

Teaching the "Be a Friend to your Dog" program in remote Indigenous communities: school children and educator perceptions

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Abstract

This paper introduces and provides an evaluation of a teaching resource package developed by Animal Management in Rural and Remote Indigenous Communities (AMRRIC) entitled 'Be a Friend to your Dog' (BAFTYD). Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory (NT) of Australia have stated the need for raising the level of awareness, empathy and responsibility towards community animals. Hence, the BAFTYD program has been delivered to children in the school environment and to community members in remote Indigenous communities in the NT to promote and maintain positive attitudes and behaviour towards animals, and to help people stay safe around dogs. The BAFTYD program aims to work with the community in a manner which is culturally sensitive and agreed upon by all parties. Ultimately, the project aims to support existing teachers in the community and Indigenous Animal Management Workers (AMWs) to deliver key animal welfare messages to schoolchildren and other community members. The provision of the teaching resources to the educators who reside in the community will help to ensure that the program is locally relevant and sustainable.

Introduction

Dogs and dingoes (wild dogs of Australia) are an integral part of many Australian Indigenous cultures. Dingoes have been on the Australian continent for around 4000 years and are woven into the fabric of much of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life, law and culture (Phelan, 2007, 2010). For some cultures, little distinction is made between dingoes and the more recently introduced dogs regarding Indigenous beliefs and law. Dogs are owned in contemporary Indigenous communities for various reasons including the roles of companions, hunters, protectors – both physical and spiritual, and as a source of warmth. Phelan (2007) describes how dingoes and to some extent dogs can be regarded as sacred animals and may be incorporated into Aboriginal society by (a) formal inclusion into family units, (b) incorporation into creation and 'dreaming' knowledge and (c) individuals that carry 'dog dreaming' with them. Note: The Dreaming explains the origin and culture of the lands and its people, and those that carry 'dog dreaming' are the custodians of the law and history of dingoes and, in some cases, dogs.

Regardless of the importance of dogs, in many respects animal health and welfare in rural and remote Indigenous communities can be far below the standards seen in non-Indigenous communities. The reasons for this are multi-factorial and although variations exist, are similar from community to community (Zambrano, 2008). Factors include: remoteness, lack of funds for veterinary care, lack of resources, and lack of education/awareness programs. In light of this, Indigenous communities in the NT expressed the desire for veterinarians to share knowledge about dog care with communities (Constable, Dixon & Dixon, 2006), and the 'Healthy Dogs Healthy Communities' project was instigated. This project, conducted by Dixon, Constable and Dixon (2007) explored ways of bringing veterinarians, health researchers, Elders, and community members together to share dog-caring knowledges to create locally relevant and culturally appropriate ways to support dog health into the future. Recommendations from this project included the projected use of local Indigenous workers to enhance the sustainability of the program – an approach that has been adopted for the BAFTYD program. The overpopulation and poor state of dog health in some rural and remote Indigenous communities affects not only animal welfare but also human welfare. Humans are impacted physically through zoonotic diseases (infections that are passed from animals to humans) and sleep deprivation from incessant dog fights, and mentally through worry and shame about dog health (Constable, Brown, Dixon & Dixon, 2008; Phelan, 2010).

Background

AMRRIC is an independent group of veterinarians, academics, health professionals, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who work to improve the health and wellbeing of companion animals and, through this work, that of remote Indigenous communities. The organisation is incorporated under the NT Corporations Act 2001. AMRRIC is founded on a deep respect for the culture and traditional ways of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It promotes a model developed over years of consultation with Indigenous communities where dogs are recognised as intrinsic to the fabric of the community and where the health and wellbeing of humans and dogs are interwoven (Constable et al., 2008; Phelan, 2010).

