

Benefits of Pets for Kids

“Nothing less than alchemy is involved when animals and children get together, and the resulting magic has healing properties that work well.”

P. Elizabeth Anderson, *The Powerful Bond Between People and Pets*, 2008

Those of us who have been lucky enough to experience the alchemy of the human-animal bond from an early age understand the magical, healing impact that animals can have on us. Children who are raised with animals learn about compassion, care, and empathy from an early age; they also learn about responsibility, differing perspectives, and life skills that will help

them navigate the world later on. A 2017 study entitled *Companion Animals and Child/Adolescent Development: A Systematic Review of the Evidence* found evidence that those whose early lives include animal family members have better social skills, higher self-esteem, and enhanced cognitive development in comparison to children whose homes don't include animals.

Animals can help children become more confident and master literacy, as the dogs of Reading With Rover do, provide therapeutic riding opportunities, as the horses at Little Bit do, and improve our social interactions with all living beings. Children who grow up with pets in their homes tend to have lower stress levels, higher levels of physical activity, better communicative skills, fewer

behavioral and learning problems, and better overall health than children who do not live with animals. Animals improve our quality of life across our lifespans, providing companionship, care, encouragement, love, and support. Please join us as we explore these relationships between kids and animals and marvel at the little miracles happening all around us.

Children and Animals: Widening the Circle of Empathy

Doctor Jennie Warmouth understands the transformative power that animals can have with children – and why it's so important to provide young kids with the opportunity to grow up with animals to help them learn about empathy, compassion, and second chances.



Jennie, who has dedicated her life to helping children and animals, has been a teacher since 2000. She recently completed her PhD in educational psychology, where she examined human-animal interactions. Her thesis, “Widening the circle of empathy through humane education: a qualitative study with diverse and at-risk children,” dovetails beautifully with the population that she works with today.

Jennie works at Spruce Elementary School in the Edmonds School District, a Title 1 school with a diverse population of students. “There are almost 600 kids, including refugees and victims of abuse,” Jennie said, “and they speak 39 different languages.” Jennie knew that she wanted to find a powerful way to impact their lives, and championing an animal welfare-based curriculum was one of the most effective ways that she could teach her students.

“When I was a young teacher, I struggled a bit with the standard curriculum,” she recalled. “I wanted to find a connection and significance for my students. All children, regardless of their language level, were enthralled by stories and images, so that was my point of departure.”

Jennie began by teaching the children about money – and she created a penny fundraiser for local animal welfare organization PAWS (paws.org).

“It was so engaging and exciting for them,” she recalled. Jennie built upon this success by having her children work on writing up biographies for adoptable animals. “We chose the animals who were harder to adopt,

whether it was due to physical differences or behavioral limitations,” she said.

Her students analyzed and re-wrote the biographies, and then the class came together to pull together the strongest ideas out of the collective draft.

“We've helped adopt out more than 500 dogs and cats,” Jennie said, “and it's really impactful because the new guardians will often email our class via the shelter. Sometimes, the animal is adopted shortly after we submit the bio, and the children get to see the immediate impact that they're having.”

Jennie has had many experiences working with children who have been victims of abuse and neglect, as well as diagnosed and undiagnosed disabilities. She has tracked the children's social and emotional development and behavior, measuring their engagement over time. “They become more engaged as they realize that their work is helping another,” she said. “They learn to write about animals from the animal's perspective, and see that that animal is going through something difficult, as well. Some of the kids come in with a much less-developed sense of ‘other;’ some come in at a four-year-old's level when they're seven, and that has to do with neglect, abuse, or trauma.”

While truancy is always an issue, Jennie has noticed that attendance is always better on the days that she brings a therapy dog to the school.

“One of the most rewarding days of my life was when all of the volunteers at PAWS knew that I was coming, and they released the children into a courtyard with puppies,” she recalled. “The kids just felt so empowered and important. It's important to provide children with qualitative human to animal and human-to-human experiences, and for some kids, it's a little bit easier to begin to exercise empathy toward a nonhuman animal than to a human friend. Sometimes, it's easier for them to assume the perspective of a dog or a cat.”



So far, 300 children have gone through the PAWS Project. “Of the 300, a significant number keep coming back all the way through 6th grade,” Jennie said.

Jennie was recently the recipient of the 2018 Foundation Edmonds School District (FESD) award.

