HOW TO FOSTER EMPATHY THROUGH RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

INTRODUCTION

The Minnesota Zoo implemented virtual empathy building programs in order to reach students who had barriers to visiting the zoo in person. Virtual sessions were 30-45 minutes each and included an animal ambassador, using teacher-preferred software. This document shares our process, outcomes, and best practices, based on data collected from school teachers, students (Grades K-3), and zoo staff across 60+ virtual sessions.

PROCESS

STEP 1. USE EMPATHIC PROGRAM DESIGN

This means keeping key stakeholders (students, teachers, zoo staff) in mind throughout the process of designing or creating programs. It means asking them for their input continually and making changes based on that feedback.
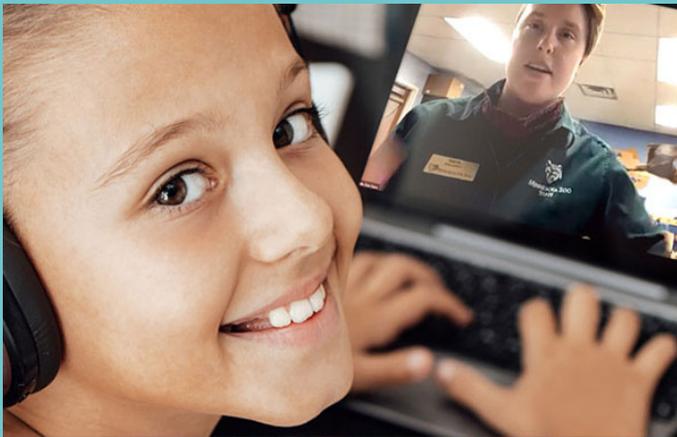
For example, it was important to teachers and administrators that our programs met science standards, used their preferred digital platform, and have more than one program, with a consistent zoo staff.

STEP 2. USE CULTURALLY RELEVANT PEDAGOGY AND EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES TO BUILD EMPATHY FOR ANIMALS

Use evidence-based methods of increasing empathy
For example:

- Use animal names and pronouns
- Model empathic behavior
- Assure the welfare of animals
- Talk about the animal's emotional state
- Tell a short story or anecdote about the animal
- Inviting students to share own experiences with animal
- Invite students to pretend to be the animal or compare self to the animal
- Suggest a caring action

Use culturally relevant pedagogical approaches
These are asset-based views of students that make learning contextual, tap into students' cultural capital, and place a strong emphasis on providing opportunities for students of diverse backgrounds to access prior knowledge and fully participate.

Effective examples from our program include:

- Zoo staff sharing their pronouns
- Inviting participation through body actions (e.g. raise hands, thumbs up, move like animals)
- Inviting students to ask questions and share
- Asking open ended questions

Collect data from teachers, students, and zoo staff to assess most effective practices

OUTCOMES

1

CAN VIRTUAL PROGRAMS HELP TO BUILD EMPATHY? YES

From comparing our virtual programs to our in-person programs, we can see that empathy not only occurred in virtual programs at the same rate, but also increased in certain areas.

In practice, we suggest that demos should be longer whether in-person or virtual (closer to 18 minutes than 10 minutes).

2

WHICH EMPATHIC AND CULTURALLY RELEVANT PRACTICES WORK BEST IN VIRTUAL PROGRAMMING?

The following practices were most strongly associated with desired outcomes, such as positive student engagement and empathic behaviors toward animals:

1. Using animal pronouns and names
2. Zoo staff asking students questions
3. Zoo staff inviting students to ask questions and/or share
4. Zoo staff inviting students to use body actions
5. Zoo staff inviting students to find similarities between themselves and animals

Encouraging curiosity and engagement in terms of students asking and answering questions and physically pretending to be animals should be encouraged in programs designed to build empathy. With limited time and resources, these seemed to elicit the best responses related to outcomes.

3

VIRTUAL PROGRAMS ON ONE SHARED DEVICE IN SCHOOL CLASSROOMS VERSUS STUDENTS ON INDIVIDUAL DEVICES

In both formats, instructors were able to use best practices which led to students participating, having positive emotions related to animals, and asking questions.

In practice, we suggest to find out ahead of time if it will be one device or more. The same best practices can be used but how you use them is different.

Reflecting on our practice, the biggest takeaways were the following:

KEY TAKEAWAWAYS

CONTEXT MATTERS
We should be aware of what is happening in the community, classroom, and world because it affects everyone involved in the virtual program. An environment needs to be created that honors this both in the planning process, a program time, and debriefing of the process.

STUDENTS AT THE CENTER
By putting students at the center and following their lead, a much richer learning experience is achieved. Space needs to be created for students to feel comfortable asking questions and explore their answers together.

TEACHERS AS PARTNERS
Classroom teachers are the interpreters in virtual programs. They facilitate communication during the program and follow up with other learning experiences. Partnership with teachers is key.

ZOO INSTRUCTOR TRAINING AND SUPPORT
It is important to design programs in collaboration with zoo education staff. This includes providing training and ongoing support as well as responding to their feedback and making program adjustments.

SEEING MORE OF THE ZOO
Virtual participants often cannot come to the zoo due to barriers. For that reason, it is important to give participants a sense of what the zoo is as a place and not just to do isolated classes.

MINNESOTA ZOO