

Can empathy be taught?

by Louise van der Merwe

While social scientists around the world agree that the erosion of human empathy is a critical issue of our time, few offer insight into how exactly we can nurture, resuscitate and develop this innate and vital social emotion with which we are born.

that these qualities become 'second nature' as the child matures. Based on the UN-endorsed *Five Freedoms for Animals*, the Caring Classrooms programme starts with companion animals because most young children have contact with dogs and cats. However the learners demonstrate that they spontaneously extend their understanding of the *Five Freedoms* to other animals too."

Van der Merwe says that what makes the Caring Classrooms programme unique is that each of the professionally developed resources requires active learner participation. "Through the resources, they are required to become actively engaged in discussing and working out positive relationships in our interaction with others who share this amazing journey of life with us."

Vivienne Rutgers, the teacher spear-heading the programme in the Foundation Phase, says the Caring Classrooms pilot achieves a breakthrough in education in the sense that the learners begin to show the early manifestations of empathy for nonhuman beings. She explains: "An example is the discussion I overheard in

the playground recently. 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,' argued the other. 'That's Freedom to Express Normal Behaviour.' They amicably argued the point. Our Caring Classrooms programme based on the *Five Freedoms* had opened a whole new window of

curiosity for them that would otherwise have remained closed. It was really heart-warming. Without the 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."

The US-based **Latham Foundation** believes it starts with the animals in our care. Says Latham's **Phil Arkow**, co-author of *Child Abuse, Domestic Violence, and Animal Abuse: Linking the Circles of Compassion for Prevention and Intervention*: "Kindness to animals is the first and truly foundational step that supports all the other steps above it in the building of empathic communities, countries, nations and a new world ethos."

Putting this belief to the test, Latham has sponsored a pilot **Caring Classrooms** programme at a primary school in the northern suburbs of Cape Town. Currently underway, the outcomes will be academically assessed by education philosopher, **Dr Kai Horethemka**.

Says education reformist **Louise van der Merwe** who developed the Caring Classrooms programme: "Early Childhood Development, those years in a child's life when neuroscience shows our brains to be the most malleable, is a crucial window of opportunity to teach the basic principles of ethics, integrity and empathy, so



Vivienne Rutgers





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"On another occasion recently, 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 a rail on the wall and was clearly traumatised by the sudden surge of 46 children into the room. Before 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 hear that whisper, all 46 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."

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