Promoting authentic connection:

How fostering a relationship with nature can support the mental health of our youth

Julia Senecal, MSW
Kristen Greenwald, LCSW

"On average, children aged ~~~ now spend only 22 minutes a day on vigorou~ ~~~ activity compared with 5 waking hour~ ~~ ~~~atively motionless."

FALSE

"On average, children aged 10 to 16 now spend only 12.6 minutes a day on vigorous outdoor activity compared with 10.2 waking hours being relatively motionless."

Who we are

Institute for Human · Animal Connection

UNIVERSITY of DENVER
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

MIND SPRINGS health
Prevention. Care. Recovery.

One Health

One Health is a collaborative, multisectoral, and transdisciplinary approach—working at the local, regional, national, and global levels—with the goal of achieving <u>optimal health outcomes</u> recognizing the interconnection between people, animals, plants, and their shared environment.
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018

Humane Education

Humane education encourages cognitive, affective, and behavioral growth through personal development of critical thinking, problem solving, perspective taking, and empathy as it relates to people, animals, the planet, and the intersections among them; it allows learners to process personal values and choose prosocial behaviors aligned with those values.
Academy of Prosocial Learning, 2018

One Health

One Health is a collaborative, multisectoral, and transdisciplinary approach—working at the local, regional, national, and global levels—with the goal of achieving <u>*optimal health outcomes*</u> *recognizing the* ==*interconnection between people, animals, plants, and their shared environment*==.
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018

Humane Education

Humane education encourages cognitive, affective, and behavioral growth through personal development of critical thinking, problem solving, perspective taking, and empathy as it relates to ==*people, animals, the planet, and the intersections among them*==*; it allows learners to process personal values and choose prosocial behaviors aligned with those values*
Academy of Prosocial Learning, 2018

The State of Humane Education 2018-2019

Research Questions

- Is HE being taught in schools?

- If so, HOW is HE being implemented?

- If not, what barriers are educators experiencing that are preventing them from implementing HE?

Demographics

- **829** total respondents

- Roles of participants:
  - **58%** teachers
  - **24%** administrators
  - **4%** mental health professionals

- **52%** have worked in education for more than **15 years**

- School setting:
  - **85%** public schools
  - Fairly even distribution across **urban (35%), suburban (36%)**, **rural (27%)** settings

In your experience, have any of the following societal issues impacted your students, school, or community?

	Bullying	Interpersonal Violence	Environmental Concerns	Maltreatment of Animals	Social Justice/ Human Welfare
Number	695	428	327	277	261
% of Total	84%	52%	39%	33%	31%

In your experience, have any of the following societal issues impacted your students, school, or community? **Other (please describe)**

- Food insecurity
- Homelessness
- Substance use
- Trauma
- Lack of access to public resources (parks, libraries, etc.)
- High poverty rates
- Date rape
- Mistreatment of animals
- Lack of parental support
- Gang violence
- Abuse (emotional/physical, and neglect)
- Fear of deportation/immigration issues
- Cultural biases (racism, ableism, sexism, etc.)
- Suicide
- Sexual misconduct
- Lack of parental support
- Social media

- Social media
- Opioid crisis
- Systems of oppression
- Gentrification
- Gun violence
- Lack of empathy
- Isolation
- Cyber bullying
- Gender-based violence
- Anxiety
- Body shaming

"Our students don't get out into nature enough. I started a garden, and some of my students were afraid of dirt, grass and butterflies. They are very alienated from the natural world. It's very sad."

