

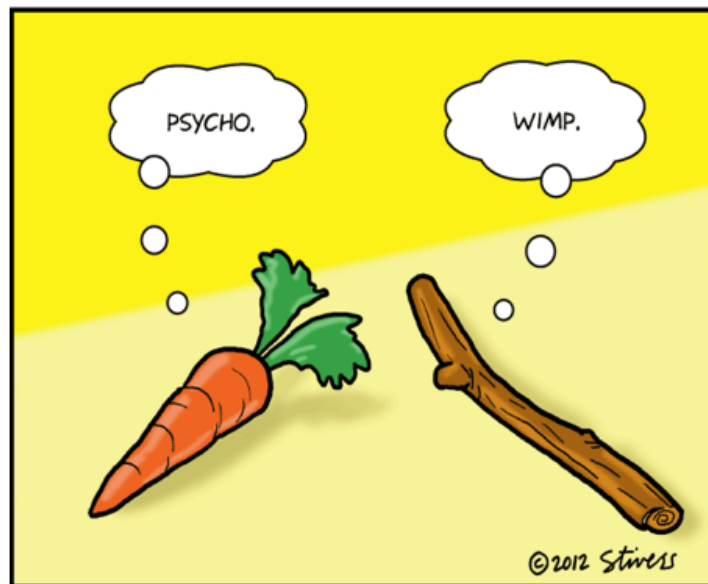
From little things big things grow – improving animal management through responsible pet ownership education in schools.



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18/10/18

Earlier this year, I was asked to speak to the theme of “Changing human behaviour: changing animal lives”. That workshop was all about exploring, discussing and debating approaches to changing human behaviour to improve animal welfare outcomes. Admittedly, the focus of that workshop was animal welfare and ethics, but I wonder if a focus on changing human behaviour isn’t at the heart of everything that animal management officers in local government do.



Education Connections 2018

In fact, behavioural change has to be the core objective of every regulatory process, since whether it’s a carrot or a stick we have in place, the desired outcome is the same: we want people to change what

they're doing - to do something they're not currently doing, to stop something we don't want them to do, to change.

And of course changing the way people own companion animals can be a difficult task when animal ownership has such a long history, and when those 'ways' - practices and beliefs - can be so entrenched.



It's not too many generations ago that dogs in our suburbs roamed relatively freely, lived on table scraps and might have had a kennel in the backyard to sleep in if they were lucky. I vividly remember as a teenager for instance choosing to walk home from school along a route that avoided the 'scary' dogs out and about in my neighbourhood, and I even recall carrying a stash of little stones I could pelt at any that might have come in for a bite. Of course there were some pampered pets, but the attitudes our parents and grandparents had towards the keeping and management of companion animals was often very different to what is considered acceptable now. Concerns about public health and safety have driven legislation to confine dogs to their owners' properties, to require them to be walked on-leash, and to compel owners to bag their dog's faeces. But there are a couple of issues here: firstly attitudinal change doesn't always keep pace with legislative change, and it's also true that you can't legislate for everything. The full range of responsible pet ownership practices that contribute to healthy happy pets, people and communities can't all be the subject of legislation.

We know for instance that a healthy pet is more likely to be a happy pet.



Physical state and behaviour

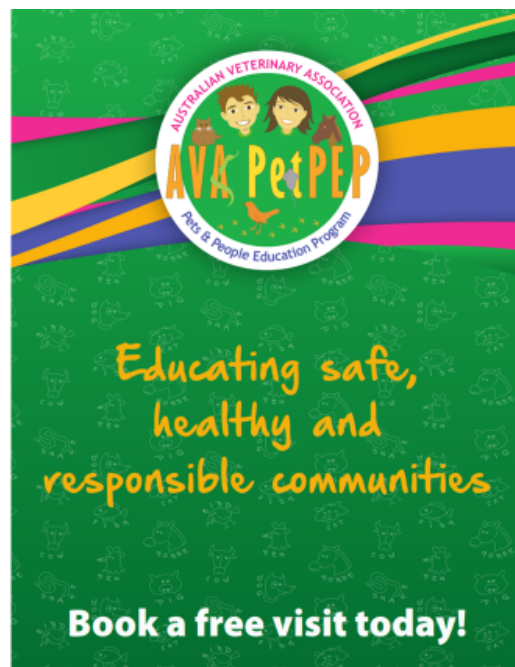


Yet you can't compel people to take their pets to the vet once a year for a checkup. We know - the science tells us - that dogs always bark for a reason, that aggression is fear-based, that appropriate socialisation is critical in the first few months of a dog's life, that some training methods work better than others. But we cannot compel owners to take their dogs to puppy class, or provide them with environmental enrichment, or manage the stressors that trigger their dog's anxiety and resultant behaviours. And yet it is exactly these things that can make the difference between a so-called 'good' and a 'bad' dog, and ultimately between a harmonious cohabitation of pets and people, and one filled with complaints, incidents and investigations.