AMRRIC facilitates and helps to maintain sustainable dog programs across Australia. A key objective is to assist communities, shires and governments to implement best practice guidelines and models into animal management and dog health programs nation-wide. This is achieved by connecting veterinarians with Indigenous communities (via Indigenous AMWs who work in the community and deal directly with issues relating to animal management) and related health bodies. Programs that AMRRIC helps to facilitate include: desexing of animals, treatment of disease, preventative health measures, euthanasia (with consent of the owner), education, and discussion of future strategies ("Dog health programs", n.d.). Dog health programs aim to build the capacity of community members to empower themselves to improve dog and community health and safety, and raise self-respect. AMRRIC also works on the 'bigger picture' to create partnerships with stakeholders, provide forums for dialogue and support research.

The 'Be a Friend to your Dog' Program

Rationale

Dog health and welfare, and keeping people safe around dogs are of concern across Australia. In remote Indigenous communities, reasons for apparent neglect and abuse of animals are complex, as previously described, and AMRRIC believes that building the capacity of individuals to empower themselves through education is an important path to a healthy, sustainable dog population (J. Hardaker, personal communication, October 2012). Research suggests that there is a link between violence to animals and violence to people throughout Australia and overseas (Lawrie, 2005). AMRRIC contends that understanding the links between animal abuse and family violence is essential, and conducting animal management programs targeted at children, families and communities could play a role in helping to prevent violence in Indigenous communities.

Teachers in remote Indigenous communities may lack sufficient resources, time or animal husbandry knowledge to teach programs on animal care. The BAFTYD program was developed by AMRRIC to improve animal wellbeing by promoting responsible pet ownership and to foster an awareness of the issues that affect the health and welfare of dogs and people in remote Indigenous communities in the NT. The program aims to increase community awareness, empathy, and responsibility towards animals through tailored education resources for school-aged children and community members. It includes a package of educational materials, lesson plans and notes designed for classroom and community teaching that are left with the schools for the teachers and AMWs to continue with the education process. Messages focus on: dogs' needs (including veterinary support such as desexing, parasite control and nutrition);

dogs' feelings (what makes a dog feel happy, sad or angry) and how to recognise them; and how to know when one might be in danger from a 'cheeky' dog (a dog that bites). Since the program began its trial stage in 2012, AMRRIC staff and associates have travelled over 11,000 kms to 17 remote schools to deliver the program to almost 1,300 students and some community members in the NT (E. Fletcher, personal communication (program report), August 2013).

Evaluation of the 'Be a Friend to your Dog' Program

Method

The BAFTYD program is made up of many lessons. Components selected for teaching are chosen from these based on the age and number of students, and the degree to which English is spoken. The one-hour lesson utilised for this study was taught by an AMRRIC Education Officer (and accredited Delta dog trainer) and comprised of the following three components:

- 'Kids and Dogs': PowerPoint presentation with pictures and (optional) video to help children (and adults) stay safe around dogs, and to identify some diseases that can pass from dogs to people and how to avoid them. Emphasises that healthy dogs are an important part of healthy communities.
- 'Dogs' Needs': Discussion on what dogs need to be healthy and happy.
- 'Recognising Dogs' Feelings': Magnetic flash cards (approximately 10cm x 7.5cm) depicting line drawings of children and dogs experiencing different emotions. Designed to help students recognise shared feelings and so develop empathy with dogs. Can be used with or without optional sentences and therefore the activity is flexible as a literacy resource.

The program was evaluated in two remote Indigenous communities in the NT by conducting a series of focus groups, semi-structured and informal interviews with schoolchildren, teachers, a teacher's assistant, council employees and community members to assess the usefulness of the program regarding its potential effect on community and dog health, and how the program could be improved. The project received ethics approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the NT Department of Health and Menzies School of Health Research (HREC-2013-1931) and from James Cook University (H5289). This paper describes the qualitative research findings from interviews with the schoolchildren, and their teachers and a teacher's assistant (educators). The interviews were audiotaped and major themes identified using a grounded theory approach. Data was open-coded as described by Charmaz (2006) where the most significant/frequent categories were merged into broad themes to describe the phenomenon under investigation.

