Editorial: On Behalf of Children

FROM SALAMANDERS TO SHETLAND

PONIES: COMPANION ANIMALS

AND YOUNG CHILDREN

The psychology and child development textbooks that most of us remember studying during our college days typically included a photograph of baby ducks following in a row behind a man walking up a grassy hill. The distinguished-looking gentleman in that famous photo is Konrad Lorenz, a 1973 recipient of the Nobel Prize® for his investigations into animal behavior. Lorenz identified and studied imprinting, the instinctive tendency of some newborn animals to remain in close physical contact with a parent or parent substitute (Hines, 2003).

Less well known are the experiences that prompted Lorenz’s groundbreaking research, something that he explains in his autobiography posted on the Nobel Prize® Web site (http://www.nobel.se/medicine/laureates/1973/lorenz-autobio.html). The internationally acclaimed researcher attributes his lifelong fascination with animal behavior to significant adults during childhood who accepted and encouraged his keen interest in other living things. About this, Lorenz writes: “I consider early childhood events as most essential to a man’s scientific and philosophical development. I grew up in the large house and the larger garden of my parents in Altenberg [Austria]. They were supremely tolerant of my inordinate love for animals”.

One memorable event occurred after Lorenz’s father returned from a walk in the Vienna Woods and presented his young son with a spotted salamander, along with the stipulation that the boy set the salamander free after 5 days. The child fretted about his obligation to return the salamander to the wild, yearning to keep it. Fortunately for little Konrad, the salamander gave birth to 44 larvae, and, even more fortunately, his nanny was a country woman who was very knowledgeable about animals and plants. With her patient guidance, 12 of the larvae were successfully reared to metamorphosis.

But young Konrad’s fascination with animals did not stop there. After hearing a book about birds read aloud, Lorenz recalled:

I yearned to become a wild goose and, on realizing that this was impossible, I desperately wanted to have one and, when this proved impossible, I settled for domestic ducks. In the process of getting some, I discovered imprinting and was imprinted myself. From a neighbor, I got a one day old duckling and found, to my intense joy, that it transferred its following response to my person.

Perhaps the reason that Lorenz’s autobiography fascinated me so was that my own childhood included two baby ducks that became similarly imprinted. We lived in the country, and my mother’s best friend, who had no children and doted on my sister and me, placed them in our Easter baskets as a surprise. I was five and my sister was seven and, influenced by Disney, we promptly named them Donald and Daisy (actually, both were female). The garrulous pair followed us everywhere. They accompanied us to the school bus stop, then waddled back home as soon as we boarded the big yellow bus. Even more surprising was the fact that they correctly anticipated the return of the school bus each afternoon and could be seen awaiting our arrival at the bus stop on school days. The moment the bus doors opened, our ducks would begin quacking excitedly, much to the delight of our peers and Rusty, our kindly bus driver.

During my kindergarten and first-grade years we also had a tiger-striped kitten named Thomas P. Tomcat and a dog named Heinz that looked exactly like Tramp in Disney’s Lady and the Tramp. Both of these animals were rescued by my father, who dreamed of being a veterinarian but never had the opportunity to attend college. Dad brought the kitten home tucked inside his jacket during a snowstorm, and he restored the dog, which had been struck by a car, to health by setting its leg and allowing it to recuperate on a blanket next to the coal furnace in our basement. Heinz not only made a full recovery but also demonstrated his devotion to us by running behind the school bus and following us all of the way to school. In my kindergartner’s mind, I was Mary in the nursery rhyme, only instead of a little lamb, I had a little dog and thought, “it followed her to school one day which was against the rules and made the children laugh and play to see a dog at school!” That laughter quickly turned to tears when the custodian roughly took hold of my dog’s collar and dragged him away. As I agonized over my poor dog’s treatment Miss Klingensmith, that dearest and most thoughtful of kindergarten teachers...
teachers, gently assured me that Heinz had been given something to drink and eat and that my mom was coming over right away to take him home. Acts of kindness such as this one from my teacher persuaded me, very early on, that I wanted to be a kindergarten teacher when I grew up.

