

5 Ways to Teach Your Kids Respect for God's Creation

"God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground'" (Gen. 1:25-26, NIV).

It is clear that God intended for humanity to have an ongoing relationship with the animal kingdom. We were created in His image and called to serve as His stewards here on earth. If this is such a key part of His plan (and it would appear so, as it is clearly laid out within the story of creation), then it should also be a key lesson that we impart to our children.

But, as with any lesson, how should we go about teaching it? How can we instruct our children to respect and care for animals as part of God's creation? If you're feeling stumped on how to get started, try using the five tips below as a jumping-off point:

1. Acquaint them with animals. More specifically, get them used to being around pets. It's easy to fear things that are unfamiliar, and children who are not exposed to common pets (dogs, cats, etc.) from a young age often develop irrational, hard-to-shake fears of all animals. It's hard to respect something you fear. Moreover, fear often prompts us to behave in harmful, sinful ways in the guise of self-protection.

If owning your own pet doesn't work for you, try scheduling regular visits with a family member, friend or neighbor who owns friendly pets. Children can learn a lot of respect for

animals simply by becoming accustomed to their presence.

2. Teach them about animals. Pets are only a small portion of the animal kingdom. Try taking your children to a local zoo (or if you can, a large zoo or aquarium) to introduce them to the diverse creatures God created.

Respect improves with understanding. Have your children observe what animals live in your area, and then do research together to discover more about the unique biology and place in the ecosystem that God gave to them. For example, learn how bees fly and make honey, and how they play an integral role in pollination. Understanding that God gave each creature its own unique role to play will help instill greater respect for pets and wildlife alike.

If you can't make it to a zoo, or if you have child who really wants to learn as much as they can about animals, try a resource that is tailored for children, like Zoobooks.

3. Encourage them to volunteer. Find ways to volunteer with animals. Get in contact with local shelters and animal rescues to learn more about their volunteer requirements and opportunities. Shelters are a great way to learn firsthand not only about the cruelty and abuse animals suffer, but also to see the healing power found in loving, playful interactions. These experiences won't just teach a greater compassion for animals. That compassion for animals can help improve kids' empathy for anything suffering abuse, animal or human.

If there are no opportunities at a shelter, try something simple like petsitting for a neighbor or family friend.

4. Model kindness and compassion. Children imitate their parents. It's almost impossible to teach a child to respect animal life if we, as parents, do not first set an example.

Model the behavior you want to see. If you have pets, model how to care for, train and play with them. Set an example of how to be respectful toward other people's pets. Be compassionate and merciful towards wildlife whenever possible. Use natural repellants and humane traps for your pest problems. If you model it, they'll imitate it.

5. Teach them about biblical stewardship. Make it clear that the earth and everything in it is part of God's creation (plants, animals, people) and that we show love and obedience to our Creator by treating His creation with love and respect.

God's command in Genesis was for humans to "rule" over the earth as God's stewards, so take time to teach them what it means to be a steward. Explain how creation ultimately belongs to God and that He has trusted us to care for it, just like a king would trust a steward to help with some of his duties.

Most importantly, make it clear that as we are created in God's image, we are to "rule" in His image as well. He should be our model, not worldly rulers who too often use their power selfishly or cruelly. We are to love and care for animals just as God loves and cares for us.

These tips are basic building blocks for teaching respect for animals. Use the above information as a jumping off point, and don't be afraid to try tools and techniques that speak specifically to your children's unique interests and learning styles. Above all, be sure to keep God at the center of your instruction.

Scott Huntington is a writer for the Oxford University Press. He is also a middle school Sunday school teacher with a passion for reaching kids for the gospel.