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Animals, Society and the Environment
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**Lesson Eight: Teaching Kindness and Compassion:
Humane Education as an antidote to violence**



Rekindling the Spirit of Care and Respect for Life

Produced and presented by

The Humane Education Trust

Humane Education: A Historical perspective in the South African context

Humane Education is broadly defined as the means through which to nurture compassion, kindness and respect for living things.

Back in the late 1990's, The Humane Education Trust was established with a mission to achieve the inclusion of humane education in the national curriculum. It seemed a fairly obvious and logical solution to an increasingly violent world, and was supported by the simultaneous coming together of factors. These included:

- The launch by the Humane Society of the United States of its FIRST STRIKE campaign ([Animal Voice Autumn 1999 Volume 31](#))
- The publication of a seminal resource on the link between animal abuse and human interpersonal violence, namely: Child Abuse, Domestic Violence, and Animal Abuse – Linking the Circles of Compassion for Prevention and Intervention, edited by Frank Ascione and Phil Arkow, published by Purdue University Press. ([Animal Voice January – April 2000](#))
- The release of crime statistics by the MTN Centre for Crime Prevention Studies ([Animal Voice January – April 2000](#))
- The success of our humane education pilot programme in Cape Town's Safe Schools ([Animal Voice May – August 2000](#) and [Animal Voice Winter 2001](#))
- The disclosure by the NSPCA in its annual report that 135 955 stray, starving, diseased and

unwanted companion animals had been euthanized in the financial year 2000 – 2001. A conservative estimate of euthanasia carried out over the same period by other animal welfare organisations and veterinary clinics around the country put the euthanasia figure, at 500 000 companion animals, with the bill being met by tax-payers in the amount of R75 per animal. ([Animal Voice Spring 2002 issue: Is Animal Welfare becoming Animal Farewell!](#))

- Finally, in this ‘perform storm’ of opportunity which enabled humane education to gain a foothold, struggle icon and then Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal gave a directive that environmental education should be included in the development of a new National Schools Curriculum. Furthermore, he accepted that humane education was a component of environmental education. (page 3, [Animal Voice’s Humane Education News, Summer 2003 – 2004](#))

Humane Education becomes part of the new national curriculum for all South African learners

The new curriculum came into being in 2012 with multiple opportunities for humane education. We, at The Humane Education Trust believed we were on the right path towards educating for a less violent society by encouraging kindness and compassion. An example of curriculum topics that fall into the humane education category is shown below:

Life Skills: Grade 1 Term 3:

Topic: Pets

- How to look after pets at home
- Treating animals appropriately

Over the decades, HET actively engaged in...

- supportive workshops for teachers in regard to the delivery of humane education
- the development and supply of hard copy readers and videos for learners with a focus on humane education
- gaining official approval and selection of these resources by the Department of Education for inclusion in its library catalogues and Learner-Teacher-Support-Material

e.g. [Animal Voice April 2007](#) (page 2, page 4 and page 5)

e.g. [Animal Voice May 2008](#) (page 11);

e.g. [Animal Voice July 2009](#) (page 12)

AND YET....

... the incidence of animal cruelty and interpersonal violence was escalating on an unprecedented scale

We had not taken into account...

- that teachers are generally not equipped with sufficient background information on animal welfare issues, to be able to teach humane education effectively
- that our Westernised education system has, for generations, stifled the development of Emotional Intelligence (EI) because EI has been associated with illogicality and weakness, in contrast to subjects such as science, technology, mathematics, and more recently, robotics and coding
- that the generally prevailing societal belief is one where animals exist for human use and are undeserving of respect in their own right

In 2015, against this backdrop, the work of Associate Professor Kai Horsthemke who at that stage taught Philosophy of Education at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, came to the attention of The Humane Education Trust. Horsthemke remained convinced that humane education was key to the kind of society we want for ourselves BUT, he said, humane education should be reconceptualised.