Schoolchildren

A focus group discussion was conducted with schoolchildren in both communities before and after the BAFTYD lessons. The children were asked how they felt about dogs in the community, how they interacted with them, and what they could do to take care of the dogs. They also drew pictures of their dogs. The teachers and the teacher's assistant were present throughout the interviews.

Results: schoolchildren

Community A: pre – BAFTYD

Four children comprising of three boys and one girl, aged 7 to 8, participated in this focus group discussion. All the children had at least three dogs at home, with one child having six including a new dog from Darwin that had two puppies. When asked to talk about their dogs, the first response was "my dog gets a lot of ticks". All the children appeared to be very fond of their dogs, but all had been scared by dogs in the community at some stage although none had been bitten. One child told the story of having to pull his barking dog away from his uncle as the uncle had previously been bitten by the dog. The same child also told the story of another dog that died after "a truck bumped it". This story unfolded to reveal that the child did not think that the dog being in the road was the problem, but that the truck was going too fast. One child mentioned that her dogs bark at night time and wake her up, and "if anybody go there, she bite them".

All children required prompting from the teacher when asked what dogs needed to be healthy and happy. Some dogs were fed beef/meat and "special food" such as dog food. "My dog loves dog food... not human food" said one child, while another said "my dog likes apples". All children had at some point taken their dogs to the "Dog Doctor" (veterinarian), with one child mentioning that his dog had bitten the Dog Doctor when the veterinarian untied the dog from the veranda. Dogs were taken to the Dog Doctor for "needles" and "medicine to make them feel better" but the children did not know if their dogs had been "fixed" so as not to have puppies. The children drew pictures of their dogs and added water bowls after the teacher prompted them that dogs should have water to drink.

Community A: post – BAFTYD

The children were re-interviewed the morning after they received the BAFTYD lessons. They were more talkative and there was minimal input from the interviewer. The children all said they enjoyed the lessons. They learned that dogs are more likely to bite if people run when being chased by a dog and that stopping (and 'being like a tree and looking at your roots') is safer. However, two children contended that one should run and stop repeatedly. The reasoning behind the latter belief is discussed below. When asked what they liked best about the lessons, the

responses centered on the aspect of playing with dogs. The children did not identify any aspect of the lessons they did not like. Regarding the issue of dogs making people sick, the children stated that "dogs can make you itchy and make you dirty", and washing hands after touching a dog and "washing it (the dog) to make her clean" was important - "if you touch a lot of dogs with ticks they can make you itchy everywhere". Other suggestions from the children to keep dogs (and therefore people) healthy were to give medicine to get rid of ticks and "go to the Dog Doctor for a needle". "They give a needle in the bum-way", one child said, while another mentioned that the "Dog Doctor can (also) put the dog to sleep".

The children seemed unsure of how to tell if a dog was happy, although playing with a dog to make it happy was mentioned several times. Avoiding a dog that seemed angry was considered prudent as 'if you go near it, it will bite you'. Signs that a dog was angry included "showing teeth – sharp teeth" and that the dog might chase. The children were aware of not going near a dog when it was sad/scared or sleeping as it might wake up and bite. When asked what dogs need, the consensus was that they needed company (play), medicine (needle), good food, dog bowl, some method of restraint (lead, fence) clean water and a place to sleep (bed, kennel) in the shade and protected from the rain. The focus group finished with showing the children a drawing of five cartoon faces on a continuum from happy to sad, and asking the children to pick the face they most identified with when they thought about dogs in general. All the children picked the happiest face.

