Establishing consensus on the best ways to educate children about animal welfare and prevent harm: An online Delphi study

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Abstract

Many animal welfare organisations deliver education programmes for children and young people, or design materials for schoolteachers to use. However, few of these are scientifically evaluated, making it difficult for those working in this field to establish with any certainty the degree of success of their own programmes, or learn from others. There has been no guidance specifically tailored to the development and evaluation of animal welfare education interventions. Accordingly, a three-stage online Delphi study was designed to unearth the expertise of professionals working in this field and identify degree of consensus on various aspects of the intervention process: design, implementation and evaluation. Thirty-one experts participated in Round 1, representing eleven of 13 organisations in the Scottish Animal Welfare Education Forum (SAWEF), and eleven of 23 members of the wider UK-based Animal Welfare Education Alliance (AWEA). Seven further professionals participated, including four based in Canada or the US. Eighty-four percent of the original sample participated in Round 2, where a high level of consensus was apparent. However, the study also revealed areas of ambiguity (determining priorities, the need for intervention structure and degree of success). Tensions were also evident with respect to terminology (especially around cruelty and cruelty prevention), and the common goal for animal welfare to be part of school curricula. Findings were used to develop a web-based framework and toolkit to enable practitioners to follow evidence-based guidance. This should enable organisations to maximise the quality and effectiveness of their interventions for children and young people.

Keywords: animal welfare, animal welfare education, children, cruelty prevention, Delphi, young people

Introduction

To promote the welfare of animals among children and young people, many organisations offer educational interventions. The aim of this study was to bring together the views of experienced professionals working in this field and identify consensus on both priorities for practice and key components of effective interventions. It also sought to illuminate any potential incongruence in expert opinion and identify key challenges facing practitioners in this field. Ensuring animal welfare education interventions are successful in producing intended outcomes and are both financially viable and sustainable are key concerns for animal welfare organisations given increased concerns about the treatment of animals in society and difficulties sourcing funding.

Animal welfare education (AWE)

There is a great deal of work being undertaken to help children and young people learn more about animals, with the goal of reducing (and ultimately eradicating) the incidence of animals being harmed. In the UK, this usually takes place under the banner of ‘animal welfare education’ or ‘cruelty prevention’ and is often designed and delivered by animal welfare organisations. The focus is usually on preventing accidental/unintentional harm rather than deliberate cruelty, as the majority of cases seen by charities are due to neglect or mistreatment because owners do not know how (or are struggling) to care for their animals appropriately (Vermeulen & Odendaal 1993; Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals [SSPCA] 2020). Some organisations, like the SSPCA (in Scotland) and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) in England/Wales, work inclusively and take a universal approach to their educational interventions. However, there are other organisations and specific interventions that target particular groups of young people, either because they are identified as being more likely to cause harm to animals (eg links with criminality or domestic abuse/neglect), and/or because they might benefit psychologically and behaviourally from understanding more about animal welfare. Examples include the SSPCA’s ‘Animal Guardians’ programme and the RSPCA’s ‘Breaking the Chain.’

While AWE interventions are highly varied and sometimes include direct interaction with animals (eg Nicoll et al 2008), this is becoming less common due to concerns about child