

Teaching Empathy Through Animals

Pets in preschool classrooms allow students to establish an emotional connection while also learning about responsibility



Harker Preschool

By **Robyn Stone**

“**T**HE CHICKIES ARE TALKING TO ME!” three-year-old Anya said as she keenly listened to the “pips” and “pews” of our Barred Plymouth Rock chicks on our preschool farm. “What are they saying?” I asked, as the chicks gathered around our ankles. “They were sitting on tree stumps in front of the chicken coop. “They say, ‘Anya we love you!’” she replied with a big grin while giving herself a hug on their behalf.

In that moment, Anya reminded me of Fern, a character in the novel *Charlotte’s Web*¹. In a dramatic demonstration of empathy, Fern attempts to rescue a piglet runt from an untimely death. With a sophisticated ability in perspective taking, she asks her father, “If I had been born small at birth, would you have killed *me*?” Father acquiesces and Fern raises the piglet Wilbur. When he outgrows their home, Wilbur moves to a barn where there is quite a menagerie of opinionated animals: geese, sheep, a greedy rat, and a crafty spider called Charlotte.

Every day after school Fern would visit Wilbur and the other animals and listen to their conversations. After relaying one such conversation to her mother, Mother thinks Fern is ill. She complains to the doctor, “Fern says the animals talk to each other. Dr. Dorian, do you believe animals talk?”

It is Dr. Dorian’s response that came to mind when Anya told me about the talking chicks:

It is quite possible that an animal has spoken civilly to me and that I didn’t catch the remark because I wasn’t paying attention. Children pay better attention than grownups. If Fern says that the animals in Zuckerman’s barn talk, I’m quite ready to believe her. Perhaps if people talked less, animals would talk more.

Is it a question of people talking less or listening more? When I observe the chickens or the rabbits on our preschool farm with my young students, the children narrate for me what the animals are saying, thinking, and feeling, and the intentions behind the animals’ behaviors. The young children seem intuitively aware. But are they simply projecting their own thoughts and feelings onto the animals? Are they anthropomorphizing? In the preschool classroom we actively teach students how to recognize and name emotions. When children break a toy, we might ask how the toy feels. When we read a picture book, we might ask how the characters feel. These are all steps toward building social competence in perspective taking.

Glancing out the classroom window, we can ask children ‘How is that squirrel feeling?’ as it dashes down a tree with an acorn in its mouth. By wondering about the squirrel

rel's emotional state, we invite the children to take on the perspective of a living being who shares earth's precious resources with us. That's a good thing, suggests Virginia Morell in her book *Animal Wise*². Morell goes on to discuss ant teachers, laughing rats, elephant memories, and more—thus revealing that animals have minds. She states:

They have brains and use them, as we do: for experiencing the world, for thinking and feeling, and for solving the problems of life every creature faces. Like us, they have personalities, moods, and emotions; they laugh and they play. Some show grief and empathy and are self-aware and very likely conscious of their actions and intents. . . . By embracing this larger understanding of our fellow creatures, we may yet succeed in overcoming the great tragedy of the Sixth Extinction.

The Sixth Extinction referenced by Morrell, is a term made popular by Elizabeth Kolbert's Pulitzer Prize winning book of the same name³. It describes the devastating effects of humans on our planet in perpetuating and hastening the extinction of a wide array of species—plants, invertebrates, and animals. Empathizing with these living things in our world may be the key to saving them. Many preschoolers have already been exposed to the concept of 'extinction.' Even as they classify plastic dinosaurs and wear adorable t-rex t-shirts, the children know that dinosaurs no longer roam the world. Teaching preschool students to show empathy for live animals may be the key to creating a generation of animal advocates as they grow up.

Unfortunately, some people see capacity for empathy as fixed. Teachers often identify key preschoolers as having more or less empathy than others. Yet, new research

by Schumann, Zaki, and Dweck⁴ indicates that a malleable view of empathy predicts greater empathic efforts. This suggests that teachers could help all students increase empathic behaviors and grow in their empathic responses even when a situation is most challenging.