“Through this award, my students and I have received \$300 to pay for our school bus transportation in order to visit the PAWS companion animal shelter this school year. This is especially meaningful to us because we are a highly impacted school without a

field trip budget. Despite the shelter being just two miles from our school we have not been able to fund the school bus transportation for most years of our volunteer service. Our visits, when possible, help create important context for the children and connect us directly with the humane educators and volunteers who partner with us electronically each week. We hope to schedule our field trip visit for early this fall quarter as we launch into our humane education program and weekly Pet of the Week advertisement writing.

Jennie is proud to partner with PAWS and her humane education program is called the “PAWS Project.” She believes that with the proper support, it can be replicated so that other schools and teachers can have humane education programs, too.

“I integrate it into the curriculum, and teach animal welfare principles two hours per week,” she said. “It's not at the cost of something else that I need to teach; it coincides with other topics. For example, animal and human studies ties in with science and social studies.”

“On another level, they're so young and this is their first experience with internet-based communication. They're beginning to understand the power of sharing words online... hopefully, they won't make the mistakes of flippant remarks. They're learning that words are powerful, and that they shouldn't say things that are irreversible. I'm hoping that these really guided experiences will help them succeed throughout their lives.”

“I have 22 delightful and eager students this year,” Jennie said. “As in most years past, I launched the weekly pet of the week writing in October with my new batch of 2nd grade learners. I'll be teaching the humane education program that I developed for one hour per week this school year. This program focuses on empathy development, social-emotional skills and human-animal safety, awareness and advocacy. This language rich curricula helps lay a foundation for the weekly Pet of the Week writing that we do on behalf of the ‘difficult to place’ or ‘special needs’ dog or cat that our partners at PAWS select for us.”

“Several of my student alumni and their families attended the annual PAWSWalk with me this year and together we raised \$890 to help homeless dogs and cats! The student alumni who attended (now in 4th through 6th grades) currently serve as mentor PAWS writers to my second grade students and are already busy planning their annual PAWS Supply Drive. My students were so proud to wear their PAWSWalk t-shirts to school the following Monday!”

New for this year, Jennie and some of her alumni writers have established the “Spruce Environmental Protective Agency” to learn about and preserve the history of our school's property and to protect the wildlife with whom they share their playground.

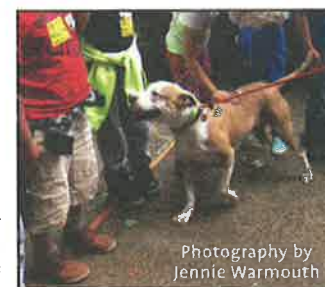
“We have created this website: warmouthj.wixsite.com/spruceelementary in response to our concerns about the displacement of wildlife as the construction of our new school began on our existing playground. We are an active committee and the students are doing an amazing job of communicating their thoughts, concerns and questions to the school district representatives who have graciously agreed to meet with us.”

Jennie was recently voted in as the newest member of the PAWS Board of Directors. “We're very excited about the future site of PAWS! My students and I will be studying the designs and plans for the new PAWS site in parallel with the construction of our own new school!” she said. “We will be applying our emerging STEM skills to envision the steps in planning, design and



of our school district's Speech and Language Pathologists. It's my goal as a scholar of Human-Animal Interaction and advocate of animal-assisted activities to provide my students the opportunity to observe the puppy's changes over time -- both physically and in his service related skill set. This will be a mutually beneficial experience as the (adorable) Golden Retriever puppy will also gain important socialization skills through his visits. The puppy, Kingsley, will visit under the care and supervision of his certified trainer.”

Guide Dogs for the Blind (guidedogs.com) founded in 1942, is North America's largest guide dog school.



Photography by Jennie Warmouth

“I'm also pleased to be the 2018 recipient of the Patsy Collins Award for teaching/community stewardship,” Jennie said. This award recognizes teachers who have elevated the environment and their community in their classrooms.

www.seattlefoundation.org/Blog/Articles/2018/05/2018-patsy-collins-award

In her humane education exploration work this year, Jennie's students have been looking at a book with life-sized photographs of six-week-old puppies and practicing how to safely and kindly pet a dog using a classroom stuffed toy.

Jennie's students will be contributing to Pet Connection Magazine with write-ups of adoptable animals as part of their humane education curriculum. Take a look to see which adoptables has been written by her students!

“Many of the children don't have pets at home, and this is their first experience with animals. I'm making sure that it's a powerful one.”