



**MODULE  
ON  
HUMANE  
EDUCATION  
FOR  
SENIOR PHASE  
LEARNERS**



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 LESSON 1

## Question 1

Let's begin by turning the spotlight on ourselves. Are *we* sentient?

## Answer

If you are aware of yourself and know what it feels like to be you — if you can experience pain and pleasure, love and hate, fear and joy, misery and emotional hurt, compassion and empathy, along with countless other feelings — then you are sentient. The word *sentience* comes from the Latin root meaning “to feel.”

The opposite of sentient is *insentient*.

An insentient being is not aware of its own existence and cannot feel physical or emotional pain or pleasure. Think about kicking a rock. Only the sentient being will feel pain. The insentient entity will feel nothing.

Sentience is central to the very concept of human rights.

Here's why: because emotional or physical pain feels bad, and pleasure feels good, these feelings are relevant to which actions are bad and which are good. Hence, human rights exist to safeguard our well-being. If we could not experience harm — or benefit — rights would have no meaning.



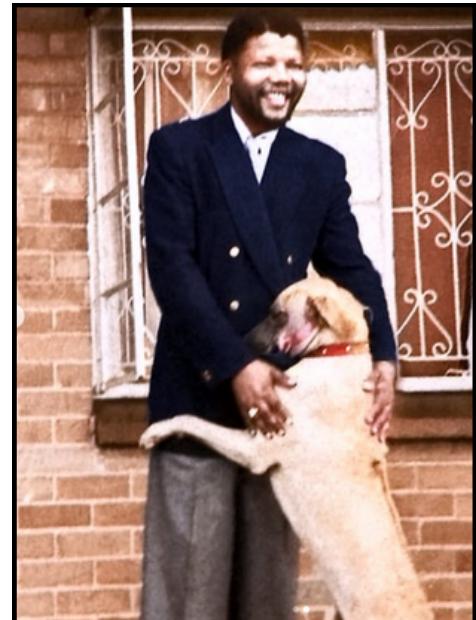
## Question 2

Are animals sentient too?

### Historic milestones in recognising animal sentience

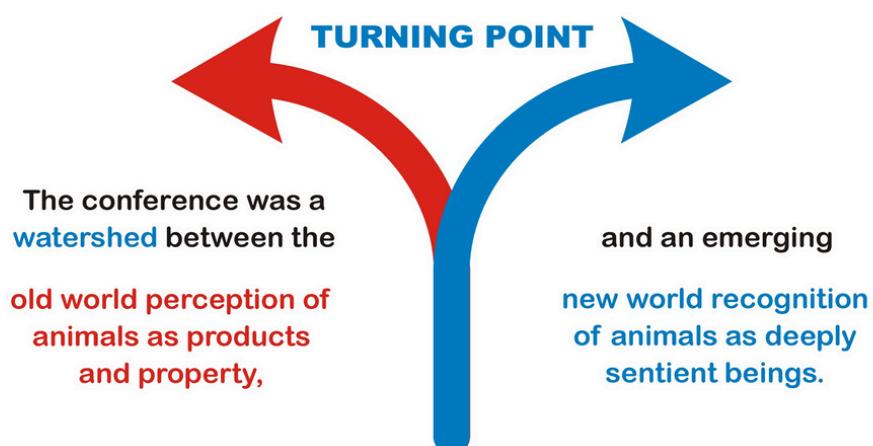
Anyone who has shared life with a dog, cat, or other companion animal may find it surprising that animal sentience was only formally recognised internationally in the 21st century.

- 2005: At a conference in London hosted by *Compassion in World Farming*, scientists voted unanimously to urge the United Nations to recognise animals as sentient beings capable of suffering. The event, *From Darwin to Dawkins: The Science and Implications of Animal Sentience*, marked a turning point. [Animal Voice April 2005](#)



- 2006: Delegates from 108 countries attended a follow-up symposium hosted by the *World Society for the Protection of Animals* and a global petition to the UN called for the recognition of animals as sentient.

[Animal Voice August 2006](#)



## A gorilla named Koko had played a role in achieving this new understanding

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### The story of Penny Patterson and Koko

A gorilla named **Koko**, revolutionised our recognition of animal sentience though learning *Sign Language*.

Born in the San Francisco Zoo in 1971, Koko was hand-reared by **Penny Patterson**, a graduate student at Stanford University, who began teaching Sign Language to the young gorilla.