Lucas, a four-year-old on the Autism Spectrum, was obsessed with our classroom rabbit. "Is it time to pet the bunny?" he'd ask upon entering the class. He had extreme difficulty relating to peers. An aide shadowed him to constantly redirect him to morning circle time and table centers. But when open play ensued, Lucas headed straight for the rabbit cage. The rabbit was an object he wanted to experience. In the first week of class, he violated the classroom rules of petting the rabbit by stepping into her enclosure, reaching his hand into her hiding place, and pushing food into her face. The consequences were obvious. The rabbit refused to leave her hideout. We talked about his behavior from the rabbit's perspective. He grew in his recognition of the rabbit as a living thing with thoughts and feelings. Lucas's desire to pet the objectified rabbit evolved into a deeper desire to care for the needs of Miss Potato the bunny. By the second week of school Lucas was able to sit on a "bunny carpet" next to the rabbit enclosure and patiently observe her until she chose to visit him for a petting. In short time, Lucas became the unofficial guardian of Miss Potato—instructing other children in how to observe and touch her. He even prepared little salads for her that she gladly consumed whilst being pet.

Lucas's parents were instrumental in helping him develop empathy for Potato. Having recently immigrated from Shanghai, they had left their own pet rabbit behind. At home, they talked about their lost bunny and the school bunny, thereby making a home-school connection. Parents are pivotal partners in helping young children grow



Empathy with Live Animals — Tips for Teachers

- Only take on a live animal in the preschool classroom if you are comfortable being the sole caregiver, even during school holidays.
- Find key developmentally appropriate animal care tasks for young children. (Example: feeding fish, refilling a water bowl, refilling a food dish)
- Establish clearly stated positive norms for how and when animals can be handled.
- Coach young children in how to observe animal behavior by narrating what you see. (Example, "I notice the bunny is in her hideout.")
- Engage the children in wondering about the animal's thoughts and emotional state of being. (Example: "When bunny is in her hideout, how does she feel? Does she want to be pet?")
- Discuss the animal's life cycle and wonder about its family. (Example: "Do you think the bunny has a mommy and daddy or brothers and sisters?")
- Recognize the elements of the animal's natural habitat and why they are important. (Example: "Bunnies usually live in the forest. Why would they need to hide?")
- Identify the many ways the animal and the child are similar.
- Invite parents to help with animal care at school and with discussing the child's relationship with the animal at home.



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empathic behavior. They are encouraged to help with animal chores at preschool.

Teachers can assign students, and even their parents, individual roles for caring for the classroom pet. At our preschool, five-year-old Ava was in extended day care until 6pm. She and her mom had the role of saying goodnight to the farm rabbits every evening and locking up their hutch. Parents are also encouraged to wonder with their children about the preschool animal’s thoughts, feelings, and families. In dialoguing with their children, parents underscore educators’ efforts in teaching the young children to be curious about school animals. Curiosity for animals in children’s immediate environment can also be leveraged into growing empathy for all animals.

In our verdant outdoor play yard, the preschoolers’ impulse to squish snails is palpable. They enjoy the sensation of hearing the shell crunch underfoot. Likewise, preschoolers have an impulse to roll and possess pill bugs (a.k.a. “rolli polli”) that invariably causes isopod injuries. But, by helping young children pause and take the perspective of the snail or pill bug, educators can develop alternative ways of re-directing that curiosity in exploring a new life form and empathizing with its unique way of life. The humorously illustrated “diary” books by Doreen Cronin⁵, such as *Diary of a Worm*, can be light-hearted tools to help young children get a new point of view about the everyday critters in their midst.

The value of pets in the classroom has been well documented, by Daly and Suggs⁶ for example. Indeed, Steven King’s article *Pets and Pedagogy*⁷ in the Winter 2015 issue of *Green Teacher* discusses the way those benefits connect with curricula. In elementary school classrooms, older students can independently care for pets and employ them in the acquisition of language arts, mathematics, and science skills. However, in early childhood, our primary focus is on the social and emotional development of young students.

Early childhood teachers can coach young children in making observations about an animal that reveals what it might be thinking or feeling. In and through this process, young children grow attached to the animal as they view it as an intelligent being and learn to take the animal’s perspective—a key factor in developing empathy.

Teaching social and emotional skills is foundational in early childhood. Using live animals in the preschool classroom, early childhood educators can teach children how to care for animals and look after their well-being. Also, teachers can coach young children in making observations about the animal that reveals what it might be thinking or feeling. In and through this process, young children grow attached to the animal as they view it as an intelligent being and learn to take the animal’s perspective a key factor in developing empathy.

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Endnotes

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