



**Guest Editor: Lynn Loar, Ph.D.**

## Shaping Behavior with Positive Reinforcement & Joy

Years ago, a seemingly benign invitation to participate in a panel discussion at a conference – something I routinely do – changed my outlook and professional direction. Last year another invitation to speak at another conference, this time extended by me to Karen Pryor, showed me a new way to work with families, both to facilitate growth and to reduce the risk of recurring abuse.

It is a pleasure and a privilege for me to introduce Karen Pryor and Morgan Spector to the readers of the *Latham Letter*. Both are parents, animal trainers, and teachers. Both use positive reinforcement exclusively to shape behaviors. Cruelty and coercion have no place in their training or in their families. We can join them in making learning enjoyable for people and animals and in making the world a more humane place for all living creatures by applying these principles to our daily lives.

Pryor's *Don't Shoot the Dog!* was first published in 1984, the year I began working with abusive families. I loved the clear, practical and witty writing, the illustrations of problematic behaviors in children,

spouses, pets and other animals, and the kindness Pryor brought to the task of reshaping behavior. I learned much that I could use with troubled families. I also learned that the families responded more readily to the stories about animals than to the anecdotes about people – that didn't seem so much like taking advice.

I worked for Child Protective Services in the mid-1980s. Several of my cases contained horrifying stories of animal abuse as well as child abuse. Case records narrated the incidents of animal abuse but failed to describe any intervention. When I checked with more experienced colleagues, they all said they had a few cases like that as well, were dismayed, but could do nothing about it.

Although we did not know it, our office was a mere six miles from the local humane society which had a staff of humane officers devoted to investigating animal cruelty and monitoring risky situations involving animals. Unlike us, they were well aware that cruelty to animals was a problem of dangerous human behavior, not something that should be set apart from investigations of child and elder abuse, or domestic violence.

In 1990, I was invited to join Randy Lockwood, a vice president with the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), and Ken White, then deputy director of the San Francisco Department of Animal Care and Control, in a panel discussion on child and animal abuse at HSUS' annual conference. Things clicked for me: the problem was human violence, not the number of legs of the victim. Notions of disposability ("it's only an animal"), or rationalization ("it was only a little swat on the bottom") might influence which vulnerable creature became the target, but the infliction of harm was the issue, not the category of the victim. Indeed, professional overspecialization by type of victim obscures the widespread problem of abusive human behavior and our society's high tolerance of violence.

Following the conference, Ken and I began to compare cases. We discovered the same behaviors and family dynamics whether the victim was a child or an animal. I had, by then, been working with abusive families for a number of years and had developed some understanding for and ability to tolerate them. Without approving of their behavior, I do understand why some people harm their children. Children demand enormous amounts of time and energy whether their parents feel up to it or not. Children talk back, defy, find fault, cry, whine and complain. They spill and break things, make noise and, when small, leak at both ends.

I contrasted the lives of the overburdened and depleted families I met at work with the cushy life I was enjoying giving my dog. I thought most people would treat their pets better than my clients treated their children. My clients had not really chosen to become parents and could not readily get out of it when the task became burdensome. People can choose to acquire a pet,

or not, and can find it another home if things do not work out as hoped. Moreover, housebreaking takes weeks or months rather than years, and the other demands pets make are comparatively few.

Ken, for his part, was operating under opposite but equally incorrect assumptions. He thought people treated animals worse than children because people thought of pets as property rather than as kindred living creatures. Surely people would not do to their own flesh and blood what they did to the animals they owned.

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When we put our two halves together, two things happened. First we got depressed. We discovered the world was a much worse place than we had imagined, potentially endangering any vulnerable creature. Second, we got energized to do something about the problem of violence as it affected all living beings. So we established the Humane Coalition Against Violence to provide training and advocacy on the link between cruelty to animals and human violence (see the *Latham Letter*, Summer, 1992).

Carol Rathmann, the shelter manager of the Humane Society of Sonoma County, attended one of my workshops in 1992 about the connection between child and animal abuse. She too became depressed and energized, leading her to create Forget Me Not Farms, an innovative therapeutic program which uses gardens, animals and empathic volunteers to teach gentleness and nurturance to children from violent homes and communities (see the *Latham Letter*, Spring, 1994, and Spring, 1996).

The number of programs using animals to reach abused children has grown exponentially in recent years as has the literature in the field. Debra Duel described 29 programs in HSUS' *Violence Prevention and Intervention: A Directory of Animal-Related Programs* (2000). In 1999, the Latham Foundation published *Teaching Compassion: A Guide for Humane Educators, Teachers, and Parents*, written by Pamela Raphael, Libby Colman and me, and sponsored *Child Abuse, Domestic Violence, and Animal Abuse: Linking the Circles of Compassion for Prevention and Intervention*, edited by Phil Arkow and Frank Ascione and published by Purdue University Press.

While enthusiastically helping humane societies and municipal animal control agencies design therapeutic programs for abused children, I was troubled by the feeling that, despite

their promise and success, the programs were not enough to resolve aggressive impulses and rebuild devastated relationships. The families were simply too damaged and had too few skills that they could marshal under stress. Would gentleness learned with plants and animals at Carol's bucolic farm really transfer in a crisis to prevent escalating tension at home from turning into child, animal, spousal or elder abuse?

Abuse prevention programs need to teach parents as well as children alternatives to violence. It does no good, and may increase risk, to give a child values and behaviors that only antagonize the parent. Intervention programs must offer the entire family, all of them likely bad learners and teachers, not only skills of care-giving, but also the ability to cope with frustration, incomprehension and lack of compliance. And, since it is human nature to resent and resist advice, the programs have to accomplish all this without directly telling people what to do.

Karen Pryor can elicit all sorts of positive behaviors from all sorts of creatures without using force or coercion, without yelling or criticizing, without even talking for that matter. She does this so playfully that both she and her students enjoy the learning and the collaboration. She simply and elegantly builds a diverse repertoire of positive behaviors and a relationship in which abuse has no place. In the past year, she and I have begun examining the use of her methods with abusive families. Her approach does give families tangible skills they can draw on when stressed to avoid abuse. By teaching me these principles

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she has replenished my energy and replaced my depression with optimism – another measure of her ability to create a world view in which negatives have no part. By reading her article and learning how to shape behavior with positive reinforcement and joy, you can join us on this exciting path to a more humane world.

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