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Making a Difference for the Future: Youth Empowerment



Raising Humane Children

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I've been a humane educator for over 20 years, offering the next generation the tools and, hopefully, the inspiration to make kind, compassionate, and wise decisions, and trying to make humane education part of the standard curriculum in the U.S. and abroad. I believe that one day humane education will indeed be fully integrated into all aspects of society, from schooling to media to religion to politics, and when that happens, we will see staggering and immediate positive change. But while I work toward the inclusion of humane education into all aspects of society and education, I also know that until we have parents dedicated to raising their own children to be humane, we won't succeed in creating a truly humane world.

Over my career as a humane educator, I've come to recognize four elements that comprise quality humane education. They are:

1. Providing accurate information about the issues of our time
2. Nurturing the 3 Cs – curiosity, creativity, and critical thinking
3. Instilling the 3 Rs – reverence, respect, and responsibility
4. Providing positive choices and the tools for problem-solving



These four elements, offered to students in all settings, in age-appropriate ways, pave the road toward humane decision-making careers, volunteer work, and activism, and enable people to lead deeply meaningful lives.

After many years of doing this work, I realized that parents could also use these same four elements in raising their own children to be humane, and I wrote *Above All, Be Kind: Raising a Humane Child in Challenging Times* (New Society Publishers) in order to help parents achieve this. In the context of raising children to be

humane to animals—one of the missions of the American Anti-Vivisection Society—parents can use this model as a guide.

Element 3, Instilling the 3 Rs, provides an overarching framework when thinking about the stages of childhood, since reverence, respect, and responsibility evolve over time. We want our very young children to experience reverence for other species, to love and appreciate them. As they grow older, we hope this feeling of reverence will turn into an attitude of respect, which, as they continue to grow older, evolves

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naturally and inevitably into a sense of responsibility.

How do we bring the 3 Rs to our children? In the early years, we provide them with opportunities to interact with, learn about, and appreciate other species, whether meeting a dog rescued from the pound, watching bees pollinating a flower, or seeing a film like *March of the Penguins*. As they grow up, we begin to introduce the other elements so that their respect and sense of responsibility can flourish.

By providing information about what is happening to others, in this case, other species, awakening our children's curiosity, and giving them the critical thinking skills to assess the issues that face animals, we pave the way for them to demonstrate their growing respect and take responsibility for their actions and choices long into their future.

When Animalearn was created in 1990, I worked at AAVS on this program and was eager to share information with young people so that they would know what was happening to animals. I taught them about product testing, showed them behind the scenes videos about the carcasses used in dissection, as well as vivisection laboratories that were perpetrating terrible violence on animals. I brought them to factory farms to see modern-day confinement agriculture for themselves. My students were shocked and angry about what they found out, but I was always quick to tell them not to believe me. I wanted my students to have the critical thinking skills to assess all information, whether from me or the media or politicians or corporations, so that they could make informed, examined choices for themselves.

Initially, I thought that my most important role was as a provider of accurate information (element 1)

and a nurturer of the 3 Cs (element 2), but I came to realize that without the reverence, respect, and sense of responsibility, and without knowledge about and inspiration for making positive choices and becoming a problem-solver, I was potentially creating a generation that felt primarily anger and despair, not commitment and confidence.

It's so important that parents not only expose their children to challenging issues (again, in age-appropriate ways), but also teach them to solve problems and become agents of change. If our children don't feel empowered to make a difference, then the first 3 elements are a recipe for sorrow and impotence, not participation and action.

Parents who want to raise their children to be humane to animals must not only teach them about what is happening to animals in our society and around the world, but also join their children in positive actions, both personal, like using cruelty-free products, and political, like volunteering for an organization, writing letters to corporations and politicians, offering presentations on important issues, or even starting a grassroots group or socially conscious business. In this way, parents can model for their children the positive actions that lead to a better world for other species.

Raising our children to be humane toward animals comes with its challenges. Our culture works against us at every turn. Animals are exploited and abused as a matter of course, whether for food, household products, to test new chemicals, in biomedical research, for dissection, on hunting ranches, or in forms of entertainment. Bucking such a system is not easy. Our child may want to join her classmates for a trip to the circus, buy a common brand of makeup that's tested on animals, or eat at fast food restaurants, and she will be faced with the reality that cultural norms often conflict with one's desire to choose compassion toward animals, a lesson she has learned from you.

Helping children negotiate these challenges includes giving them information and inspiring their kindness without judging them for making choices that may differ from the ones we might hope they'll make. It means sharing with them stories of other kids their age who are making a difference. It requires that

we open their eyes, but not that we insist upon their making the same choices as we do. Above all, it means modeling the qualities that we hope they will embody in their own lives.

In my career as a humane educator, I've tried to provide tools for parents and teachers alike. I've written two books for children, *So, You Love Animals: An Action-Packed, Fun-Filled Book to Help Kids Help Animals*, published by Animalearn in 1994; and most recently, *Claude and Medea: The Hellburn Dogs*, a children's novel about 12-year-olds inspired by an eccentric substitute teacher (really a humane educator) to become clandestine activists in New York City. The children solve a rash of Manhattan dog thefts and rescue the dogs from a vivisector. (see page 9) In writing these books, I hoped not only to give children the tools and role models for leading compassionate lives toward animals but also to help parents in the tremendous task of raising their children to be humane. Additionally, the website of the Institute for Humane Education (IHE), www.HumaneEducation.org, has many downloadable activities that you can use with your children that will teach, inspire, and motivate them to live more fully in accordance with their own deepest values.

I believe that along with teachers, parents have the most important and the most difficult job: raising the next generation well. If we can succeed in creating a humane generation, that is, a generation that embodies compassion, wisdom, integrity, and kindness, we will change the world dramatically for the better. What a wonderful, noble, and challenging task we have before us. **AV**

Zoe Weil worked for AAVS from 1989-1996. She is now the President of the Institute for Humane Education, www.HumaneEducation.org, which trains people to be humane educators through its Master of Education and certificate programs and weekend workshops. In addition to the books mentioned above, she has also written The Power and Promise of Humane Education for teachers and activists.