Community B: pre – BAFTYD

Eight children comprising of six boys and two girls, aged between 5 and 9, participated in this focus group discussion. All children had either two or three family dogs. One child expressed interest in the picture of the facilitator's (interviewer) pet Labrador retriever on the facilitator's computer screen. When asked what kind of dog this was, the child answered "a happy dog". A discussion of what made dogs happy or sad followed. The children thought the facilitator's dog was happy in the picture because "he looks happy (smiling) and has a football". According to this group of children, dogs that were not happy "looked sad and might bite" or that they "walk away and cry" or fight. Dogs could be made happy by playing games with them such as playing football or throwing something for the dog to chase. Things that made dogs sad included not playing with them, or leaving them on their own, and that teasing a dog could make it angry. When asked what teasing a dog meant, one child said "mocking the dog, like ha ha come bite me". Four of the eight children had been bitten by "cheeky dogs". One child said he was being chased and had started to climb a fence, but that the dog ran up behind him and bit him on the leg.

The children seemed disappointed when they found out that there was not going to be a dog present at the lesson. However, it was explained to them that dogs that lived in the community might not like strange dogs coming in from outside, and also that the accommodation provided by the council/shire does not always allow dogs. The children also appreciated that dogs didn't like sitting in the car for long journeys and that the facilitator had driven a long way from Darwin. One child then asked if there was a "dog shop" in Darwin where one could buy dogs, police dogs in particular. A discussion ensued on how police dogs worked by tracking people, and holding someone until the dog's handler told it to let go. The children were asked if there were any cats in the community and did the dogs chase the cats. The answer was that there were some cats and kittens around, and dogs sometimes killed cats. One child said "my cat chases the dog" to much amusement. The children were very positive about the local horses and enjoyed riding. The focus group was terminated at just under 10 minutes as the children, who were in quite a large group and as young as five, were becoming unfocussed.

Community B: post – BAFTYD

The children were re-interviewed shortly after they received the BAFTYD lessons i.e. at the end of the school day. Although the children were somewhat rowdy (due to the time of day), the responses were similar to those of the children in Community A. The children said they all enjoyed the BAFTYD lessons. The parts the children remembered the most were related to the diseases that dogs could pass on to people, and not to run if being chased by a dog but to "stand like a tree". "If you stop running and don't look back, the dog will go home", said one child. The children were aware that they could get itchy from dog ticks but that there was "dog medicine" available to help with the problem from the "Dog Doctor" and (when prompted as to where else) from the local shop. Dog Doctors could "clean dog's bodies and look for worms" and "make him a good dog – a happy dog". Washing one's hands well with soap and water after touching dogs was also discussed as a means of preventing becoming itchy from dogs.

The children said that dogs needed "play" (throw/retrieve) and "dog food" and "somewhere to lie out of the sun" to be happy. One child thought dogs might prefer cat food, which might indeed be true. Dogs also needed water when thirsty and water to "wash them and make them really fresh". The children recognised that angry dogs could look fierce, show their teeth and growl, and that their "tail might be (straight) up". One child said "to make a dog really wild, you give them (red) chilli", although it was unclear as to whether this was a punishment for being cheeky or to cause a dog to become cheeky.

Most of the children said they would enjoy having dogs in the classroom as part of the BAFTYD lessons,

with one child vehemently saying "No!". When asked explicitly why he did not want a dog in the classroom, it appeared that the message that dogs could cause people to get sick or injured was the cause of his concern. The children were all extremely positive about being shown more videos in future BAFTYD lessons. The focus group concluded with the children drawing pictures of their dogs, while informing the facilitator that their dogs were useful for deterring would-be burglars by barking when people were sleeping and for making snakes go away.

Educators

A teacher from Community A, and a teacher and a teacher's assistant from Community B, participated in two semi-structured interviews respectively after the BAFTYD lessons were delivered. Feedback was sought on the usefulness of the program, student engagement and how the program could be improved. The responses from both interviews (i.e. from all three educators) have been amalgamated as shown below.

