Guest Editor’s Introduction: Animals in Children’s Lives

James Serpell
UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

In contemporary Western society, nonhuman animals play an extraordinarily salient role in the lives of children. For their first gifts, almost all infants receive soft toys manufactured in the likeness of animals. Throughout childhood, children continue to receive such objects from friends and relatives—the recent cult of the beanie baby providing a suitable case in point. Animal representations liberally decorate the clothes, cribs, strollers, and prams of both babies and toddlers. In a child’s room, these same representations tend to appear on wallpaper, curtains, and lampshades. The overwhelming majority of fairytales, fantasies, fables, storybooks, and other literary genres associated with children are either about animals or feature animals as important central characters (Bettelheim, 1976; Tucker, 1989; Johnson, 1996).

Animals also predominate in television programs, cartoons, and films, especially those produced for younger children. After all, the entire media and entertainment edifice of the Walt Disney Corporation arose from animated caricatures of mice and has evolved through a veritable bestiary of comic, tragic, and heroic animal characterizations.

Real animals occupy an equally prominent position in the child’s world. Almost all children enjoy visiting zoos, aquaria, and natural history museums. Documentary films about animals and nature fascinate many children, and almost all, at some time in their lives, will keep companion animals. Market research has demonstrated that pet ownership occurs most frequently in households with children (Messent & Horsfield, 1985). Various studies suggest that over 90 % of children, if they do not already “own” a pet will express—when prompted—a desire to do so (Salomon, 1981; Kidd & Kidd, 1985).

Whether child or adult is primarily responsible for promoting this apparent affinity for companion animals is unclear. Survey results indicate that the majority of parents either believe or assume that children benefit in various ways from the company of companion animals. Companion animals may teach a child responsibility, encourage caring attitudes and behavior, provide companionship, security, comfort, amusement, or an outlet for affection. They may promote respect and compassion for animals and nature by offering a child opportunities to learn about
animals and the "facts of life" (Macdonald, 1981; Salomon, 1981; Cain, 1983; Salmon & Salmon, 1983; Paul, 1992; Paul & Serpell, 1992; Endenburg & Baarda, 1995). But the extent to which companion animals actually fulfill these varied roles is still largely unknown. To some extent, adult society may have constructed an idealized world of childhood populated by "animal friends" that bears only limited relation to children's spontaneous or unindoctrinated perceptions and inclinations about animals (Kellert, 1985).

**Animals as a Force for Good**

Its unchallenged ubiquity in the modern, urban-industrial context may give the impression that this idyllic animal-child association always existed in some form or other. Grier's careful historical analysis (this volume) tells a different story. According to Grier, middle-class parents and moralists in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries essentially invented the child-pet relationship as we recognize it today. Its original purpose was to serve as an antidote to boys' supposedly "natural" capacity for brutality and violence. By inculcating the middle-class virtues of kindness, gentility, and self-control through the medium of pet care, the Victorians intended to nip this masculine propensity in the bud before it could pose a serious threat to domestic harmony and the bourgeois social order. In addition, animal pets, although not regarded as moral agents, could serve as exemplars for the moral instruction of wayward youth. Their diligence in the care of their young, their fidelity to their human masters, their stoicism in the face of pain and adversity could all be used to good effect.

Although these ideas subsequently became central tenets of the humane education movement, there remains a scarcity of empirical support for the view that caring for, or growing up with, pets during childhood inspires a more generalized kindness and sympathy toward animals or other people. Some studies suggest that adults tend to keep the same kinds of pets that they, as children, grew up with (Kidd & Kidd, 1980; Serpell, 1981; Poresky, Hendrix, Mosier & Samuelson, 1988). One, however, found that pet ownership in childhood was associated with less negative attitudes to some other animals such as lions, pigs, chickens, and snakes (Bowd, 1984). Similarly, Paul (1992) found strong statistical associations between childhood pet keeping and humane attitudes and behavior in adult life (Paul & Serpell, 1993). The cause of these associations, however, remains unknown. Positive parental attitudes to pets strengthen these effects, as does the absence of younger siblings. The type of pet and its individual importance to the child are also important predictors of adult humane attitudes (Paul & Serpell, 1993; Serpell & Paul, 1994;....