([Animal Voice September 2015](#); (pages 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11)

([Animal Voice 2018 Issue 79](#)) (pages 16 and 17)

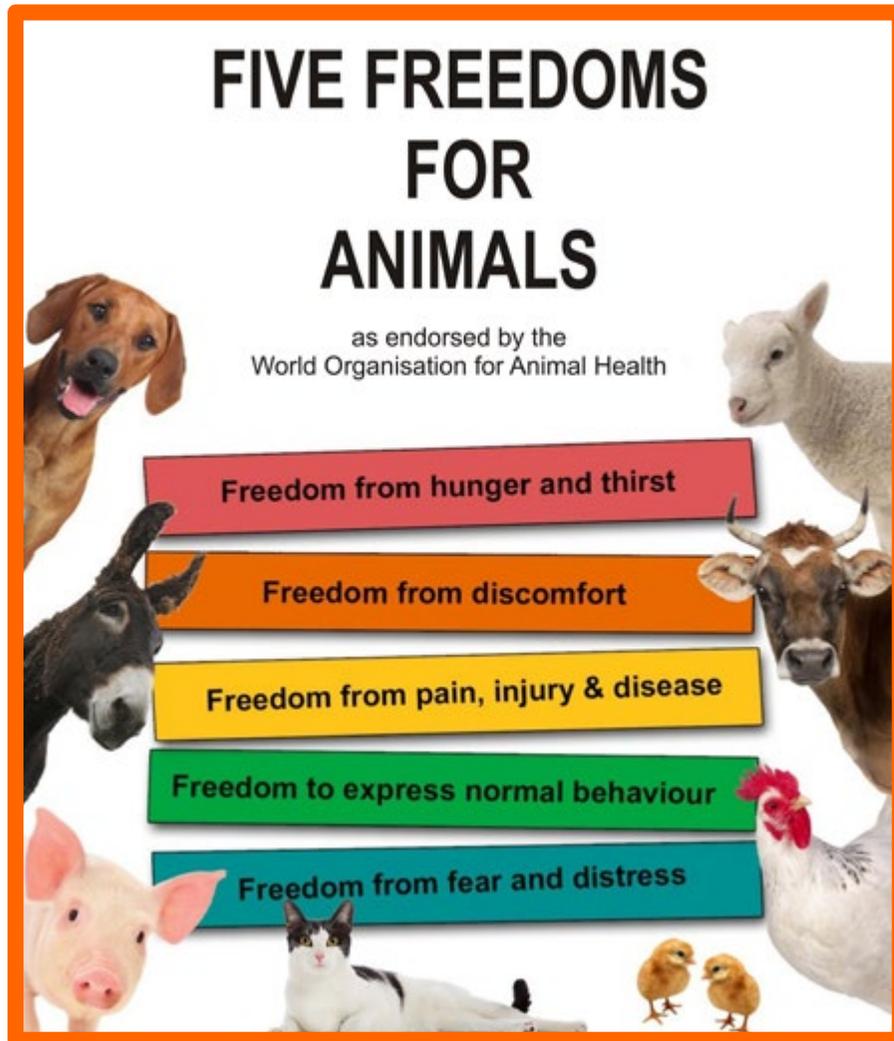
Humane Education, he suggested, was about:

Justice, not just kindness

Respect, not just compassion

Rights, not just protection

The Reconceptualisation of humane education



The Humane Education Trust set about reconceptualising humane education and we based our new approach on the Five Freedoms for Animals. **The Five Freedoms** are endorsed by the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and supported by member states, including South Africa. They are a set of principles that do not make an appeal for emotions such as kindness and compassion but instead, appeal to a sense that is innate to each and every one of us – the need for justice, fairness, respect and rights. And if we readily understand these principles for ourselves, the question is, can we extrapolate it to the ‘other’ – the animals?

The Humane Education Trust believes that The Five Freedoms for Animals is the closest the world has come, so far, to according rights to animals.

Further thinking behind the reconceptualization of humane education

As already stated, our need, as humans, for justice, fairness and respect, is innate to us. When justice, fairness and respect are withheld, anger and emotions that may lead to violence, well up from deep within. Even small children understand the concept of fairness without difficulty.

