



FOSTERING EMPATHY FOR ANIMALS USING RESEARCH-BASED BEST PRACTICES

Empathy is an important driver for positive social change and motivates people to take caring action towards animals and nature. Here at Woodland Park Zoo, we believe that fostering empathy for animals is a powerful tool for empowering our guests and the community to make conservation a priority in their lives.

In 2015, Point Defiance Zoo and Aquarium, Seattle Aquarium and Woodland Park Zoo embarked on a journey together to intentionally improve our capacity to foster empathy for animals and evaluate the outcomes of our efforts.

This document has been developed to complement the Seattle Aquarium literature review and to share how Woodland Park Zoo has begun to apply the empathy best practices in a variety of ways. It also includes some concrete examples that you can try incorporating into your organization.

FRAMING

The concept of framing refers to the way something is presented to others. Framing is important for all of the best practices because it can influence a person's perception and understanding of an animal, as well as lead a conversation towards a clear goal by bridging concepts that are familiar to the audience with the new information being shared. Narrative, language and action all have an impact on empathy development.

Practices you can try:

- Intentionally choose language that encourages people to see animals as individuals that have unique personalities, experiences and intentions.
- Highlight the interactions and relationships between animals, people and their environments.
- Be aware of your audience, and try to understand their perspective when conveying messages to have a larger impact.

Here at our zoo:

- We refer to our animals as individuals by talking about their personalities and using their names and pronouns. Instead of saying "These are our greater one-horned rhinos," we say "Here are Taj and Glenn, our greater one-horned rhinos. They are two-year-old boys, and Glenn loves getting his back rubbed by the keepers."
- We have a document of "Words that Matter" that we use to have a shared language when engaging with guests, developing interpretive content and signs, writing social media posts, etc. For example, "habitat" or "home" is used when describing an animal's living space, rather than "exhibit" which refers to the design of the whole space, including the area in front of the habitat where much of the interpretation is located. Using the words "habitat" or "home" highlights that the space belongs to a living, breathing animal instead of an object that is on display.
- One of our Ambassador Animals is a large red-tailed boa constrictor named Anahi. Her impressive size can sometimes elicit negative reactions initially, but when the keepers talk about how sweet she is to work with and show how calm they are while handling her, people often change how they react to her.

MODELING

Modeling positive, empathic behavior provides an example for others to learn how to build empathic skills. Valued role models play an important part in how their audiences develop empathic behavior. If the role models act, speak about or engage with animals in a certain way, they normalize empathetic behavior and encourage their audience to mirror that same behavior.

Practices you can try:

- Physically and verbally model the empathic behaviors you want people to achieve and reinforce positive behavior.
- Develop consistent and intentional messaging throughout your organization to demonstrate empathy practices through multiple avenues and create a consistent empathetic voice for your organization.
- If possible, provide long-term programs to build relationships between role models and their audiences.
- Support caregivers as role models by teaching them best practices so they can also model positive empathic behaviors with their children.

Here at our zoo:

- We model empathic behavior when we handle our Madagascar hissing cockroaches by calmly letting them walk from hand-to-hand as we talk about them. Also, while we do acknowledge some people may feel fear or disgust, we do not reinforce it and instead talk about the benefits of having decomposers like them in our environment.
- Our early childhood educators try to be aware of their nonverbal language (facial expressions, how they react to/interact with an animal, etc.) because they know their audience, especially children, will pick up on those cues and mirror that behavior.

INCREASING KNOWLEDGE

By increasing knowledge, people can more accurately perceive the emotions and intentions of others (people and animals). Knowledge becomes more impactful when people feel connected to an animal empathically. It leads to informed empathy which takes into account an individual animal's needs. This is important to prevent misconceptions and promote accurate understanding.

Practices you can try:

- Highlight the similarities and differences between the animals and people, including their needs, specific characteristics, behaviors or other comparisons.
- Narrate animal behaviors and connect them to (interpretations of) the individual animal's emotions and intentions. Share how and why an animal is or is not behaving a certain way.
- Facilitate conversations to understand your audience's perspective as well and find out what they already know. That way, the conversation is more tailored to your audience and they can better connect to the information you are sharing.

Here at our zoo:

- For outreach programs, our presenters often talk about an animal's needs and how they compare to our needs. We highlight what an animal needs to survive (basic needs) and what they need to thrive (secondary needs). When people are able to understand an individual animal's needs, they are more likely to develop empathy for that animal.
- Storytelling is a great tool to foster informed empathy in our guests. In many of our programs, we use a story arc to help guests connect our individual animals to the species as a whole. During our Sloth Bear Snack program, guests first learn about the bears in our care to foster an appreciation for the individuals. Presenters then layer on the conservation story of sloth bears, from past human exploitation to the present-day recovery of the species, and share actions that people can do to help.
- Empathic programming can run the risk of presenting the animals in our care in a way that guests might start to think of them as potential pets. In order to avoid that scenario, we highlight the specialized animal care that keepers provide and stress the importance of considering an animal's individual, distinct needs. We aim to present our animals as sentient beings and avoid the perception of them as just "cute" or "cuddly."

