

The importance of caring for pets

David Regis reflects on some implications of the 'tamagotchi' craze discussed in Mark Griffiths' recent article

Just a Tick is the name of our survey method to consult children and others on the content of the health education curriculum.

In schools, the job of sorting out the content of the health education curriculum is often given to one teacher, or a group of teachers. To some extent this task has been superseded by the National Curriculum guidelines on Health Education — but only to some extent, as the exact content and time given is still the responsibility of the school, and so the views and expertise of the teachers involved may become the deciding factor. However they are not solely responsible for the curriculum, nor the only people entitled to a view.

Back in 1983 the Unit obtained a grant from the Health Education Council (as it then was) to refine the technique of the *Just A Tick* enquiry and to consult more widely in the community. Parents and other adults connected with schools were to be asked for their views, but in addition, and most importantly, the children were to be consulted too.

All the groups consulted (pupils, parents, staff, governors, and health-care professionals associated with the school) were presented with identical topic lists, but the adults were asked to rate the *importance* of each topic for inclusion in the curriculum, whereas the children were asked how *interested* they would be in having lessons on that topic.

The method and results from the national survey were published in 1989 (Balding *et al.*,

1989), and have been much discussed in the pages of *Education and Health* and elsewhere (Code & Redman 1987, Code 1990, Balding 1992, Regis 1996), showing how each topic rates among the different groups of people surveyed.

One of the topics was *Caring for Pets*: how did this fare in the ratings battle? Without getting into the detail of the percentages, we have simply ascribed a rank position for each topic based on the frequency that each topic was given the most positive response by subjects. This is statistically rather naughty but in practice very fruitful in bringing together a manageable set of data for group discussion.

The pupils' rank position of interest in *Caring for pets* was as follows:

Age	Boys	Girls	No. of topics
7-8	1	1	44
8-9	1	1	44
9-10	1	1	44
10-11	1	1	44
11-12	4	1	49
12-13	4	5	49
13-14	6	6	49
14-15	13	21	49
15-16	8	12	49

It could not be clearer that throughout primary school and well into the early years of secondary school the topic of caring for pets is of great interest to young people. How do the adult groups rate this topic? Their rank position of the importance of *Caring for pets* was as follows:

Infant/First schools	No. of topics	
Parents	19	44
Teachers	5	44
HCPs*	13	44
Junior/Middle schools		
Parents	37	44
Teacher	26	44
HCPs*	34	44
Secondary schools		
Parents	49	49
Teachers	49	49

* Health-care professionals associated with the school, e.g. school nurses.

Although there is some indication that infant/first school teachers recognise both the appeal and potential of pets as a dimension of

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health education, adult groups give the topic very much lower importance than seems compatible with the pupils' level of interest.

Our own reflections on these data include:

The educational potential of pets

Adults may not see pets as being a particularly important topic in themselves, but the potential for using pets as a vehicle for education about other issues is great. Among other things, pets need a balanced diet, a hygienic environment, routine, exercise, play, health care and good social relations, and so key messages about many topics can be learned through their care.

Pets and personal power

We often talk about good decision-making in health education in schools, but the potential for pupils to exercise genuine choice over their lives is often rather limited. Any attempt by a child to deviate from a path its parents think is best for them often makes clear how little real choice we allow them! No matter how earnestly a child argued that all its dietary needs could be supplied by Shredded Wheat, it is unlikely that most mothers would allow the experiment to continue for very long. However, with respect to the care of pets, children can perhaps make genuine decisions on their behalf and exercise genuine power in implementing them, if they are entrusted with sole or major responsibility for their care.

Pets and personal responsibility

Nonetheless, responsible parents and teachers will no more allow their children to make an incorrect decision about pets than about themselves. This, of course, is the appeal of the virtual pet: incorrect decisions can be allowed to be made, and their consequences to occur, without adults feeling the need to intervene. In reality, many parents might be glad if the wretched thing died anyway.

Pretend pets and real responsibilities

We are reminded of a very widespread PSE lesson, included in our *Cross-Curricular Sex Education* resource, based on the care of an object (for example, an egg or a bag of flour) where the pupils contract to care for it in a similar way to a baby: it should not be left alone in a house, it should not be allowed to get cold, and so on. This has been widely promoted, and was the focus of a recent novel, *Flour Babies*, by

popular children's author Anne Fine, which won the Carnegie Award. So real pets, tamagotchis and bags of flour may all contribute towards preparation for parenthood.

An afterthought

If *Caring for pets* is not top of the list for the secondary pupils, what is? We cannot give a current answer, but the *Just A Tick* report (Balding *et al.*, 1989) gave the following 'top topics' for the late eighties:

Age	Boys	Girls
7-8	Caring for pets	Caring for pets
8-9	Caring for pets	Caring for pets
9-10	Caring for pets	Caring for pets
10-11	Caring for pets	Caring for pets
11-12	Physical fitness	Caring for pets
12-13	Physical fitness	Cancer
13-14	Physical fitness	STDs
14-15	Physical fitness	Cancer
15-16	Physical fitness	Parenthood & child care

References

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