In addition, underpinning the Five Freedoms is the landmark judgement in 2016 of the Constitutional Court, which ruled that:

- Animals have intrinsic value as individuals.
 - Animals are sentient beings capable of suffering and experiencing pain.
 - Guardianship of the interests of animals reflects constitutional values and the interests of society at large.
 - Animal protection safeguards the moral status of humans and the degeneration of human values.
- ([Animal Voice February 2017](#), Page 12)

We took this thinking further...

Slavery was not abolished by an act of kindness or compassion

Women did not win the vote through an act of kindness or compassion

Apartheid was not abolished through an act of kindness or compassion

Gay rights were not won through an act of kindness or compassion

All of the above were forced upon civilisation through our evolving sense of social justice

And so too now, our social conscience dictates that we must extend our circle of concern to include

THEM, the animals. If anyone is in doubt, consider:

- Some 72 billion land animals and over 1.2 trillion aquatic animals are killed for food around the world annually. Virtually all the land animals never see the sun, soil or a blade of grass in their short ravaged lives - sentientmedia.org
- Humanity is responsible for the extinction of 60% of wild animal populations since 1970 – WWF

In September 2020:

- 5800 cows drown off the coast of Japan when the livestock carrier transporting them from New Zealand to China capsizes.
- 50 000 South African sheep leave the port of East London on a gruelling 3-week journey to Kuwait for slaughter

CASE STUDY

In 2017, in cooperation with the principal of a Cape Town primary school, The Humane Education Trust set about delivering humane education (reconceptualised) to a class of Grade 3 learners. The school services a community where socio-economic challenges include poverty, unemployment, domestic violence, depression, drug addiction, suicide among young adults, environmental degradation, and animal neglect and cruelty – including organised dog fighting.

The class comprised 42 learners, both boys and girls, with an average age of 9 years old. Over a period of three terms (10 weeks per term), at a rate of 2 hours and 55 minutes per week (35 minute Life Skills lessons over 5 days a week), the pupils were taught The Humane Education Trust's Five Freedoms programme. By the end of the third term, the learners showed significant proficiency in their understanding of The Five Freedoms as demonstrated in their performance of a puppet play. See here: <https://youtu.be/qDkXnoOoloE>

(Special permission to show children's faces was obtained and their performance has been broadcast three times on SABC2 Issues of Faith.)

([Animal Voice 2018, Issue 79](#), Pages 18 – 19)

One year later:

Of significance, one year later, although these learners had not received any further instruction on the Five Freedoms for Animals, all had retained memory of the Five Freedoms as demonstrated by the results of the following questionnaires:

Question 1:

When you think back on The Five Freedoms for Animals, which freedom is the first that comes to your mind?

Of the 42 learners:

34 replied “Freedom from hunger and thirst”

6 replied “Freedoms from pain, injury and disease”

2 replied “Freedom from discomfort”

Question 2:

Do you think it is important for learners to know about The Five Freedoms for Animals? Please give a reason for your answer.

Of the 42 learners, 100% replied in the affirmative.

Reasons included:

- “Because the Five Freedoms is something we need to know”
- “Because if you help animals you will become very kind and help people also”
- “Because the Five Freedoms make me feel like a hero”
- “Because the Five Freedoms make us better people”
- “Because I know now how to treat my dog”
- “Because the Five Freedoms make you into a champion”
- “Because people will become kind”
- “Because some people will become good from this learning”
- “Because now I can teach my uncle about the Five Freedoms when he beats his donkey”
- “Because I love the puppet show and everyone says I should be an actress when I grow up”

Empirical evidence:

Vivienne Rutgers, the teacher spear-heading our Five Freedoms for Animals programme in the class, commented that she believed the pilot project had achieved a breakthrough in education in the sense that the learners had begun to show the early manifestations of empathy for nonhuman beings.