Koko caught on quickly. By the age of 3, she could communicate with 200 signs and, as her vocabulary developed, she made up her own signed words. For example, she called a ring, a 'finger bracelet'; she called ice cream 'cold-candy'; an empty cup 'drink no'. When she saw a horse with a bit in its mouth, she signed 'sad teeth'.



KoKo had a special love for kittens. She named one of her favourites 'All Ball' and cuddled the kitten as if he were her child. She grieved the loss of All Ball when he died, and she made sounds similar to human crying. Her favourite bed-time story was *The Three Little Pigs*, and she even learned to play the recorder.

By the end of her life, Koko had learned to use more than 1000 signs, and under-stood 2000 spoken English words. Just before she passed away in 2018 at the age of 47, KoKo told Penny she had a message. Using sign language, Koko said: "I am gorilla. I am flowers, animals. I am Nature. Man Koko loves. Earth Koko loves. But man stupid. Koko cry. Fix Earth. Help Earth. Nature see you. Thank you."

Truly, Koko's legacy is an extraordinary example of inter-species communication.  
(Information from *The Gorilla Foundation*).

## South Africa acknowledges animal sentience

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In an unanimous judgment in 2016, South Africa's Constitutional Court declared that:

- Animals are sentient beings capable of suffering and experiencing pain.
- Animals have intrinsic value as individuals.
- Protecting animals reflects constitutional values and the interests of society.
- Animal protection safeguards the moral status of humans and prevents the erosion of human values.

[www.saflii.org/za/cases/ZACC/2016/46](http://www.saflii.org/za/cases/ZACC/2016/46)



In handing down judgment, Justice **Sisi Khampepe** stated:

*“The rationale behind protecting animal welfare has shifted from merely safeguarding the moral status of humans, to placing intrinsic value on animals as individuals.”*

### Complexities ahead

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While sentience is not dependent on the extent and complexity of cognitive ability, it is also not uniform across all species. In addition we tend to be more considerate towards animals we live with – like dogs and cats – than towards equally sentient animals like pigs or cows.

For decades, fish were dismissed as insentient. However, in 2025 *Science Alert* reported overwhelming evidence that fish suffer up to [22 minutes of intense pain](#) when taken out of water. Considering that an estimated 2.7 trillion fish are killed for human consumption each year, this represents an almost unfathomable scale of suffering.

## Despite knowing that animals are sentient, we still allow them to be...

- hunted for trophies (*the word ‘wildlife’ makes them ‘other’*)
- imprisoned in cages (*the words ‘units of production’ makes them ‘other’*)
- experimented upon (*the word ‘models’ makes them ‘other’*)
- imprisoned for entertainment in zoos and circuses (*we justify this in our minds as ‘education’*)
- we destroy their habitats (*we need more land for humans*)
- we send them on long sea journeys to slaughter
- we send them into space for research purposes. (*See the story on Laika*)



### Laika

Let's turn our minds, for the moment to Laika, a small stray dog from the streets of Moscow in Russia who, in 1957, aboard the spaceship Sputnik 2, became the first living creature to orbit the Earth. Doctors had embedded medical devices in her body to monitor her heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure and physical movement as the rocket took her into orbit with G-forces reaching five times normal gravity levels.



Data relayed back to Earth showed that the noises and pressures of the flight terrified Laika. Her heartbeat rocketed to triple the normal rate, and her breathing rate quadrupled. She reached orbit alive, circling the Earth in about 103 minutes, but (thankfully) died soon afterwards.

More than 30 years later, Russian medical doctor and space dog trainer **Oleg Gazenko** commented: “*The more time passes, the more I’m sorry about it.*”

*(Story is courtesy The Smithsonian Magazine, 11 April 2018)*

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/sad-story-laika-space-dog-and-her-one-way-trip-orbit-1-180968728/>

### However, sending animals into space continues to this very day!

An August 2025 issue of *The Conversation* called for this to stop, and for an international acknowledgment of animal sentience.