Psychology of Social and Environmental Issues

Increased interpersonal violence, abuse, racial injustice, school shootings & destruction of our natural world: Depression (collapse), anxiety (fear & activation), disconnection/dissociation (overwhelm, avoiding, numbing), loss of empathy, apathy, replicating the behavior (attempts to regain control or normalize), hyperarousal symptoms, difficulty concentrating

Climate Change: Solastalgia, ecoanxiety, depression, PTSD, apathy, overwhelm, distrust, anger, powerlessness, fatalism, substance use, aggression

Disintegration of the family and community: Isolation, loneliness, loss of belonging, loss of identity, attempts to build community in maladaptive ways, loss of caring adults and peers

Fear of deportation/Immigration issues: Loss of belonging (family, community and sense of place), isolation, anxiety, depression, distrust, fatalism, numbing

All Behaviors Have a Purpose

Vaping ------------------------> Numb difficult emotions and memories, demonstrate disdain for the "system", stress relief, disconnect from reality, increase sense of belonging

Technology Overuse-----------> Avoidance of a painful current reality, increase connection and belonging, stress relief, reduce boredom, avoid feeling lack of connection in household and neighborhood, avoid interactions which trigger social anxiety

Bullying------------------------> Increase sense of physical and emotional safety, build self-esteem, adopt an identity, increase sense of belonging, feelings of power, release feelings of anger, frustration, and sadness, attempt to normalize violence witnessed/experienced elsewhere

Interpersonal Violence-------->Increase sense of personal safety, maladaptive way to meet emotional needs

Suicide Attempt---------------> "Make this pain to go away immediately and for good", instilling hope where there is no longer hope, obtaining necessary attention for mental health support

Positive Youth Development- The 5 c's

1. Connection
2. Caring/Compassion
3. Competence
4. Confidence
5. Character

   And later-

1. Contribution!

How is humane education an intervention?

➢ Humane education interventions fostering a connection to nature can:
  ○ Build Connection/Sense of Belonging & Ecological Identity
  ○ Build Caring/Compassion/Empathy
  ○ Build Competence/ Sense of Mastery
  ○ Build Confidence/Self-Efficacy
  ○ Build Character/Identity as an Ecological Citizen & Solutionary

Examples of humane education interventions	Intended outcomes
Students think about the wild animals who live in their own neighborhoods and consider some of the dangers that those animals experience every day. They will brainstorm ways to create safer habitats for urban wildlife, and partner with local wildlife officials to implement their ideas.	- Students **build empathy** while they learn about daily challenges for wildlife. - Students **problem solve** ways to address these challenges and build competence while working with professionals to implement ideas. - Students **build connection** with their wildlife community members!
Students role-play what to do in common situations involving nervous or protective dogs.	- Students **build competence** and **develop confidence** in their ability to interact with stray or pet dogs in their community parks. - Students **build empathy** for animals, other humans, and themselves.
Students learn the science behind nesting birds and use craft supplies to construct their own bird nests.	- Students **build empathy** for wildlife as they understand the time and energy that goes into building their homes. - Students **build connection** with wildlife as they consider how other species also prioritize building a safe home for their families.
Students research not only the negative health implications of vaping, but also the environmental impacts (single use plastic, impact of heavy metals on the water supply and animals, etc.)	- Students **build their identity as an ecological citizen/solutionary** as they gain understanding around the bigger impacts of vaping. - Students **gain confidence** in their ability to speak to their peers about the dangers of vaping.

Think-Pair-Share

1. What related humane education interventions are you already implementing?

1. What interventions could you develop or incorporate today? How can you engage youth in this?

1. What do you think about humane education's role in PHPR?

Contact info

Kristen Greenwald, LCSW
KGreenwaldLCSW@gmail.com
603-455-8287

Julia Senecal, MSW
Humane Education Programs Manager
The Institute for Human-Animal Connection
Julia.Senecal@du.edu
303-358-8494

References

- Bexell, S. M., Lantzy, M., Buckman, A., Senecal, J., & Lee, H. (February 2019). *State of Humane Education in the U.S.:2018-2019.* Presentation at the Humane Summit. Online International Conference.
- One Health. (2020, February 11). Retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/onehealth/index.html
- Lerner, R., Lerner, J., Bowers, G. Geldhof, G.J. (2015). 16 positive youth development and relational-developmental systems. *Theory and Method,* 1.
- RAINN (2020, February 20). Children and Teens: Statistics. Retrieved from: https://www.rainn.org/statistics/children-and-teens
- Van Susteren, L. (2017). Overview of the mental health and psychosocial impacts of climate change. American Public Health Association Conference: 2017