

Healing Species Overview

Mission: The Healing Species is an 11-week violence intervention/character education outreach. Through the assistance of rescued dogs, we teach children a process from which to understand and overcome abuse, neglect, and grief while teaching life skills in self-esteem, conflict resolution, anger management, and respect for the feelings of others. The children learn to gain success through acts of compassion and responsibility instead of returning “violence for violence.”

“In the legal arena, violent crimes are referred to as “depraved heart” crimes. Let us, therefore, address and repair the heart. Let us start with the children.”

Cheri Brown Thompson, founder and director of the Healing Species

The History: Through several years of legal research and personally conducting interviews with convicted violent offenders, Cheri Brown Thompson, founder and director of the Healing Species, discovered that not only did all of the violent offenders that she personally interviewed, but also all of those that she encountered through extensive literature reviews have two things in common: 1) they were abused as children and 2) they first acted out that abuse on the only victim more vulnerable than they, an animal. This realization led to the founding principles of the Healing Species, a program dedicated to ending the cycle of returning “violence for violence”. Thompson gave up practicing law, and now serves with no pay as the executive director of the Healing Species. Today, there is a waiting list of schools to be served, and Healing Species staff serves over 4,500 school children with the 11-week program each year.

The Unique Twist:

- Those who really bring the Healing Species lessons to life are the rescued dogs who act as “helpers and teachers” in every lesson.
- Each class begins with the dog’s story of abuse and neglect, a situation to which the children can often relate.
- Through the dog’s story, the children find a happy ending, hope, and courage for their own stories.
- The dog is a living example of overcoming one’s past, and returning nonviolent responses.
- Lastly, the dogs provide an incredibly strong “visual aid” to the Healing Species lessons, thus making it possible for even struggling students to remember lessons almost verbatim.
- What better way to reach “shut-down” children than through the wagging tail and unconditional love of dogs nobody else wanted? The children learn first hand that even the most vulnerable and most wounded among us is important and does have something important to give.

Critical Foundations of the Program:

- Crime is a learned behavior. It can be unlearned. Even children who have *never been* nurtured can *learn* “how to” nurture others and themselves, thus intercepting the cycle of violence, abuse, neglect, and crime.
 - Healing Species does not only address the problems of violence, truancy, and poor performance in school. Instead, Healing Species addresses the roots of these problems by dealing with issues of poverty, returning violence for violence, and gang related activities. The Healing Species curriculum opens the eyes of children and teens by teaching and empowering them that they do not have to “give-up” or “drop-out”. There are other choices.
 - The lessons provide an epiphany for the children that they do not have to accept abuse; they do not have to join gangs; they do not have to sell drugs; and they do not have to fight their way through life.
- Poverty begets crime. “Drop-out” and truancy begets crime and poverty. *Many* children go home to poverty, domestic violence, bullying, despair, violent crime within the home, and violent neighborhoods. Statistics reveal this, but the children we serve also tell us about these environments.
- Healing Species Character Education can literally lift these children from this world:
 - by empowering children with age-appropriate awareness about abuse and providing tools for getting help if in abuse;
 - by making certain the children learn appropriate ways to deal with bullies;
 - by providing avenues of resolving conflict without fighting; and
 - by providing “hands on” *experience with lessons in respect for the feelings of others, and gaining power, leadership, and esteem from practices in mercy instead of from bullying.*
- Once children gain empowerment in taking care themselves, the Healing Species opens their young eyes to ways of “making their heart strong” by teaching them how to practice responsibility, compassion, and empathy by reaching out to those around them.
- **The children learn first hand that – just like the visiting dogs nobody else wanted- that they *are* important and *do* have something to give.**
- As a result of ending the cycle of returning violence for violence, other results automatically emerge. School teachers and guidance counselors of Healing Species students report an 80-100% improvement in students’ ability and desire to come to class, concentrate in class, prepare for classroom activities, manage classroom time, and appropriately interact with classmates. With these newly learned skills, students invest better use of time in school related activities such as standardized testing and overall performance in academic ventures.

Standardized Test Score Improvement Among Healing Species Students:

- The Healing Species Program was first started in South Carolina in 1999 and began serving schools in the Puget Sound area in the school year 2006/07. In South Carolina

Healing Species teaches in every fourth grade classroom in a South Carolina district. This relationship has been ongoing for the past two years.