So legislation alone is not going to bring about every change in pet ownership behaviour that we want. What else is there? What other approaches might we pursue to bring about these changes? (i.e.) To increase compliance, to raise the standard? There are many theories of behavioural change, and plenty of info-graphics that describe and represent models of behaviour.

Essentially they're about capability, opportunity and motivation: having the knowledge, skills and abilities to engage in the behaviour + outside physical and social factors which make the behaviour possible, feeding into brain processes which direct our decisions and behaviours. These brain processes can be automatic or reflective.

There is no one answer, and effective animal management, as you all know, is a combination of reactive and proactive strategies. This presentation is an introduction to the Australian Veterinary Association's Pets and People Education Program and its role in assisting Council AMOs in their work both now and into the future.




Educating the community about animal management issues and giving young citizens practical knowledge and tools is of benefit to the whole community, but to Animal Management Officers, it could represent the "ounce of prevention" which can mean the difference between a front-page incident and a non-event.

The Pets and People Education Program is one model for a collaborative approach to animal management and responsible pet ownership. Partnering with local Councils and other local animal care professionals, AVA PetPEP facilitates free interactive lessons to students in primary schools across Queensland. AMOs

(Local Laws Officers, Rangers – I know the terminology varies) deliver content relevant to their specific jurisdiction in a positive and fun environment within schools, as part of a quality-controlled program run by the AVA. PetPEP engages and educates current and future pet owners so that they are fully aware of the responsibilities that come with pet ownership. Anyone can be a pet owner; the AVA has an interest, together with its stakeholders, in teaching people how to be responsible pet owners.

Why children, and why primary schools? There are a couple of reasons. Firstly, we are aiming, with this program, for generational change. With a solid foundation of PetPEP visits throughout their primary school years, by the time these students grow up and have companion animals of their own, they will automatically register, microchip, fence appropriately, walk on a lead, pooper-scoop, access regular veterinary care and so on.

Secondly, the statistics reveal where most dog bites occur – with young children and from known dogs.



As a dog bite prevention initiative

“The longer-term trends in dog bite injuries ...(showed) a steady increase of 5.9% on average. This pattern was not replicated for 0-14 year olds. The stability in rates of young children relative to those of older individuals may be due to the introduction of successful national and jurisdictional dog bite prevention initiatives such as Delta Dog safe, the AVA Pets and People Education Program and SPOT (Safe pets out there) amongst others. These programs have generally targeted junior and primary school children.”

Rajshekar et al (2017)

In a recently published study on public sector hospitalisations due to dog bites in Australia 2001-2013, it was found that the highest annual rate was for age groups 0-4 and 5-9 years of age, and that trends in dog bite injuries were, on average, increasing. Yet this pattern of increase was not replicated for 0-14 year olds. The stability in rates of young children relative to those of older individuals, the study concluded, may be due to the introduction of successful national and jurisdictional dog bite prevention initiatives such as Delta Dog safe, the AVA Pets and People Education Program and SPOT (Safe pets out there) amongst others. These programs have generally targeted junior and primary school children.”

So how does it work and what does it actually look like?



What does a PetPEP school visit look like?

- Up to three presenters
- 20 minute segments
- Students rotate through speakers
- Highly regarded by teachers
- Aligns with Australian Curriculum
 - Learning Areas: Science, English, Maths, HASS
 - General Capabilities: Critical and Creative Thinking
 - Personal and Social Capability
 - Ethical Understanding
 - Cross-curriculum Priorities: Sustainability

Once a school books a visit, we arrange the requisite number of presenters and pull together a program for the visit. We provide each presenter with a Presentation Outline for how to structure their content into the 20 minutes to maximise their impact and keep the rotation on schedule.

Stakeholders



PetPEP works with a range of different stakeholder organisations who provide a presenter for that visit, delivering their specific message in an interactive and very visual educational experience. Working with AVA PetPEP provides Councils with links to a network of local animal care professionals including AVA member vets, RSPCA, Biosecurity Qld, wildlife carers and (some, not all) dog trainers. These links help to maintain positive networks within the community to achieve animal management and welfare goals and communicating common key messages.