Those of us who look back on the companion animals of childhood as significant others and important markers of phases in our lives are not alone. The noted children’s book author Gary Paulsen (1999) titled one of his books My Life in Dog Years, and each chapter is organized around a particular dog or dogs that he owned at various times. Without a doubt, some of the most vivid childhood memories—both happy and sad—revolve around the animals we shared our lives with as children. I agree with Konrad Lorenz that the creatures we care for during childhood often set in motion a lifetime of nurturing. For those who had the privilege growing up around animals, childhood memories are populated by other species that captured our imaginations and taught us enduring lessons about love and loss. Both child and animal made adaptations in order to accommodate one another’s needs; we learned to evolve in one another’s presence (Schoen, 2002). Such assertions are not pure speculation or fond memories, however. There is a burgeoning body of interdisciplinary research to suggest that the bonds of attachment we forge with other species are real as well as a growing body of professional literature to support the contention that educators should use their influence to make opportunities to nurture other species an important part of the curriculum (Franklin & White, 2001; Jalongo, 2004).

Companion animals that came into our lives as children did much more than look cute or charm us; they built our belief in ourselves as individuals deserving of their trust and attention. Their names and habits are unforgettable, and their contributions to our “ethic of caring” (Noddings, 2003) are inestimable. As early childhood practitioners, we have the wherewithal to provide such opportunities to children, not only those who already have companion animals at home but also—and perhaps most importantly—to those who do not, for they are the ones with fewer chances to care for other species.

What do we know about the child/companion animal bond? Perhaps the most basic lesson is that companion animals are capable of exerting a powerful, positive force in children’s lives (Podberscek, Paul, & Serpell, 2000). We also know that, as with so many other types of learning, role models—particularly those models provided by the family—are the source of lasting messages about how to treat other living things (Melson, 2001). Working with animals can succeed when other interventions have failed; the impressive work of Green Chimneys, the famous residential facility for emotionally injured children (www.greenchimneys.org) is a testimony to this assertion. Caring for and learning about animals can raise children’s level of awareness about environmental issues and build their commitment to function as stewards of the earth, as reflected in Jane Goodall’s “Roots and Shoots” program, which promotes humane education worldwide (www.janegoodall.org/rs).

Early childhood educators who have never generated a groundbreaking theory or created a world-renowned program still have something important to contribute to young children’s understandings about companion animals. We might be able to persuade an administrator to allow us to keep a classroom pet, invite handlers and therapy dogs in for a group demonstration, provide parents and families with helpful information about companion animals in the family, work with social services to get a service dog for a child with special needs, or share pictures and stories about animals we cared for and about how they were rescued, raised, or trained.

Even if we cannot bring companion animals to the children, it might be possible to take the children to visit the animals. For example, I recently discovered that Simple Blessings Farm is located just a few minutes away from my home. What can children see there? A miniature menagerie. The farm is affiliated with Personal Ponies (www.personalponies.org), an international program that provides UK Shetland ponies (who are 30 to 39 inches high) to children with special needs, free of charge. This spring, the mare is having a foal, and the owner tells me it will be about 12 inches tall when it is born. Now that is something I will drop just about everything to see! The farm residents also include a miniature burro, a group of pygmy goats, and several Shetland sheepdogs—all child-sized and eager to make friends. Children and adults visit, equipped with bags of baby carrots and dog treats, and have a wonderful time getting to know the farm’s residents. In the process, children learn that the animals are individuals, not simply categories. They see Clementine, the miniature burro, who has a pygmy goat as her best friend. They see adults modeling intense interest, genuine compassion, and effective ways of interacting with particular species. The children also notice the adults working hard to keep the animals they care about safe, healthy, clean, and well loved. Such lessons are internalized in ways that tests and standards are not. Perhaps most importantly, the inhabitants of Simple Blessings Farm have the power to activate children’s sense of wonder. For the child who...