- The results in this district are astounding.
- Standardized test performance of these students before Healing Species implementation and after Healing Species implementation was tracked. In all of the fourth grades in these schools, the percentage of students meeting overall standards increased significantly from the year before Healing Species implementation to the year of Healing Species implementation.
- These results emerged as a partial result of the students learning to: concentrate in class, not react to bullying, and gain self-esteem through success in character and respectable venues such as academics, as opposed to joining gangs or acting out in violence.

Research Based Results:

Healing Species is not only an innovative and cutting edge method of addressing violence prevention and truancy prevention, but Healing Species also has proven results by outside, professional, researchers regarding the highly-structured curriculum.

- The Healing Species has been evaluated with three separate measures:
 1. ***Testimonial data collected by the school teachers of the students served by Healing Species:*** Findings indicate between 80-90% of students of Healing Species program decrease violence, increase awareness of surroundings- including those around them in need- increase actions based on empathy, and improve academic performance.
 2. ***Formal, district wide “in-house” evaluation by Lexington School District One:*** The district based their evaluation on a complex pre- and post-test of each student and on teacher written-reports of observable behavior changes in students after the 11-week Healing Species program. The evaluation, headed by Dr. Donna Shealy, Head of Guidance for Lexington One, showed a 90% improvement in ability to walk away from fights, concentrate in class, react appropriately to a bully, and show dramatic decrease- as much as 45%- in discipline referrals. Additionally, the overall standardized test (PACT) performance increased significantly, and the percentage of students below basics decreased after Healing Species implementation.
 3. ***Formal Outside Evaluation by the University of South Carolina School of Social Work:*** Data was collected from schools in several districts in South Carolina public schools. The participants were representative of low, middle, and high socioeconomic status (SES) levels. Overall USC Social Work evaluation results state that “the program positively and significantly alters students’ beliefs about aggression, levels of empathy, and violent and aggressive behaviors.”

Statistical results across all SES levels:

- Out-of-school suspensions for violent behavior decreased by more than 50%
- Aggression decreased significantly
- Choice-making based on empathy for others increased significantly
- Classroom behavior significantly improved

Results using the Normative Beliefs About Aggression Scale (NOBAGS):

- Retaliation aggression, general aggression, and total aggression combined decreased by 62%

Results using the Index of Empathy for Children and Adolescents (IECA):

- Choice making using empathy increased by 42%

Results using the Aggressive Behavior Teacher Checklist (ABTC):

- Teachers rated displays of violence by students decreased by 66.9%

Results by Review of out-of-school suspensions for physical fights:

- Suspensions decreased by over 55%

The overall finding indicates that the Healing Species violence intervention character education program is highly successful. **Lives have been changed!** Children have learned how to break out of the cycle of violence and thus improve their chances of overcoming poverty and the cycle of crime.

Healing Species

It is so amazing to us at **LIFE+DOG** to see the many ways in which dogs are helping teach our society. Each day it seems there is another study or story about an inspirational dog doing something amazing for the common good of people. Many times these dogs have been subjected to the worst in people, yet they seem to instinctually rise above their pain to help make the world a better place for all, especially children. In a time when bullying and violence among our nation's youth dominate the headlines, there is one group, **Healing Species**, that is doing all they can to teach adolescents the importance of kindness and acceptance...with the help of some very special rescued dogs.

"The opportunity to love a dog and to treat it with kindness is an opportunity for a lost and selfish heart to be redeemed. They are powerless and innocent, and it is how we treat the humblest among us that surely determines the fate of our souls." — Dean Koontz

About the Group:

Healing Species was founded by Cheri Brown Thompson in 2000 after receiving her law degree from University of South Carolina School of Law. During her time in law school, Cheri spent years researching and interviewing convicted violent offenders where she learned of the link between violence toward animals and violent crime in society. She found that most of these violent offenders have two things in common: they were abused or neglected as children; and they acted out that abuse on the only victim more vulnerable than them, an animal. Knowing that she had found her true calling, Thompson gave up practicing law to focus on building a program that was dedicated to ending the cycle of returning "violence for violence." With all of the cases she studied she found that compassion, both a lack of receiving it and understanding what it is, was a key missing component in these subjects' lives.

