

What Causes Cruelty?

by Bill DeRosa

There are some forms of cruelty that we are familiar with and that occur quite commonly among children. We frequently see or hear about children pulling insects apart or crushing insects or other small creatures under their feet. (Salamanders, snakes, and toads are common victims.) This behavior may simply be the result of children's curiosity about what animals look like on the inside. Or some children may crush or pull apart small creatures as a way of getting the attention of their peers or even of adults. It may also be that children learn to imitate adult behaviors such as fly-swatting and spraying insects with insecticide. Thus, destroying small creatures does not seem objectionable to some youngsters because such behavior is often condoned by adult society.

What Research Tells Us

Research has primarily centered on other forms of cruelty, which, though less common than the insect-crushing variety, receive a great deal of publicity. Such cruelty often involves pets or farm animals and extremely violent acts such as burning, severe beating, stabbing, and other forms of torture.

One study designed to investigate the causes of this type of behavior was conducted in 1971 by Fernando Tapia, M.D., a psychiatrist at the University of Missouri School of Medicine. In this study, titled *Children Who Are Cruel to Animals*, Tapia analyzed the case histories of eighteen male psychiatric patients, ranging in age from five to fifteen years old. All of the patients had persistently exhibited severe cruelty to animals. Tapia found that in eleven of the eighteen cases, the children's cruel behavior seemed to be determined by environmental factors—a background of gross parental neglect, brutality, rejection, and hostility. Fathers were often alcoholic and physically abusive or separated from their children for long periods of time. In three other cases, a chaotic home environment, combined with biological/psychological disorders seemed to account for the children's abusive behavior. In most of the remaining cases, brain damage was thought to be the significant contributing factor.

Many of Tapia's findings have been supported by the results of a 1980 study titled *Aggression Against Cats, Dogs, and People*, conducted by Dr. Alan R. Felthous of the C. F. Menninger Memorial Hospital in Topeka, Kansas. In order to determine possible causes of childhood cruelty to animals, Felthous looked at the childhood histories of a group of adult male psychiatric patients. Of those

who had histories of cruelty to animals, most had been subjected to brutal punishments by their parents. In addition, those in the animal cruelty group tended to have alcoholic fathers and high incidences of separation from father figures.

The significance of a violent, chaotic home life, including parental alcoholism and paternal separation, was also brought out in the preliminary results of a 1983 study conducted by Felthous and Dr. Stephan Kellert of Yale University. Authorities such as Felthous and Kellert believe that in unstable and abusive home situations, animal cruelty serves two functions for the child:

(1) Cruelty is used to express frustrated aggression toward another person, such as an abusive parent; and/or (2) children model or imitate violent parental behavior by being cruel to animals. Authorities also suggest that separation from a father figure may contribute to cruel behavior in boys by depriving them of an effective male role model for learning to deal with anger and appropriately channeling aggressive impulses.

What Teachers Can Do

As educators, the type of cruelty we will encounter most often will be of the, psychologically speaking, less serious variety—acts such as children's occasionally crushing insects or other small creatures. To discourage students from such behavior, Dr. Michael Fox, Scientific Director for The Humane Society of the United States, suggests that they need to learn to empathize with the animals. Pointing out to children that animals are similar to humans in many ways may encourage youngsters to refrain from violent behavior toward the creatures they commonly encounter. In addition, you may want to provide new ways in which children can relate to small animals. For instance, try taking students on an insect safari to observe the animals in their natural habitats. (See our article "From Ick to Interesting" in the March 1984 issue of HUMAN EDUCATION.)

The other forms of cruelty involving torture or wanton killing of pets and wild and domestic animals should be treated as signs of a problem requiring professional help. Be sure that your school counselors and administrators are familiar with the studies cited in this article. If your school has a list of certain behaviors or conditions to watch for in children—such as indications of child abuse, drug use, or other problems—request that persistent, wanton cruelty to animals be added as an indication of

psychological disorders or a chaotic home environment. Finally, encourage your students to report any such acts they witness or hear about. Stress to students that doing so is not an instance of "tattling," but a means of obtaining help for someone with a serious problem.