Read [HERE](#)

## 'us' and 'them'

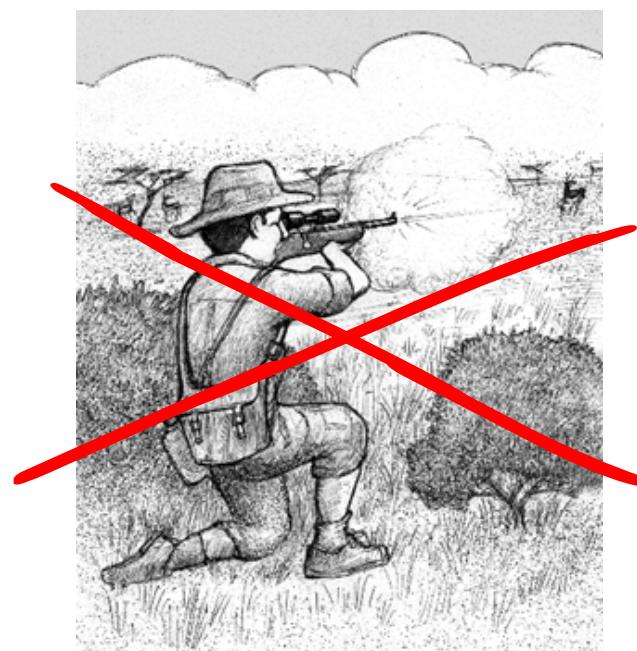
*Instead of an  
'us' and 'them'  
mentality, should we  
strive to include  
sentient beings in a  
universal circle of respect and compassion?*



## Will AI help transform our relationship with animal sentience?

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Artificial Intelligence could help shift our view of animals from “property” to “co-inhabitants of Earth” with rights of their own.



## Possible scenarios include AI help to accommodate animal sentience in world ethics:

- **Accelerating alternatives to our consumption of animal products:** For instance, AI is speeding up the development of cultivated meat, making it more affordable and comparable in taste to conventional meat, and therefore potentially reducing animal slaughter. It's already happening!

[SEE HERE](#)



**Philip Lymbery, CEO of Compassion in World Farming, delights the crowd by eating meat after four decades of veganism at the launch of cultivated meat in Cape Town in April 2024.**

To find out more, read ***For the Love of Kin***, an allegory inspired by this historical event and told from the perspective of *Pecorino*, the rescued sheep, still living at a Western Cape animal sanctuary, who became part of it all.

[READ HERE](#)

*See Comprehension Notes on page 27*

## Possible scenarios (CONTINUED)

- By analysing animal sounds, body language, stress hormones, and behaviours **AI could translate their feelings into human language:**

**Dr Con Slobodchikoff**, CEO of Animal Communications Ltd., and his team of scientists have set a goal for themselves.

Within a decade or so, they believe they will have developed an App that will enable us to interpret and understand nonhuman language. See [zoolingua.com](http://zoolingua.com)

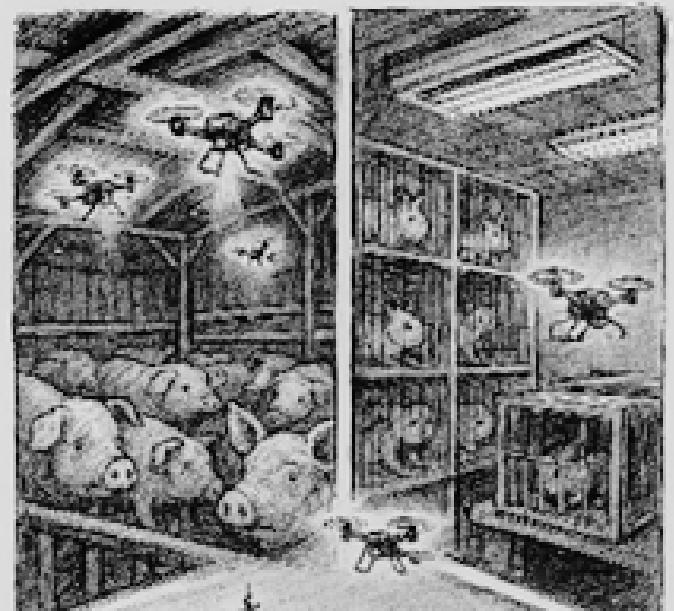
He explains: *"At Zoolingua, we believe communication isn't about teaching animals our language—it's about learning theirs. Using cutting-edge AI and groundbreaking scientific research, we're decoding the unique ways animals express emotions, needs, and even ideas. This isn't science fiction; it's the future of human-animal connection.*



*"My client seeks relief from human harassment, m'lord"*

- **AI could uncover hidden cruelty:**

AI-powered micro-drones could record proof of abuse on factory farms, fishing fleets, or laboratories, with blockchain authentication preventing denial.