Around this same time, Thompson met a dog in need that helped to further inspire her vision of changing the cycle of violence, a neglected and homeless pup she called Gravey. Gravey was covered in mange, under-nourished, and extremely fearful of people. She was so afraid of people that it took Cheri a full month to win her trust, inching closer and closer each time Cheri came to deliver food and water. Cheri's compassion and persistence to helping Gravey earned her the trust of the cautious canine and Cheri was able to take Gravey home for medical treatment and, most of all, a happy loving home. Reflecting on the experience, Thompson realized that people could see Gravey with their eyes, but not with their hearts. They saw an animal in need, but didn't have the compassion and heart to help. She knew she could do something to change that. "We can teach compassion. What better way than through a rescued dog that returns love even in the face of hate," she said. Armed with her research and helpful pup Gravey, Thompson developed the Healing Species curriculum, aimed chiefly at middle-schoolers, that she, her trained staff, and their rescued dogs now present to more than 3,000 students and incarcerated juveniles annually. Since the program began in 2000, the organization has grown in popularity and size, with "Satellite" programs in Wisconsin, Texas, and New Zealand.

Healing Species is the first animal assisted violence intervention program in the nation that is addressing the root of behavior and violence issues. The students who participate in the program are given tools to overcome grief, anger, and abuse, and learn to respect the feeling of all beings through acts of compassion and responsibility. "We build a bridge between students and their hearts with the help of rescued animals," says Joy Southard, executive director, Healing Species of Texas. "The participation of the rescued dogs helps us reach all children, including high-risk youth. The dogs help children open up to the message that even the most wounded among us has something important to give and deserves to be safe. Many of the children we teach have come from situations similar to these dogs—abuse and neglect—and they do not have the skills to overcome their situations." She adds, "We strive to reach these children who need to know they are important and needed."

Healing Species' Founding Principles:

- Crime is a learned or reactive behavior. It can be unlearned. Even children who have never been nurtured can learn "how to" nurture others and themselves, thus intercepting the cycle of violence, abuse, neglect, and crime.
- The lessons provide an epiphany for children that they do not have to accept abuse; they do not have to join gangs; they do not have to sell drugs; and they do not have to fight their way through life.
- The children learn firsthand that—just like the visiting dogs nobody else wanted—they are important, have something to give, and deserve to be safe.

About the DOGs:

The stars of Healing Species are the dogs. These dogs that have experienced abuse from humans and learned to overcome their fears to trust again are living examples to the participants that what happens to you in life does not define you. All beings have value and worth. "We are teaching the next generation, the ones who will be our leaders and caregivers of this world, to change the way they treat each other and our animals; to be advocates for the voiceless, to make decisions based on empathy, to not continue the cycle of violence," says Southard. "This empowers the students to find hope and courage for their own lives."



The Healing Species dogs are most often part of the instructor's adopted family, but also may come from animal assistance programs, shelter outreach programs, and friends of Healing Species. Each dog must have a rescue history, pass a temperament test to show their willingness to be exposed to this extremely social atmosphere, and have access to ongoing health maintenance and quality care, ensuring they are truly cared for.

For these dogs participation in the program is a stark contrast to their former life and they are showered with affection and love the minute they arrive at a school. "They are like rock stars. More importantly, they are seen by hundreds of children as an example of courage, perseverance, loyalty, trust, and love," says Joy. "We bring dogs who are now the ambassadors for shelter and stray dogs everywhere, overcoming their past situation to help give back to our community. Our hope is that through hearing each dog's story this next generation will not repeat what has happened to these animals, while drawing powerful life lessons to assist them throughout their journey to adulthood."

One dog who has made a tremendous impact on everyone he meets is Lt. Dan, a mastiff mix puppy who was the victim of a puppy mill breeder. During his birth, which must have been breech, he was pulled by his back legs out of the mother, causing irreparable damage to his hips. He was then put up for sale on Craigslist as a mastiff with "weak legs," but in reality he was paralyzed. Luckily, he was rescued by a Houston-area veterinarian who provided him with a wheelchair and new lease on life. He joined Healing Species' Texas satellite program and assisted instructors with classes at a juvenile detention facility. "We had just finished teaching a component of one of the lessons on empathy and how that leads to responsibility, and Lt. Dan was brought in for the follow-up lesson," Southard remembers. "The kids told us about their own experience with dog fighting and things they had done to harm animals. After hearing some of the disturbing things they had done to animals, Lt. Dan was brought in and the reaction to this beautiful dog who cannot use his legs because of what someone did to him was extremely powerful. These very tough boys were in awe of Lt. Dan. He certainly inspired anger against the people who harmed him, but he also was able to convey something universal in that room. Each boy felt a degree of reverence toward Lt. Dan. They respected him; they didn't feel sorry for him. They were able to see his courage. For us, it was another gift from an unlikely leader, this disabled pup, Lt. Dan."