Results: educators

All educators felt that the information in the BAFTYD lessons was useful and relevant to the context of community life. One mentioned that perhaps too much information was being presented to fully engage the students and that more 'hands-on' activity such as "act like a dog" or "role-play" would be beneficial. Another suggestion was to use more video as English was not a first language for most students and the visual aspect would help reinforce key messages. The time of day the lessons were delivered was also considered important. It was recommended that didactic lessons be delivered early in the mornings and more hands-on activities be done in the afternoons when children were tired and less focussed. The suggestion was made to make the magnetic cards that are used to depict dogs' emotions in colour rather than B&W, and larger so that children with visual problems and those sitting at the back of a large class could see them better. However, the cards as they are now were said to be fine for small group teaching. The one-hour lesson was considered to be a bit too long for children under 8-years old and that focussing on one concept and them doing some hands-on activity was better than covering several different areas in one session. It was requested that the teachers be informed of the lesson plan in advance (even by 10 minutes) so that the teacher can inform the children and/or step-in and help if necessary. The latter point was significant as some children liked to know what was going to happen as they "did not handle change well".

One educator had expected a dog to be present and had informed her class of this and so some students were disappointed that no dog was present. Apparently, another teacher had brought a pet dog to class some time previously as a treat which the

students loved and engaged very well in the session. Another educator thought there would be benefits to having a dog in the classroom but that this could be distracting, and that the objectives of having the dog would need to be clearly thought out. One educator, who was Indigenous, considered the information on teaching children not to run from dogs to be very important, as dogs chasing children was a common cause of friction between community members. Other information considered to be most useful by this educator was the explicit pictures of dog attacks on children to stress the seriousness of what dogs can do, and to recognise what can make dogs sick and how to prevent dogs from infecting people. The language used in the teaching of the BAFTYD program was deemed to be appropriate and no issues concerning cultural sensitivity were identified. However, it was mentioned that the picture of a toddler and a dog defecating (intended to highlight cross contamination) was perhaps too graphic.

It was felt that the video depicting a person running and stopping, and getting chased and not chased by dogs was confusing for the children. One educator had to spend time after the lesson explaining to the students that the video was intended to depict that dogs only chase if someone runs, and not that people were supposed to run and stop repeatedly. It was noted that children in the community are taught by their families 'to run and to jump up high' – "jump on a fence". Educators believed that the children would be able to apply some of the knowledge delivered in the BAFTYD program but that regular follow up was essential to reinforce the messages. Follow up was deemed to be better delivered by someone in the community such as an AMW or a teacher.

Concerning the level of dog welfare in the community, one educator said that there were a lot of "mangy" dogs and some in good condition, but that it varied depending on the time of year. One educator commented that she and several other school staff members had been bitten by loose dogs, but there appeared to be fewer dogs roaming the streets than in previous years. "When I came here... I couldn't walk down the street as I would be attacked by dogs", she said. It was generally thought that some communities required more education on the issues surrounding dog welfare and how dogs were treated than others.

Discussion/Conclusion

The findings of this study support those in the literature concerning the significance of dogs in the community, the link between good animal welfare and human welfare, and the need for Indigenous knowledge and practices to figure centrally and direct learning about dog care and safety.

A comparison of the interviews with all the children (N=12) before and after the BAFTYD lessons indicates that the children had knowledge about

some dog-related issues (not teasing dogs, importance of play/company, good food, visits to the veterinarian) beforehand. However, they may have gained knowledge concerning being safe around dogs (not running if chased, avoiding angry or sleeping dogs); what else constitutes a happy, healthy dog (clean water, good food, dog bowl, shelter, comfort, some method of deterring wandering); and that dogs can make people sick (from faeces, ticks/fleas and other parasites) but good hygiene (hand washing, dog washing) and use of anti-parasitic products from the veterinarian or local shop may alleviate this. It is not possible to tell if what the children told in the final focus groups came from the actual lessons, or that they were more confident speaking to the facilitator the second time. Also, it is possible that there were some difficulties regarding language and concepts. For example, children might have been confused initially when asked "what dogs needed to be healthy and happy" as in some communities there is no direct translation of the word 'need' in this context (S. Constable, personal communication, August 2013).