- **Immersive empathy-building:**

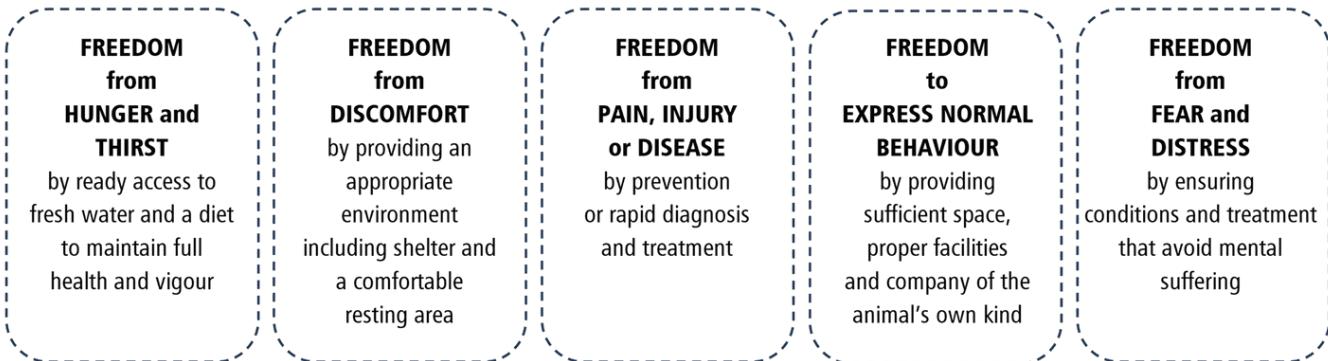
AI-generated holographic experiences could allow people to live a day as a factory-farmed pig, chicken, a hunted lion, or a laboratory animal used for medical research.

Take a look at the **Five Freedoms for Animals**, as endorsed by the *World Organisation for Animal Health*, as basic requirements for animal welfare.

## THE FIVE FREEDOMS FOR ANIMALS



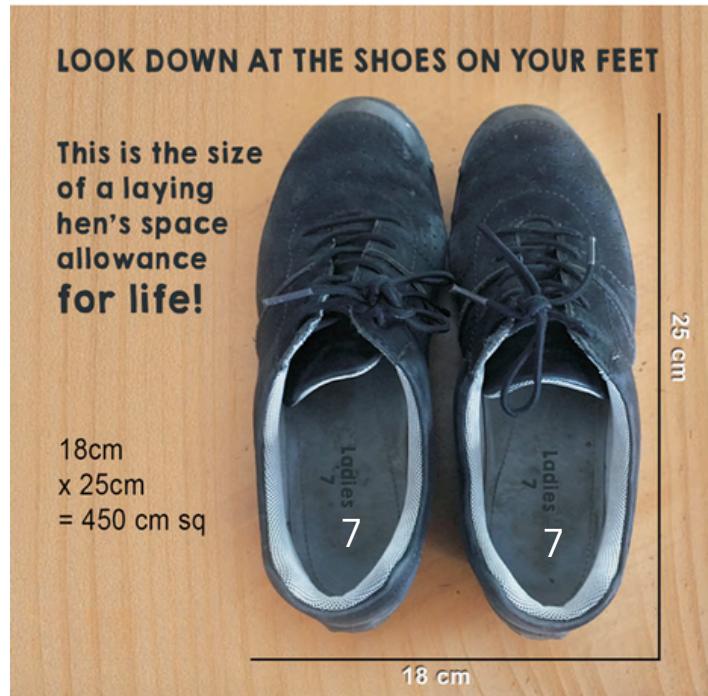
World Organisation  
for Animal Health  
Founded as OIE



**Yet, industrialised farming (factory farming) does not comply with the Five Freedoms.**



*25 million laying hens in South Africa are kept in battery cages...*



*We wouldn't keep our dogs like this, but we keep our pigs like this...*



## NOTES

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# LESSON 2

# Animal Sentience and Human Rights

In 2023, the United Nations made an unprecedented addition to the Convention on the **Rights of the Child (CRC)**. In General Comment No. 26 (GC26), the UN decreed that all persons under the age of 18 are to be protected from witnessing violence – including violence inflicted on animals.

(Please see UN [General Comment 26 Article 19](#).

Please also see [Concluding Observations](#) delivered by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child on 08 February 2024, specifically Section 27e.)

This historical development marked the first explicit entry of animal welfare into the human rights domain, acknowledging growing scientific evidence that exposure to violence – whether against humans or animals – alters brain development in children and can have lifelong mental health consequences.