Presenter	Content area
Vet	Caring for your pet's health The role of a veterinarian
Council	Responsible pet ownership in the ____ Council area
RSPCA	Prevent-a-Bite Understanding dogs' body language
Biosecurity Qld	'Help an Animal Smile'
Dog trainer	The importance of training; how dogs learn and communicate
Wildlife	Difference between pets and wildlife Pet owners' responsibilities to wildlife
Other	Guide & Assistance Dogs; Greyhound Adoption Program



As they rotate around their speakers, students learn about different dimensions of the responsible pet ownership message: how to have a healthy pet, how to have a safe pet, how to have a happy pet, and so on.

Students also learn practical skills so they can interact safely with animals.

Understanding canine body language helps children make safe decisions about which dogs to meet and which dogs to avoid, with the link between an animal's emotional state (How is this dog feeling?) and its likely behaviour made explicit. From this, a four-step best-practice protocol is taught for Meeting a New Dog Safely: ask a grownup, ask the owner, ask the dog, pat on the shoulder.

They are then able to share this with their family and friends who then also become equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to stay safe around animals, in particular dogs. AND we are teaching consistency and best practice. Veterinary behaviourists tell us that, in combination with a dog's communication skills, a person's skill in picking up their cues plays a big part in reducing dog bite incidents in the community.

Presenters who may take an animal with them can then reinforce these protocols, although there is no compulsion to take a live animal to a PetPEP visit, and there is of course a comprehensive Risk Management framework around this.

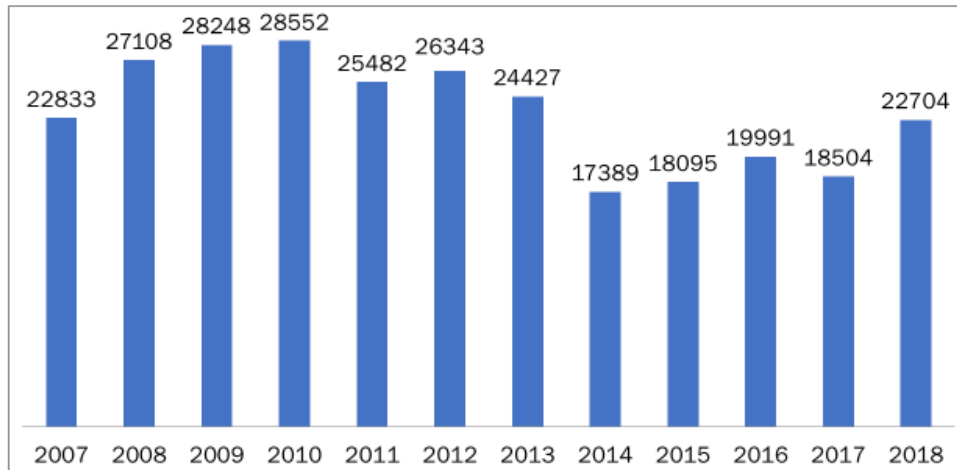
All schools that take part in the AVA PetPEP program are provided with resources free of charge with the support of Council, and distributed by the Council officer present at the school visit: bookmarks, stickers, Activity Booklets. These resources help to consolidate the messages of the PetPEP school visit, and to prompt conversations with family and friends about what they have learned. In this way, we are able to extend the reach of the program's messages, and we know that PetPEP can also then have an impact on current, not just future, pet ownership practices. (anecdote?)

So how is this significant for you? PetPEP started more than 20 years ago, in Western Australia I believe, but currently, in the way I've been speaking about today, only in Queensland. In Queensland, the AVA

employs a small team, I'm the Coordinator, dedicated to organising and delivering more than 400 school visits each year across the state.



Number of students



So it does have a significant reach: we talk to about 20 000 kids every year. But it's not only this immediate audience of primary school children that benefit. Educating students about animal management issues is of benefit to the the whole community, and we know that it can contribute to a broader impact as well:

- Promoting appropriate behaviour around and towards animals
- Educating the community about the importance of microchipping, registration and desexing
- Decreasing the number of dog attacks in the community
- Reducing the number of neglected or abandoned pets
- Reducing the incidence of animal cruelty
- Reducing the number of roaming pets that have a damaging effect on native wildlife
- Better management of household pets to reduce the number of animal-related complaints to local Councils (read these): including walking dogs on-leash, picking up dog droppings and understanding and managing barking.

But there's something else that happens as well: not only do students learn the reasons for and the value of Council bylaws, they also see Local Laws Officers personalised, a powerful tool in building relationships and ultimately, compliance. PetPEP helps Councils educate the next generation of responsible pet owners, but it can also influence current pet ownership practices, promoting safe, healthy, responsible communities – and a recognition of the role of AMOs in achieving this.



References

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