PROVIDING EXPERIENCES

Giving people the opportunity to interact with animals and the environment not only exposes people to new experiences, but they are also more likely to develop a deeper connection to the animals with whom they interact. The more time people spend with animals, especially animals that show agency and natural behaviors, the more opportunities to build connections. Experiences do not all have to be structured programs - they could include casual conversations, interpretive signage, online/virtual experiences or events.

Practices you can try:

- Prompt focused observation of an animal's physical characteristics and movements, and provide information for people to understand the animal more.
- Create habitats and offer experiences that show or highlight an animal demonstrating natural behaviors and showing a sense of agency. Making natural behaviors more visible to guests can help foster empathy for that animal.
- If possible, provide repeated and extended experiences for people to engage with animals and learn new things about them.

Here at our zoo:

- When we have programs with our Ambassador Animals, we strive to give our animals as much choice and agency as possible in touch opportunities. The keepers let the guest know that when Eduardo, our three-banded armadillo, puts his front feet on the wooden mark it means he is making a choice to participate and can be touched gently with two fingers on his back.
- We provide both on- and off-site programs that get people up-close to animals, like Creature Feature, giraffe and rhino encounters, Willawong Station and Mobile Zoo so audiences have more opportunities to engage with our animals in a variety of ways.
- Guests are able to see a training opportunity with the Tiger Gate program. During this program, our presenters work with the keepers to narrate and interpret the animals' behaviors, intentions and feelings. When Eko, our Malayan male tiger, raises his paw to reach the training target, we explain that he is practicing presenting his body parts, which makes it a cooperative effort for preventative care exams.

PRACTICE

Empathy development requires practice and it looks different for everyone. By providing more opportunities for people to practice empathic skills and giving positive feedback when it is observed, the more likely those skills will be repeated.

Practices you can try:

- Ask inquiry-based, open-ended questions to encourage people to have conversations about animals and take the animals' perspective.
- Provide opportunities for people to care for, feed, train, interact with or observe animals in ways that utilize empathic skills.
- Verbally acknowledge people when desired empathic statements, questions and behaviors are displayed.

Here at our zoo:

- There are some children and their caregivers that come to Zoomazium every day to watch Creature Feature, a program that involves a puppet story followed by an animal encounter. The children get to practice gently touching the featured animals, usually reptiles or insects, with one or two "science fingers" and learn how to interact with animals in a respectful way.
- Our camp instructors provide positive reinforcement to their campers by complimenting and thanking them for observing six-year-old Komodo dragon Berani quietly and not tapping on the glass.

ACTIVATING IMAGINATION

Activating the imagination helps people to better understand the perspective of others. This involves cognitive empathy because it requires active empathic reasoning. When people take the perspective of another animal, we increase our concern for the animal's well-being. There are many ways to activate imagination, and some of the most common perspective-taking practices are storytelling, role-playing and mimicry.

Practices you can try:

- While children are especially good at role-playing and mimicry, try using those same techniques on adults too. People of all ages understand animals more when they make connections between the physical movements of animals and the animals' emotions or thoughts.
- Encourage people to imagine themselves as an individual animal, and then ask open-ended questions about their personal needs, wants and likes or dislikes from the animal's perspective in a given context. These questions will help the participant focus on the perspective of the animal and build empathy, rather than sympathy which does not involve a shared perspective.
- Storytelling is a powerful tool for fostering empathy in guests. The stories do not have to be long with a beginning, middle and end. They can be a short arc that gives people a glimpse of an individual animal's life. People often remember stories because they experience empathic responses when identifying with the characters.

Here at our zoo:

- The keepers have close relationships with the animals they care for. Because of their intimate knowledge of the animals in their care, we encourage them to tell stories about the individual animals and what makes them unique. Before coming to the zoo, our red-tailed hawk Gunnar was hit by a moving car on the highway as he was hunting for food. He was blinded in his left eye. His injury prevented him from being released after recovery, but now he is a wonderful ambassador for how we should make sure our trash goes where it belongs so birds like Gunnar do not get injured when their prey runs onto the highway to eat food thrown out of windows.
- If it is safe or appropriate, we use role-play and mimicry to help people take an animal's perspective. When we talk about Penelope, a Virginia opossum, growing up and traveling up her mother's belly to get inside her pouch for milk, we have people imagine and mimic crawling through tall grass and using only their noses smell out their food.
- We also use storytelling in social media and press releases when we talk about our animals, like when Hasani, our young giraffe, had to receive custom-made therapeutic shoes or when we celebrated our grizzly bears Keema and Denali's birthdays. Even our conservation projects have stories about the perspectives of people and animals.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

All of these best practices are interrelated and multiple practices are often used at the same time. Empathy practices do not always look the same for every situation or organization and should be tailored to each given context and audience. At Woodland Park Zoo, we have created a framework for training our staff and volunteers to use empathy practices. Our practices bridge the foundation of empathy and the goal of fostering empathic behavior change with strategies for encouraging empathy in our guests. The [empathy bridge framework](#) is one representation of the research-based best practices outlined above.