## Empathy at the Core

To understand why this link is so important, we must consider the role of **empathy** in human development. Empathy is the ability not just to sympathise (“feeling sorry for”) but to **feel** with another – understanding and sharing their emotions as if they were our own.

It is not only humans who experience empathy. Many species of sentient animals – such as elephants, dolphins, dogs, pigs, rats, and primates – have demonstrated empathetic behaviours, including consoling others, refusing rewards when others are harmed, and cooperative problem-solving. This suggests that the evolution of communities and civilisation itself depends on empathy.



Professor Simon Baron-Cohen, University of Cambridge, is a leading scholar on empathy. He explains:

**“When empathy is dimmed, it causes us to think only of our own interests. When we are solely in the ‘I’ mode, our empathy is switched off.”**

Empathy, therefore, is not a luxury—it is the foundation of moral society.

## What Causes Empathy to Be Lost?

If empathy is so vital and innate, what erodes it? One powerful factor is exposure to violence, including violence against animals.

When we witness suffering caused by violence, our brain often initiates a numbing process to shield us from emotional pain. This is called desensitisation. Over time, progressive desensitisation leads to:

- the normalisation of violence,
- the erosion of empathy,
- the disruption of fundamental human values,
- and, eventually, an acceptance and participation in violent acts.

### The Cycle of Empathy Erosion:

1. Exposure to violence
2. Progressive desensitisation
3. Normalisation of violence
4. Decline of empathy
5. Disruption of moral values
6. Acceptance of violence as “normal”
7. Participation in violence

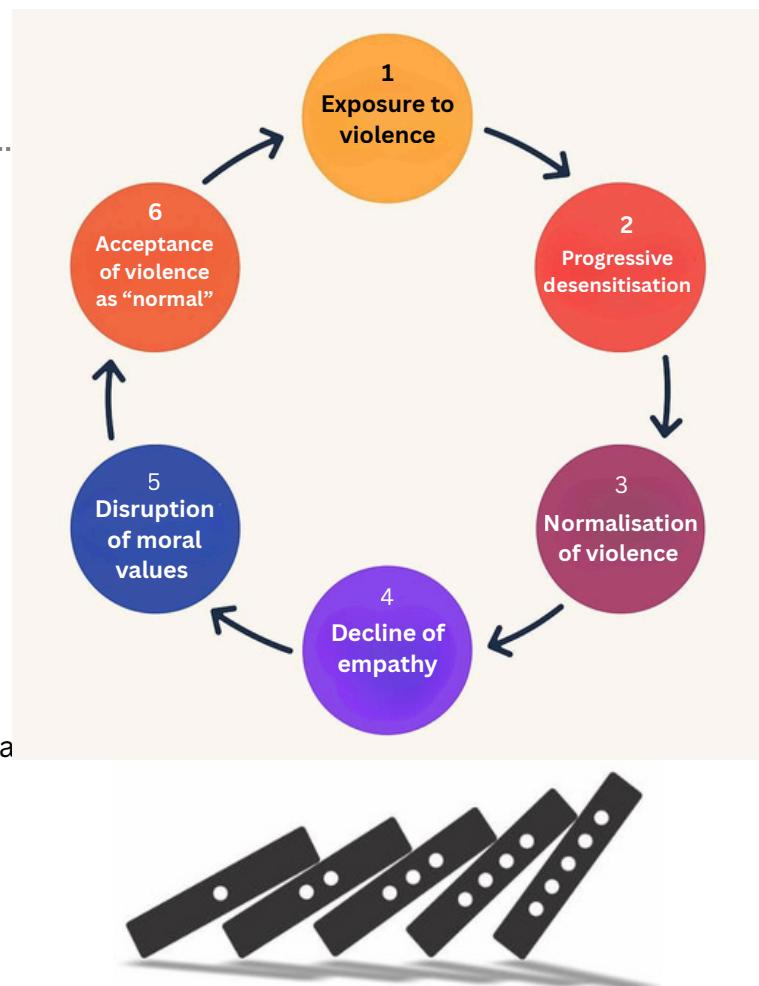
This cycle is not abstract.

Research in criminology has shown strong correlations between animal abuse, child abuse, and domestic violence. Where animals are harmed, humans are often at risk too.

See [European Link Coalition](#)

See [National Link Coalition](#)

See Teesside University [Research](#)



## Why Animal Sentience Matters

If animals were not sentient, how we treat them would have no moral relevance. But science is clear: animals are sentient. They experience pleasure, pain, fear, and joy.

