

AUSTRALIAN ANIMAL WELFARE STRATEGY



Media Release

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Encouraging kids that it's 'cool to be kind to animals'

Reducing the incidents of animal abuse and cruelty is the aim of a new project that encourages school children to understand the needs and behaviours of pets and wild animals so they can show them empathy, respect and the appropriate care.

The project, *'cool to be kind to animals'*, will also focus on creating a more compassionate and respectful group of pet purchasers and owners.

Funded by the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy (AAWS) with in-kind support from a number of partners, the project will use social media to raise awareness in the community and develop a two-way dialogue with children on the importance of knowing how to treat animals properly.

The AAWS was developed by the Australian Government to raise the standards for animal care and welfare. The Strategy unites animal industries, welfare groups, community organisations and State and Territory governments to work together on one agreed program on behalf of the broader community.

The Strategy is overseen by a skills-based Advisory Committee charged with driving the implementation of the AAWS. The 15-person committee includes stakeholder representatives and experts in various fields of animal welfare and is chaired by Dr Gardner Murray.

The *'cool to be kind to animals'* project has established Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and WordPress accounts to provide information on key areas of interest with contributors regularly updating content with the aim of educating children.

Liz Walker, CEO of Melbourne's Lort Smith Animal Hospital, has more than 20 years' experience in the veterinary industry and is the project manager.

She says the project came about following research undertaken by a sub-committee of the AAWS companion animal working group which found there was a specific need to encourage young Australians to behave empathetically and respectfully towards sentient creatures.

“Our project, ‘cool to be kind to animals’ focuses on young people aged around 9-14 and educating them on having empathy for animals, the importance of animals as sentient beings, and also forming non-aggressive relationships with animals, built on kindness.

“Encouraging young people to develop a level of empathy for animals, and to understand they have feelings, we believe will go some way to preventing incidents of animal abuse in the future,” Ms Walker said.

The project acknowledges that compassion and empathy are fundamental for responsible pet ownership and that pet owners have a duty of care to provide the Five Freedoms for Animals.

The Five Freedoms for Animals

1. Freedom from Hunger and Thirst
2. Freedom from Discomfort
3. Freedom from Pain, Injury or Disease
4. Freedom to Express Normal Behaviour
5. Freedom from Fear and Distress

Responsible pet ownership means caring for your animals, and that includes the provision of appropriate food and adequate water to ensure that animals are free from hunger and thirst. Owners and/or carers also need to ensure their pets are free from discomfort, free from pain/injury and are healthy, free to express normal behaviour through contact with animals of their own kind and free from fear and distress.

According to Ms Walker, the project is looking at reinforcing the duty of care for pets by taking a proactive approach to preventing the community from mistreating or abusing animals, and it begins with schoolchildren.

“It is important that steps are taken while children are young. Too often we see reports of teenagers abusing or mistreating animals, and we are keen to get the message out that it really is cool to be kind to animals before it gets to that stage.

“Early education really is the key,” Ms Walker said. “What we also want to see is an exchange of knowledge between those in the animal welfare community and children and feedback that the content is relevant, of interest and is having a positive impact on behaviour.”

The project will focus on improving communications and provide education and training in the companion animal sector and will draw on support from members of the AAWS companion animal working group as the project gets up and running.

Initially, pet owners and advocates, vets and vet nurses and those working in animal shelters will be encouraged to show their support for the initiative by contributing to content on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and WordPress and telling pet owners about the project.

Content for the social media platforms will be determined by input from a database of key opinion leaders, bloggers and authors who will contribute information on companion animals and photos on a regular basis.

Over the next two years resources will be built up to provide comprehensive information, education and training opportunities in the companion animal sector, targeted to children.

Coverage will also include wildlife and native animals and as the conversation on the various social media platforms continues to grow, eventually it is hoped that school teachers will become involved.

'Cool to be kind to animals' is a collaborative effort involving:

Liz Walker, CEO of Lort Smith Animal Hospital; Tim Adams, Petcare Information and Advisory Service; Jane Bindloss, Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia; Tracy Helman, Victorian DPI, Bureau of Animal Welfare; and Spinifex Communications.

For more information about 'cool to be kind to animals' contact cooltobekind@spinifexcommunications.com.au or visit:

<http://www.facebook.com/cooltobekindtoanimals>

https://twitter.com/#!/Cool_ToBeKind

<https://cooltobekindtoanimals.wordpress.com/>

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