A BREAKDOWN IN THE RELATIONSHIP

TAKING ACTION

Those of us who care for animals or children may want to seek some answers or strategies about how to help if there is a breakdown in their relationship.

Children are not naturally cruel, although they can be curious and are not always wise. How you react to what they do is a key factor in what will happen next. Even though you may be appalled at the behaviour, make sure the child knows you are not appalled at them. Separate the behaviour from the person. It is important to teach children that being kind to animals is the right thing to do.

Being very angry or blaming may make the child feel alone and isolated from you. This may affect your chance to be one of the people who can model and teach kind behaviour. Try to always let the child/young person know that they are valued and important. Children need to be supported in changing the way they think about and behave towards animals.

When you are planning on what action to take, consider some of the following factors:
- What age is the child or young person?
- Were they alone or with others? Were the others involved in the cruelty?
- What type of animal was involved?
- Was the animal a domestic pet animal, a farm animal, or something else? (like a fish or insect)
- Was the animal known to the child/young person (eg a known pet animal or a stray)?
- Was the act impulsive? Or did it seem to be planned?
- Is this a case of someone hitting out in a moment of anger? Is it an act of revenge?
- What is the context? - was it on a farm, in the bush, in the city, at home? Some people see hunting as cruel, while others believe it is a sport. The context and thoughts of the person can be important in determining what action to take.
- What condition was the animal left in? Was it frightened/ injured/ killed?
- If there is an animal that is hurt, make sure it receives veterinary care. If it is appropriate, the child or young person might be involved in this, or in contributing to payment for this.
- If a child or young person has badly hurt or killed an animal, it is important that there is follow up. Cruelty to animals by children/ young people is often not dealt with because it seems such a horrible thing, or because people do not know what to do. It is preferable to face the problem. If left unchecked there is a chance it will happen again and could get worse.
Principles for an action plan

1. Safety
You need to ensure that both children and animal are safe. To keep animals safe, follow the principle to either supervise or separate. Check the safety for the young person in all settings. Contact other adults who need to help with this if necessary. This could include teachers, family and coaches.

2. Management
Manage interactions and promote the desired behaviour with positive reinforcement strategies. You might set up a contract with the child or young person, counting the number of times they complete the chosen positive behavior, and providing an agreed upon reward after a certain number of repetitions.

3. Teaching and Reinforcement
Many young people are fascinated with animals and are highly motivated by contact with them. This can provide an opportunity for learning to happen as long as it is ensured that the welfare of all animals and humans are considered in the planning.
   - Talk to your child. Help them understand that animals can feel pain.
   - Try to find out what caused the act of cruelty. Explain that animals need to feel safe just as people do.
   - Monitor interactions in an ongoing way.

Example - Arnold
One of 6-year old Arnold’s jobs was to feed the dog. No-one knew why, but he started to put the dog’s food in a cupboard where she could smell it but not reach it. When his parents found out, they talked to Arnold and made a deal with him. They explained that it was mean to tease the dog, and that she needed to get her food. Together they made a chart for the fridge and Arnold got a star every time he gave the dog her food straight away. When he got ten stars, they agreed on a treat that involved a day out as a family - dog included. After a month, they decided that they no longer needed the chart - but they still kept going on the family outings together as they were having so much fun.
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Example - Ella
Ella's 5 year old grandson gets very excited when he comes to visit her farm. He has always been interested in the ducks and other birds around the barn. On his last visit she noticed that he kicked out at one of the tamer ducks, and it really worried her. The adults in the family talked together and then they spoke to their son. They told him that the ducks had lived on the dam for a long time and that it was their home. The next time he visited his grandparents, they fed the ducks together and told him stories of the ducks who had lived there for a long time. They told him how proud they were of him being kind to the animals. From that time, every time he visited, they made sure there was some fun activity about caring for animals. They never saw him being careless or unkind again.

Example - Josh
Josh is a young teenager who is lives with foster carers. When he came to live with them, he was very excited to meet the family cat, who was soon sleeping on his bed at nights. They heard him telling people at his school that the cat was his best friend, and they were glad that they could share their pet with him. After he had been with them for a while, there was an incident when he was very angry. The cat was in his room and they were appalled to see him pick up his 'friend' and throw her against the wall. Josh also got a big shock (although he didn't have the words to say it), his behavior changed immediately and they knew he was shocked by what he had done. Luckily the cat was not badly hurt, but they decided that Josh would have to earn the right to be alone with her. They talked with him and talked to his school about doing some work on his anger. They made sure that he could sit with the cat every night in the living room, so that Josh knew that what he had done was serious, but so that he still got positive time with his animal friend. After a couple of months, he was able to have the cat in his room again. They made an agreement that if he was angry he would go out the back, and he promised he would never hurt his friend again. They said that if he did ever hurt the cat again, he would not be able to spend time alone with her at all. He did get angry, but he knew they were serious and he never hurt the cat again.