Thus, protecting animals from abuse is not only about animals – it is about protecting human dignity, empathy, and society itself.

## Practical Implications

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The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has gone further, explicitly calling for an end to bullfighting and trophy hunting, recognising them as forms of violence with harmful psychological impacts on children. These practices objectify animals, ignore their sentience, and entrench violence as entertainment or sport.



## Education as Prevention: The Danish Example

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Denmark includes empathy education in its national curriculum. This approach has been shown to:

- reduce bullying,
- improve mental health and well-being,
- and foster greater respect for life, both human and nonhuman.

If societies embedded empathy education alongside recognition of animal sentience, children would be supported to grow into adults better equipped to resist cycles of violence.

## Questions for Reflection and Debate

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- Should animal well-being be considered a human rights issue?
- Why or why not?
- Does exposure to violence of any kind harm the psychological development of children?
- Can you give examples from your own community or life?
- Would granting nonhuman animals the legal right to protection from abuse reduce violence in human society? Is our empathy incomplete if it excludes nonhuman animals?
- Can we be fully, proudly human without extending moral concern to other sentient beings?

## Conclusion

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The recognition of animal sentience within human rights law represents a watershed moment. It underscores that protecting animals from abuse is inseparable from protecting children from psychological harm and protecting societies from the erosion of empathy. Violence against animals is not a separate issue from human justice – it is a mirror that reflects and shapes our humanity. To protect children, uphold human rights, and build compassionate societies, we must also protect animals.

# Class Activities

## Activity 1: Comprehension Questions

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1. What does the UN's General Comment No. 26 (2023) say about protecting children?
2. Explain the difference between empathy and sympathy. Give an example of each.
3. What happens during “desensitisation”?
4. List the stages in the “Cycle of Empathy Erosion.”
5. Why does protecting animals also protect children?

## Activity 2: Small Group Debate

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Motion: ***“Animal welfare is a human rights issue.”***

Divide into groups of 4–5 learners. Half prepare arguments for the motion, half against. Then hold a short debate.

## Activity 3: Reflective Writing

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Write a one-page essay answering:

***“Is our empathy incomplete if it excludes animals?”***

Encourage learners to use examples from their own experiences, such as pets, farm animals, or wildlife.

## Activity 4: Empathy vs Sympathy Comparison Chart

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### ■ Sympathy vs Empathy

Sympathy	Empathy
"I feel sorry for you."	"I feel with you."
Pity, concern, distance	Shared experience, connection
Example: "That's sad."	Example: "I understand your sadness because I've felt it too."

*Empathy builds stronger connections ■*

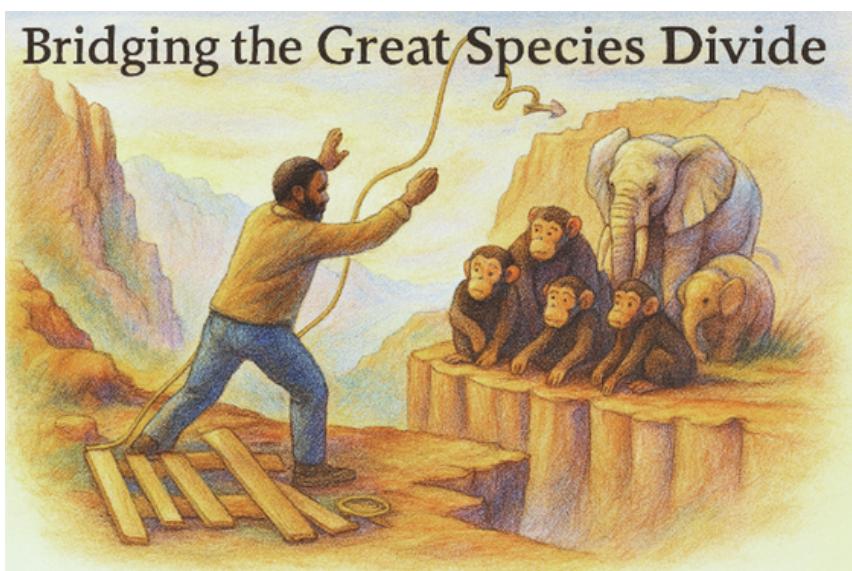
Learners can be asked to role-play scenarios from each side.

