

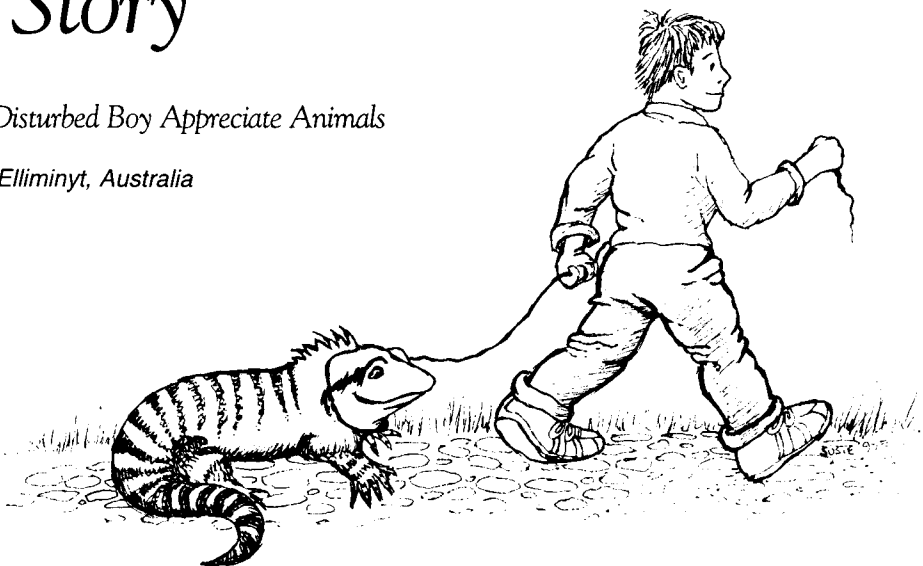
Fred's Story

How Quail and a Lizard Helped a Disturbed Boy Appreciate Animals

by Graeme Hyde, Elliminyt, Australia

Recently I was reminded of a memorable incident which occurred 32 years ago when I was working and living in a children's home in Melbourne, Australia. It is the story of "A Boy and His Emotions."

For 19 years I worked in social welfare in the State of Victoria during which time I spent 11 years in the administration side of residential children's homes. In each of the four homes I worked in, the boys and girls



were (in almost every instance) from broken homes where either the parents couldn't cope with raising their children or the marriage/partnership had broken down.

Naturally many of the children were quite emotionally disturbed and, in most cases, they were wards of the state who had been placed in care with the appropriate residential children's home.

This is the story of a 15-year-old boy who had severe emotional problems caused, in part, by being rejected by foster parents when his own parents became incapable of caring for him. For the purpose of the article, he will be called "Fred."

Because I was the deputy administrator of the children's home, I lived on site (with my wife and two children - and our pet tabby cat and cocker spaniel) in a house provided for the purpose.

Shortly after settling into my new job at the home, I built a small aviary to house some Australian finches, a pair of Chinese Quail *Coturnix chinensis*, and pair of *Neophema* parakeets. Not long after the aviary was finished some of the birds, including the quail, began to breed.

Part of my "hands-on" duties in the children's home were to work some weekends as a relief cottage parent when the regular staff (a married couple) had rostered days off. On one of those days a boy teased Fred from out-

side a lounge room window and, in response Fred went to punch him (forgetting there was a window between them) and, as a result, his fist went straight through the window - missing the tormentor.

Fred, who was a big strong boy (he didn't know his own strength), had arranged with his cottage parents to keep white mice in a building on campus quite near the unit he lived in. This meant he could keep his smelly pets and tend to them without causing any problems within the unit he lived in which, at the time, housed 24 boys. The only other pets in this unit was a dog belonging to the cottage parents and a pet white rabbit belonging to one of the boys.

It was around this time that Fred killed the pet rabbit when, one day, he lost his temper completely and, at the same time, lost all control over his emotions. You can imagine the impact on both the boys of the unit, and their cottage parents when they learned of Fred's cruel act.

Following this I was able to gradually encourage Fred to visit my residence, which was only 100 yards from his cottage, and on such occasions I would allow him to enter my aviary to look at my small collection of birds.

Eventually, as we both gained each other's confidence, I allowed Fred to hold one of the Chinese Quail in his hands and then showed him how to gently release the bird from his hands.

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When the quail had a clutch of young ones, I allowed Fred to hold one of them in his hands to study the tiny chick before gently releasing it.

On reflection (some 31 years later!) I think I gradually came to realize that the boy had a genuine interest in animals even though he probably had never owned a pet of any sort when he lived with his natural parents.


Around the time I was encouraging Fred to appreciate birds (and other animals) a small group of students from Melbourne's Monash University Social Involvement Club were attending the children's home as tutors to the children. The main aim of the SIC students was to help the children with improving their school work and, at the same time, offer them genuine friendship - something most had never experienced from young adults aged in their late teens to early twenties.

As a planned part of their program the university students took the boys from the unit Fred lived in on a weekend camp in rough bush country in the Gippsland area of Victoria.

On his return from this weekend Fred brought an adult lizard back with him and expected his cottage parents to allow him to keep it either in his room or the unit. In sheer desperation the cottage mother suggested that he walk down to my house and ask if I could solve the problem.

What we agreed to was that the South-East Gippsland Water Dragon (ie, lizard), which measured 30 inches, could be kept in an appropriately-sized bird cage in a shed in my backyard and that Fred would be responsible for looking after the reptile.

The finale to this story is that Fred, who went from being sadistic with animals to caring, came to my house every morning before school to take the lizard for a walk along the concrete path that led from my backdoor to my back gate. To give the lizard its daily exercise Fred used to tie a piece of string around its neck - like a lead on a dog - so he could take it for a walk.

Yes, the contact with my small aviary and its birds helped this emotionally disturbed teen-age boy to understand and appreciate the purpose - and the place - of animals in our lives. 

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