

Tails Are Not for Pulling by Elizabeth Verdick

Lesson Plan: ages 4-7

Before Reading

ASK: Do any of you have pets at home? What kind? What are some ways that pets help make us feel good?

SHOW: Share a photo of your own pet, if you have one, or a pet that has special meaning in your life. Share a funny or heart-warming story about the pet.

CONNECT: Point out the many ways in which animals are connected to humans. For example, they may greet us when we come home or help us feel peaceful when we touch them. Trained animals help solve crimes, rescue people in life-threatening situations or help those with special needs to live more independent lives.

During Reading

ASK: How do animals communicate? What do you think pets mean when they “say” meow, woof, growl, hiss, squeak, or chirp?

SHOW: Look at the pictures of pets in the book and point out ways animals “talk” with their bodies. What does a wagging or swishing tail mean? What does a purring cat communicate? Turn to pages 20–21 and show the cues that animals use to indicate distress: flattened ears, bared teeth, a raised paw or a show of claws. What should children do when they see these cues in real life?

CONNECT: Talk about how “pets are for loving, not teasing.” Ask the children to share their ideas about showing kindness toward animals. How can they love a pet gently from its head down to its tail?

After Reading

ASK: What should you do when you meet another person’s pet for the first time? Is it ever okay to run up to that animal and give it a big hug, or grab it in your hands to hold? Why not? What might happen?

SHOW: Role-play a safe way to approach someone’s pet. Make sure children know to ask the owner first if it’s okay to touch the pet. Demonstrate how to hold out a hand slowly for the animal to sniff, and then how to watch and wait for the animal’s cues. An animal that hides, growls, or seems anxious isn’t ready to be touched, and may be saying, “Hands off.”

CONNECT: Bonding with animals is rewarding—but safety is important too. Remind children that touching, holding, and caring for a pet includes basic safety rules that help protect both people and animals. What are some other ways to keep animals safe and healthy? Why is caring for pets such an important responsibility?

Activities

1. Show pictures of a variety of animals, birds, fish, and reptiles so children can look at how many different styles of tails there are. Which creature has the longest tail? The shortest, the curliest, the most colorful, the wildest? Talk about the different ways that tails “talk”: they wag, wave, wiggle, swish, bristle, and ruffle. What else can they do?
2. Discuss how animals may sometimes let their “teeth do the talking.” Even the calmest pet may sometimes nip or bite, especially if it is being teased or provoked. Tell children that bites need to be treated with the help of an adult. Make sure they understand that “hurting the animal back” is never an appropriate response.
3. Talk to children about what to do if they ever witness someone treating an animal in a cruel manner or if they see an animal that looks hurt or sick. Although their impulse may be to try to intervene, it’s always safer to get the help of a trusted adult. Show materials from organizations whose mission it is to help animals in need.
4. Invite a person who works with trained service animals to bring a live pet to help give children a lesson in treating animals gently, and to share ways in which this animal helps to improve human lives.
5. Find fascinating facts about animals, or encourage children to research some facts on their own. Did you know that a dog’s sense of smell is 1,000 times better than a human’s? That birds have hollow bones? Or that pet rabbits can be trained to use a litter box?
6. Support organizations that rescue and protect animals, find good homes for them, or educate people about the importance of kindness toward all living creatures. Are there opportunities to visit or volunteer? To donate money? To invite a speaker? Or to learn more about this important cause?

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