Healing Species has so many dogs that have life experiences that are profoundly meaningful, like Lt. Dan. The children not only learn valuable lessons through their stories and their examples, they form a

unique bond with the dogs. So much so that they have often been asked to highlight these dogs on their website so that the children could follow their stories and also retell them. These requests led Southard to create a new component to the curriculum in Texas, the assembly presentation **Dogs of Character**. Gathering in school assemblies the students are introduced to three to five dogs who represent situations that many children face today. "We compare the feelings of a new dog at the dog park to that of a new kid on the playground. We will bring a dog that has the physical signs of abuse, perhaps he has lost his leg due to cruelty, for our older kids to address bullying," says Southard. We bring dogs that have amazing loyalty to each other yet are characteristically so very different, to teach diversity and tolerance, and are even working on a new project with young girls who have been victims of human trafficking. Dogs provide a safe and special way to identify troubling issues, like bullying, instead of giving heavy-handed lectures to students. So much of Dogs of Character's work is with kids who are struggling to rise above their situations and these dogs become a vehicle for teaching empathy both to and for these children. The program has been extremely successful in schools across Texas and they are currently developing a franchise program to make it available for other states to use in their schools.

"Peace on earth starts with how we treat the weakest or most voiceless among us." – Cheri Brown Thompson

The Results:

Beyond reaching thousands of at-risk children with their message each year, Healing Species and their entire curriculum are providing positive, quantitative results that include a reduction in in-school and out of school suspensions, reduced classroom behavior problems, and a rise in academic test scores. "The long-term effect on civility is indisputable," says Cheri Brown Thompson. "Independent research found suspensions decreased 55%, acts of aggression decreased 62%, and acts of empathy increased 42% in classrooms where the 13-week, 1-hour-a-week curriculum had been presented. Moreover, school officials report less bullying and violence and academic scores have gone up." They have also received the support and endorsement of many government entities and school districts throughout the nation, proving the value of the program and the power of these dogs to educate everyone they come in contact with. "In Texas, we have the support and recognition of the Texas Juvenile Probation Commission and Judge Mike Schneider here in Harris County, and that is huge," says Southard. The group has also been recognized by the South Carolina Department of Education as "Best of the Best" in both intervention programming and the arena of character education. In 2010, the South Carolina Department of Education also approved the Healing Species program as a "Propitious New Model Program" for at-risk students, meaning it is an effective and favored program to help struggling students and schools, and allowing the usage of Federal dollars to implement the program.

"All of this is wonderful, but personally, it is the letters from the children telling us they no longer bully the kid who is different from them that is most rewarding," says Southard. "When we teach the Diversity and Tolerance lesson we are acutely aware of this issue having a profound effect and we pull no punches when addressing cruelty to animals and cruelty to people. The recent suicides of children taunted for

being gay is discussed with the goal of asking students to base all their actions on empathy that leads to responsibility. 'Could you have saved him?' and the response from a class that says 'yes, I could have and will' is undeniably a testament to our work."

How Are Animal Abuse and Family Violence Linked?

Animal abuse and family violence are usually perceived and treated as separate issues, handled independently by animal care & control or human services agencies that until recently have had little incentive to work together. Professionals in all these fields are not surprised when they learn that often they are dealing with the same families, the same perpetrators, and the same overarching problems. Where animal abuse used to be trivialized by people saying, "It's only a dog!" or "Boys will be boys!", leaders now recognize that cruelty, abuse or neglect in any form should be taken seriously. Animal maltreatment is often "the tip of the iceberg" and the first warning sign of an individual or family in trouble. Knowing that these forms of family violence are linked, it is important that the agencies involved understand their role in communicating, collaborating, and reporting with each other.



Violence towards humans or animals can take the form of physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect. While most animal cruelty investigations involve unintentional neglect, many uncover intentional neglect and abuse. All cases have the potential to be connected to other forms of violence or dysfunction in the home, and animal control officers and humane law investigators are often "first responders" and the first point of contact for a family in need of assistance.

How are animal abuse and other family violence linked?

