet ownership and the harmonious integration of pets into the community.

It was apparent to Dr Evans that primary school children would be the most receptive to the message about responsible pet ownership. The idea was and still is about providing children with the knowledge and skills, which will enable them, to make informed and discerning choices about their pets and animals in adulthood. The program is designed to be fun and educational and enables links to be made between schools and the veterinary profession as a point of reference for expert advice and assistance. It lends itself beautifully to include input from the broader community including, animal control officers and animal management groups.

In 1998, the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) reviewed the implementation of the Pet PEP Program in Australia. This review highlighted the necessity for the AVA to seek strategic partnerships for the overall promotion of the program. The Australian Veterinary Association, 156 veterinary practitioners, Fort Dodge, Queensland Department of Primary Industries (DPI) and Petcare Information Advisory Service (PIAS) have contributed to the further development and promotion of Pet PEP.

INTRODUCTION

Pet PEP was first launched in Western Australia in 1990. By 1996 the program had been delivered to 4,686 Australian schools. Feedback from teachers who have used the program has been extremely positive. Pet PEP has evolved over the years and is currently being rewritten to be more in keeping with educational trends in teaching and learning, that is, literacy and numeracy based. Within this framework there is much to offer in terms of integrating the animal theme into these key learning areas and promoting the message about responsible pet ownership and animal welfare. Providing a resource to teachers that is a useful and valuable tool facilitates the process of learning and teaching about pets and animals. Other community groups including, scout and guide groups, pre-schools, day care and kindy centres have also found Pet PEP to be a valuable resource.

WHY Pet PEP?

Children have a natural affinity with animals and Pet PEP provides an opportunity to harness their enthusiasm and learn about and have contact with animals. The program encourages a collaborative approach whereby those concerned with animal welfare and promoting the positive association with animals work together within schools and the wider community to bring about the message of responsible pet ownership. The 'Pet Expo' is an ideal forum for these groups to come together and present activities for the students. The expo takes the form of a group of rotational activities designed to be fun and educational. The children participate in a variety of activities, from vet and wildlife talks to dog obedience demonstrations and council talks.

Topical issues addressed in the program include:

- the human/animal bond;
- selecting the right pet;
- needs of our pets and animals;
- controlling pets;
- training/animal behaviour;
- avoiding dog bites.

HOW Pet PEP WORKS

The program is taught in the classroom by the teacher with support from their local Pet PEP veterinarian. There are schools that geographically would not have access to a vet, for example, Coen State School in far north Queensland would only have access to the flying vet and for obvious reasons — time tabling, etc — it is not always practical. However the program can ‘stand alone’ and is a useful and valuable teacher resource.

There is much to offer in terms of teaching the animal theme and promoting the message about responsible pet ownership and animal welfare. An example in the program is the delightful story by Di Evans — ‘Tigger the Wildcat’. Through the story children learn about the necessity of desexing and the impact that stray animals have on the environment. Children are learning about these issues through investigation, communication and participation in the story. Similarly, other topics including selecting the right pet are taught by integrating the lessons into the key learning areas of literacy and numeracy. A letter to the vet requesting the types of costs associated with owning a pet integrates writing and reading skills with a maths lesson utilising the animal theme. Advice on how to look after the classroom pet is particularly beneficial in building relationships, very much a win-win situation. There is also an opportunity for other groups including animal welfare officers and animal management officers to be involved and they can be invited to the classroom as guest speakers.

WORKSHOPS

Workshops have been designed for Pet PEP veterinarians and vet nurses to:

- provide an opportunity to share ideas and foster a collaborative approach;
- workshop the program to recognise scope for learning and teaching;
- give tips and guidelines for class room visits (pitching at various age groups);
- participate in micro-teaching sessions.

Feedback from workshops conducted in Queensland has been positive in that the session provides some good ideas as well as motivation.

EVALUATION OF Pet PEP

In 1996 the Pet PEP Advisory Group commissioned the Centre for Research in Science, Technology and Environmental Education at the University of Canberra to conduct an independent evaluation of Pet PEP as an educational resource. The findings of the study concluded: ‘statistically significant improvements in student’s knowledge, behaviours and attitudes to responsible pet ownership were evidenced; teachers overwhelmingly endorsed the Pet PEP curriculum resource and would use it again’.

The positive results of the survey influenced the AVA to develop Pet PEP further to ensure that the program’s potential is reached and that it accelerates an attitudinal change toward responsible pet ownership in the community.

CONCLUSION

The Australian Veterinary Association has been proactive in its commitment to the Pet PEP Program. In March 1999, the Board made a decision to further develop the program. Strategies for further development include:

- publish a second edition of the Pet PEP Program resource material as a 48 page booklet and to promote the program to all primary schools in Australia;
- develop a dedicated Pet PEP web site to include future additional material. Each page of the resource material will have a reference to the Pet PEP web site;
- produce a Vet Resource Kit to enable links to be made within the communities;
- employ a national coordinator to oversee the management of the program.

It is recognised that an approach to this project is required to bring about the desired outcomes.

This ranges from the topics to be taught in the program utilising the veterinary practitioner to providing opportunities for groups including, animal control officers, animal management officers and other community groups concerned with animal welfare to be involved. The aim is to ensure the appropriate messages are delivered to the classrooms and links with established and maintained within community groups throughout Australia.

It is suggested that facilitating the building of relationships within communities is the best approach.

This project requires much energy and enthusiasm and a commitment to work together to bring about the message of responsible pet ownership and enhance community awareness. In that way pet and animal owners will have skills to make more informed and discerning choices about their pets and animals.

REFERENCES

Evans, D 1991. *Pet PEP — Pet and People Education Program*, Australian Veterinary Association Limited.

Kayrooz, C 1996. *Pet PEP Evaluation of An Educational Resource*, Centre for Research in Science, Technology and Environmental Education.

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Madonna's professional background is as a Physical Education teacher. She has worked in both high schools and primary schools in the State Education Department and Catholic Education. For almost 4 years Madonna has coordinated Pet PEP part time for the AVA (Qld Division). In April 1999 she was appointed National Pet PEP Co-Coordinator. The role has provided the opportunity of seeing the rewards gained by working in community on this project. The children are learning some valuable lessons and the vets are actively participating in shaping the attitudes of the next generation of pet and animal owners.

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