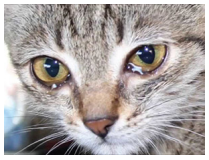
Written by By Christine M. Schwamberger
Friday, 15 May 2015 07:35



Since time immemorial, the Navajo have respected, honored and protected the four sacred elements of life: air; light/fire; water and earth/pollen. The Diné have a duty and sacred obligation to respect, preserve and protect all that was provided them; and they are designated as stewards for their animal relatives.

Bullying has been making regular headlines, been blamed for suicides, and is of great concern to schools today. Local schools have regulations prohibiting bullying and have signs designating “Bullying-Free Zones”. Another problem is the epidemic of abandoned and starving cats and dogs wandering the streets of Gallup, and surrounding communities. Dead dogs and cats “litter” our local streets, demoralizing residents and tourists alike. Recently, it was feared that abandoned, starving dogs had killed homeless people north of Gallup. But, you may ask, what do these things have in common? Aren’t these two completely different problems?

These problems are both symptoms of the need for more consideration and responsibility in our community. But like most things, consideration and responsibility must be taught. We need a special focus in our educational system to foster more consideration for the members of our community, including our fellow students, and our dogs and cats. After all, dogs and cats are also members of our community. And the type of consideration and responsibility that is needed is called “empathy.” Empathy is the act of putting yourself in someone else’s shoes, or paws, as the case may be, and feeling what the other is feeling.

Studies have found that empathy acts to prevent aggression and violence, especially for children and teenagers. Using the plight of animals as an example, empathy leads children and youth to feel more personal distress at the sight of abandoned, neglected or abused animals, and makes them want to help. The children’s care and concern for the animals can then be extended to other children, and to the natural environment. This holistic approach to the world closely parallels the Navajo cultural traditions of Beehaz’áanii and Ké, which teach enhanced duties to respect, preserve and protect all that was provided in the natural world, and to be stewards for animal relatives. Therefore, humane education can easily be adapted to meet Navajo traditional curricula in schools.

Humane education is a very efficient vehicle for accomplishing many things at once by focusing on the needs of animals in a fun way. Humane education not only teaches empathy, which prevents bullying, it also teaches Common Core requirements (English/Language Arts, Applied Mathematics and Science, etc.), and teaches Pillars of Character (Respect, Responsibility, Kindness and Citizenship). There are many free lesson plans on the internet, free teaching materials such as coloring books, activity sheets and newsletters can be ordered, and films are available for loan or purchase. There are lesson plans and activities for all grade levels, kindergarten to high school.

The work of the Southwest Humane Education and Pet Care Initiative (SHEPCI) is to introduce humane education to the Gallup area, and surrounding Native American communities, by contacting school administrators and teachers, administrators of other community organizations, creating a network of support, presenting workshops, and organizing humane education activities and events. Two groups will come to the Four Corners area to conduct workshops on humane education teaching techniques: the Association of Professional Humane Educators (APHE) and Animal Humane. SHEPCI is compiling a contact list of interested persons who will be notified when these workshops take place. To get on the workshop contact list, to help promote humane education at your school or organization, to get free humane education lesson plans and materials, and for more information contact: Christine Schwamberger at (503) 997-0991, or schwamberger@earthlink.net.

Christine M. Schwamberger is President of the Southwest Humane Education and Pet Care Initiative (SHEPCI), which is currently filing for 501(c)(3) nonprofit status.