In domestic violence, child abuse and elder abuse cases, actual or threatened animal abuse can be a way for the abuser to silence victims about the incident or to prevent them from leaving a violent relationship. Abusers kill, hurt or threaten animals to exert power over the human victims and to show them what could happen to them. Killing a family pet can eliminate a source of comfort and support for the human victim. Sometimes the victims themselves abuse animals, either to protect the animal from worse harm or to displace their hostility towards their abuser.

Hoarding of excess numbers of animals, especially by elders, has been linked to a wide range of mental illnesses, illegal criminal activities, and public health and safety problems demanding the concerted, coordinated efforts of multiple municipal agencies.

Dog fighting is an insidious problem that has been linked to guns, gangs, drugs, and gambling. Children are often exposed to this toxic environment, further desensitizing them to violence and drawing them away from the healing powers of empathy.

Many elders try to provide loving care for their pets, but lack the financial resources, transportation, or physical capability to do so. As a result, either many companion animals suffer, or the animals are well-maintained but the person neglects her or his own well-being.

The emotional impact upon impressionable children who witness or perpetrate acts of animal cruelty can be lifelong and devastating.

What Does The Link Look Like?



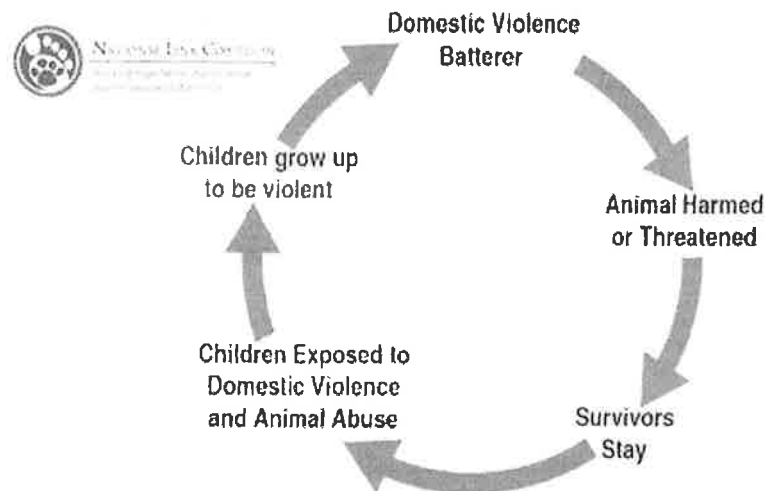
Animal abuse is **“the tip of the iceberg”**: the way animals are regarded in a family is a window into interpersonal relationships and family dynamics. Investigators who find

animal cruelty, abuse or neglect are rarely surprised to see other issues lurking beneath the surface.

Animal abuse is part of an **inter-generational cycle of violence.**

Children living in homes with domestic violence and animal abuse absorb unhealthy attitudes and family norms...

and hand these values down to their own children when they grow up.



The "Power and Control Wheel" of Animal Abuse and Domestic Violence



Isolation: Refusing to allow her to take her pet to her vet. Prohibiting her from socializing her dog with other dogs.

Threats: To harm or kill her pet if she leaves or asserts any independence.

Legal Abuse: Custody battles over pets. Filing theft charges if she leaves with the pet.

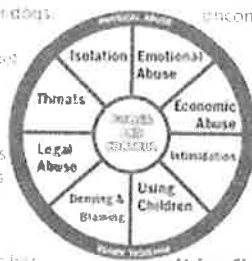
Denying & Blaming: Blaming her on the pet for his cruelty. Killing the pet and saying it didn't matter because the pet was old.

Emotional abuse: Disappearing, giving away or killing pets to take away her source of unconditional love. Forced participation in animal sexual abuse.

Economic Abuse: Refusing to allow her to spend money on pet food or vet care.

Intimidation: Harming or killing pets. "Next time it'll be you..." Targeting pets of family/friends who aid her escape.

Using Children: Harming/killing children's pets to intimidate them. Blaming the "disappearance" of the family pet on her to create a wedge between her and the children.



Animal abuse is a form of **power and control** used to manipulate, intimidate, and retaliate against others in domestic violence. It is one part of the Duluth Model of Power and Control used

widely in the domestic violence field.

When animals are abused, people are at risk; when people are abused, animals are at risk. Increasing awareness of the link is encouraging legislators, community agencies, and caring people to take action by giving greater importance to suspected animal abuse, knowing that they may be also preventing other forms of violence.