## Activity 5: Human + Animal Rights Connection Bridge

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Draw your own version of a bridge with two sides:

- On the left bank: "Children's Rights"
- On the right bank: "Animal Rights"
- The bridge itself = Empathy.



## NOTES

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# LESSON 3

# Animal Sentience and the Words we use

## Language shapes how we think

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Linguists remind us that the words we use matter. Language can either build respect or reinforce discrimination.

- **Positive language** affirms and strengthens others.
- **Negative or derogatory language** can diminish others, creating the perception that they are less worthy or inferior.

Think about the words that have been used to insult or belittle you or others. How did they affect the way you felt about yourself? Now imagine how this applies to animals.

## Insults to animals in everyday speech

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Philosopher **Professor David Benatar**, in his book [\*\*Very Practical Ethics\*\*](#), notes that when someone calls another human an “animal,” it is rarely meant as a compliment. This shows that, hidden in our language, there are many insults to animals.

Perhaps the most commonly-slur is the b-word so often used to denigrate women. However, change is beginning to happen. For example:

- Instead of saying pets, many people now say companion animals.
  - Why? Because companionship is a **two-way relationship**, not a one-sided one.
- Instead of saying an animal has an owner, some prefer guardian or caregiver.
  - Why? Because words like “owner” suggest animals are property, like objects, rather than sentient beings.

## The language of oppression

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One of South Africa’s leading socio-linguists, [\*\*Professor Raj Mesthrie\*\*](#), explains that derogatory words are not harmless. They are a central part of discrimination. He argues that we need “linguistic disinfection” — in other words, cleansing our language of anti-animal slurs.

See [Animal Voice](#)

## The language of oppression

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The language we use against non-humans reflects dominance and subjugation.  
Think about it...

**“Stock” or “livestock”** – Reduces sentient beings to economic units, implying they exist primarily for human profit.

**“Game”** – Frames wild animals as targets for sport rather than as autonomous creatures.

**“Pest”** – Justifies lethal control of animals deemed inconvenient, erasing moral consideration.

**“Harvest”** – Often used in hunting or culling contexts, implying animals are crops rather than lives.

**“Problem animal”** – Labels creatures in conflict situations (like elephants near farms) as obstacles rather than sentient beings.

**“Resource”** – Positions wildlife as commodities for human use, whether in tourism, meat, or trophies.

**“Population”** (in ecological management) – Focuses on numbers instead of individual welfare, enabling mass culling or sterilisation.

**“Vermin”** – Dehumanises or delegitimises existence, historically used to justify extermination.

## Words that show respect

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Animals are not objects. They are **sentient beings** – capable of feeling, experiencing, and having their own personalities. This is why many people choose to use **he** or **she** instead of it when referring to an animal.

By changing our words, we can also begin to change our attitudes. If language can harm, it can also heal.

# Comprehensive Tasks

## **A. Understanding the text** (CAPS: *Reading & Viewing – Demonstrates understanding of ideas and information in texts*)

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1. What does it mean when we say “language shapes how we think”?
2. Explain what Professor Raj Mesthrie means by linguistic disinfection.
3. Why does Professor Benatar believe it is wrong to call someone an “animal” as an insult?
4. What is the difference between calling an animal a pet and a companion animal?
5. Why is it problematic to call someone the owner of an animal?

## **B. Critical thinking** (CAPS: *Language – Thinking and Reasoning / Writing & Presenting – Developing arguments*)

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1. Think of a time when someone used negative words about you or others. How did it feel?
2. Can you think of common sayings in English or another language you know where animals are used as insults (for example, “you pig”)? Why might these be harmful?
3. Do you agree that animals should be called he or she rather than it? Give reasons for your answer.
4. What changes in language could you make in your own life to show more respect for animals?

## **C. Vocabulary** (CAPS: *Language Structures & Conventions – Expanding vocabulary and using words in context*)

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Match the term with the correct definition:

a) Sentient beings	1. Words or expressions that insult or belittle others.
b) Derogatory language	2. Living beings capable of feeling and experiencing.
c) Companion animal	3. Replacing harmful words with more respectful ones.
d) Linguistic disinfection	4. A term showing a two-way relationship between humans and the animals they live with.

## **D. Writing task** (CAPS: *Writing & Presenting – Short transactional/reflective writing*)

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Write a short paragraph (6–8 sentences) explaining how changing our language can help people treat animals with more respect. Use at least two terms from the vocabulary list in your answer.