The educators interviewed (N=3) believed the BAFTYD material to be useful and culturally sound. Teaching children not to run (and climb) when being chased by dogs was considered to be important information, especially as this is what some children are reportedly told to do by community members. Indeed, one child in this study was bitten on the leg as he attempted to climb a fence after being chased by a dog. It is likely that the video sometimes used in the BAFTYD program to show that when a person runs he/she is more likely to get chased by dogs than when he/she stops was confusing for some children. The video illustrated this concept by showing a person running and stopping repeatedly, which some of the children believed to be what one was supposed to do when being chased. The intended meaning of the video should be made clearer to avoid this misconception, or only show the video up to one run and stop sequence. Although the video is not an integral part of the BAFTYD package, and is not used by all of the AMRRIC Education Officers who deliver the program, it highlights how teaching materials need to be very clear and well scripted.

An awareness of the damage dogs can do to people by biting was emphasised, as was knowing that dogs can make people sick through passing on disease and/or parasites, as this was not considered common knowledge. It is noteworthy that all the children and at least one teacher in this study had been bitten and/or scared by a dog suggesting that cheeky dogs are a serious issue in these communities, and that there is a need for educating children and adults how to behave around these dogs. Suggestions for improvement of the BAFTYD program that emerged from the interviews with the educators included: the timing of lessons (i.e. didactic lessons in the mornings when the children are fresh and hands-on activities in the afternoons when

children were less focussed); keeping lessons short and to the point (to engage the younger children in particular); the use of more visual material such as videos, colour images and bigger magnetic cards for easier visibility in larger classes (note: it is possible that the children who were unsure of how to tell if dogs were happy had difficulty in seeing this part of the lesson); and, although some role-play was utilised in the lesson plan for this study, more hands-on exercises would be preferred. The request for communication with the teachers regarding the lesson plans indicates that some information relayed from AMRRIC to the Schools involved may not be being passed on to individual teachers, and this might be an area for enhancement.

The need for regular reinforcement of the key messages was also expressed, and it was deemed that this information would be best delivered by someone residing in the community with local knowledge and ease of access. Sustainability of the BAFTYD program is only possible with strong community support and ownership. For the program to continue functioning, with decreasing reliance on external resources, the support and training of community members to maintain the program between AMRRIC/veterinary visits is necessary. For maximum impact the teaching resources should be linked with the Australian Curriculum, disseminated through associated digital teaching and learning portals, and their usage supported from each state and territory. AMRRIC is currently working with Education Services Australia and the NT Department of Education and Children's Services to this effect.

The BAFTYD program has evolved since its inception adapting to informal feedback in its trial stage. Teaching style/content has been adjusted to better suit the intended audiences. An example being the 'Recognising Dogs' Feelings' lesson that was used in this study, being changed from paper-based to movable magnets that can be attached to a white board. Several of the lessons, for example, 'Puppy Maths' (not evaluated in this study), which is designed to teach children about the importance of desexing female dogs to reduce the number of litters born, would lend themselves to adaptation to computer-delivery methods. These options are currently under consideration for feasibility. The BAFTYD program lends itself well to both school and community teaching. Historically, the program was used within a wider community education environment and then adapted as a school resource. Independent feedback recently received from a further evaluation of the program by the first author of this study via interviews with family groups/council employees suggests that all community members would benefit from the education.

The BAFTYD program addresses a range of animal health and care issues in Indigenous communities, and has helped build the capacity of schoolchildren

and community members to care for their dogs and to stay safe around them. This study has contributed to research into the teaching of animal health and welfare in Indigenous schools; the findings acknowledge both the integral and important part dogs play in many Australian Indigenous cultures, and the links between animal health and community health and wellbeing. The children who participated in this study showed empathy to animals before the BAFTYD program was delivered. If this empathy can be supported and built upon there may also be some long term benefit in the reduction of violence in Indigenous communities.

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