- She reported: “An example is the discussion I overheard in the playground. A dove was sun-bathing nearby, extending its wing to catch the rays of warmth. Two nine-year-old boys saw this and the one said to the other: “See! That’s Freedom from Pain, Injury and Disease.” “No, it’s not,” retorted the other, “that’s Freedom to Express Normal Behaviour.” They amicably argued the point. Our Five Freedoms pilot project had opened a new window of curiosity for them that would otherwise have remained closed. If they had not been exposed to the humane education programme, they probably would not have even noticed the bird or, based on my experience, they may well have decided to chase it away by throwing stones at it.”
- “On another occasion, we unlocked the classroom for the day’s schoolwork to begin, only to find a little bird had somehow been shut in all night. It perched on the rail above one of the windows and was clearly traumatised by the sudden surge of 42 children into the room. Before the introduction of the Caring Classrooms programme, I believe the children would have caused pandemonium trying to catch the bird. Instead, they heard me... I said ‘sit quietly, I’ll open the window, and we will be patient while the bird finds its way out’. The little bird took a significant amount of time to do this

but as it hopped nearer to the open window, one child whispered ‘nearly there’, as encouragement to the bird. To hear that whisper, all 42 children had to have been as quiet as mice. Then several of the children whispered ‘nearly there’ with every hop the bird took in the right direction. And we all whooped when it finally flew out. That ‘nearly there’ whisper of encouragement was empathy in action across species, and I hadn’t seen it before.”

- Another observation is that the children spontaneously extrapolated their understanding of the Five Freedoms not only to other animals, but to themselves too! “*Don’t bully me,*” I heard one small girl say. “*I’m a sentient being. I have feelings too.*” It was said in all earnestness. She understood the Five Freedoms and their implications better than she understood her own child rights in the South African Constitution. What she said was something no-one could argue about and the young bully boy was stuck for a retort!

International interest in The Five Freedoms for Animals programme

At the invitation of the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics, The Humane Education Trust was invited to present its work to an international audience in Oxford in July 2019. Subsequently, our presentation, has been selected for inclusion in **A Handbook of Humane Education** edited by Andrew Linzey and Clair Linzey, soon to be published.

The Ferrater Mora

Oxford Centre
for
Animal Ethics

Conclusion:

The Five Freedoms for Animals should become a basic learning requirement for all young people, along with their 123's and their ABC's.

The Humane Education Trust contends that learning about the Five Freedoms for Animals as an integral part of the learning area known as Life Skills, in the Foundation Phase of schooling (ages 5-9), awakens in learner perceptions a sense of fairness and justice towards other species. Although the focus is on companion animals in the very early stages, this focus forms fertile groundwork for the tackling of wider animal welfare issues as the grades advance.

The urgency for the inclusion of the Five Freedoms for Animals as a vital component of education is all the more imperative as the world enters an age where anthropocentric learning is at odds with our new understanding of our fragile world. In his book Earth Emotions, geoscientist and eco-philosopher Glenn Albrecht suggests education needs urgently to equip school children with knowledge of the science of symbiosis, making them the first generation to walk out of the Anthropocene (Age of man) epoch and into the Symbiocene (the interconnectedness of life) epoch.

([Animal Voice's Education Rewired –Issue 1: July 2019](#)) (pages 4 and 5)

To hasten the process, we have started uploading our curriculum-aligned lesson plans in an online power point format for free downloading, and the large number of downloads by teachers has been heart-warming to say the least. See here:

<https://caringclassrooms.co.za/product/lesson-plans-grade-r/> and

<https://caringclassrooms.co.za/product/lesson-plans-grade-1/>

Short biographical note:

Louise van der Merwe is the Founder and Managing Trustee of The Humane Education Trust, South Africa, and the Editor of the magazine Animal Voice.

She is recipient of the following awards:

- Recipient in 2013 of the City of Cape Town's **Youth Environmental School Award** "in recognition of an outstanding contribution and commitment to humane education and environmental awareness in the City of Cape Town."
- Recipient in 2011 of a **winner's trophy** at the *Feather Awards* in association with *The Female Tribe* and *1st for Women Insurance Brokers* for "tireless and selfless work to bring attention to the plight of animals in South Africa and the impact that animal cruelty has on human beings, society and the environment."
- Recipient in 2003 of **Campaigner of the Year** award presented by the *International Fund for Animal Welfare/Animal Talk* magazine.