RSPCA Victoria’s Education and Learning team actively involves and engages the community in a meaningful way. We offer knowledge and demonstrate compassion through the working relationships that exist between humans and animals.

During 2013 and 2014, students visiting RSPCA Victoria learnt about our animal welfare campaigns, they debated the ethics of using animals in research and explored the welfare issues associated with the puppy factory industry. Students were also given a forum to discuss animal welfare issues associated with the live export industry.

CASE STUDY ONE

The CARE program
The CARE program was trialled in a number of schools that provided intensive English language training for recently arrived immigrants and refugees. Conducted throughout several sessions, each class received a total of seven contact hours. The first three sessions were conducted at the school, covering pre-evaluation on the Five Freedoms, dog and small animal needs along with dog behaviour and body language. The final session was conducted at the RSPCA Education Centre and focused on post-evaluation of the Five Freedoms, making dog treats, a barn session that involved contact with more animal species, and meeting with an RSPCA Inspector to discuss animal cruelty case studies and Australian animal welfare laws.

Changes in participants’ attitudes towards animals were demonstrated through students’ modified interactions with the education animals attending the program sessions. There was an overall reduction in fear of dogs, with the majority of students wanting to engage with the education dogs voluntarily and with enthusiasm. The program assisted in the overall wellbeing of the students by providing safe interactions with calm animals, essential to students, many of whom had a history of trauma.

One student wrote:
“First I learned how to take care of animals and take them to the vet which is opposite to my country. In my country if they are sick the people leave the animal to die naturally. But the RSPCA teach me that it is wrong and the animals have rights like humans and we have to take care of them and to feed them because they are living creatures too!”

In 2012, 60 students participated in the RSPCA CARE program. In 2013, a total of 170 students participated in the program, and the program was expanded to accommodate the needs of secondary students.

It was evident the program created positive animal welfare outcomes by strengthening the students’ empathy towards animals, as well as improving their knowledge of the Five Freedoms. The program also provided students with a calm and safe environment to assist in trauma recovery, as well as a means to improve literacy in English language - factors essential to a pathway of empowerment for new arrivals to Australia.
CASE STUDY TWO

Education Training for the Animal Protection Society (APS) of Samoa

In collaboration with Animal Protection Society (formerly WSPA), RSPCA Victoria educators visited Samoa to consult and advise APS on current educational strategy. We undertook a targeted resource analysis with APS staff and sought to get a clear understanding of the educator’s role to identify and define the requirements of the program. We ascertained what the educator wanted to achieve and how to deliver effective programs, establishing a framework on which to create a future sustainable strategy for the APS education programs.

A passive lecture style was replaced with stimulating, inclusive multi-sensory experiences.

To assist the APS educator to meet the agreed outcomes of the project, we worked together to develop a totally new suite of engaging animal welfare activities that could be taken and adapted to a wider audience. We undertook mentoring sessions in the APS office before moving into the classroom to pilot and workshop the new activities. The pilot program was conducted over two days, to eight different classes.

We also refocused the APS Education program to include high quality Samoa-relevant photographs taken during our visit. PowerPoint presentations and printed handouts now utilise these culturally appropriate photographs and are accompanied by age-appropriate illustrations and messages.

An easily accessible library of Samoan images was established for ongoing use in educational resources and activities and a library of purpose drawn, friendly images suitable for animal welfare messages was provided for the educator’s use. A comprehensive set of seven flexible activities was developed addressing the required topics. These activities can be customised for the programs for various audiences, allowing a range of teaching topics and enabling the delivery of effective programs.
CASE STUDY THREE

Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust – community health program

Lake Tyers Aboriginal Trust (LTAT) is an indigenous community located approximately 30km from the popular tourist and fishing town of Lakes Entrance in East Gippsland, in eastern Victoria. In early 2007, an informal survey was conducted at LTAT which identified dog ownership rates were high. It was estimated at the time there may have been up to 120 dogs at the Trust. Few were registered, microchipped or desexed. Regular basic animal health care practices, such as vaccinations and parasite control, were uncommon.

There had been concern expressed about the dog population by our regional RSPCA Inspector, who was often in direct contact with the community, as well as the Executive of the Trust. These concerns were based on two main community issues: public health and a genuine concern for the animal welfare of the dogs in the community. There were reportedly a large number of unwanted and generally neglected animals that lived amongst the community and there was particular concern for many sick, underweight or injured animals. The dogs lived closely with the community, with free range of the entire site, where they were known to turn over rubbish bins looking for scraps of food, particularly after a community meal. There had also been concerns raised regarding the risk of zoonosis being spread throughout the community (especially the children) through contact with the dogs.

This outreach program consisted of a proactive, collaborative approach from RSPCA Victoria in consultation with the Executive Officer of the Trust, which aimed to implement animal welfare strategies within the Lake Tyers community to form the basis of future sustainable animal husbandry practices. It involved a visit from educators, Inspectors and veterinarians over a two day period, offering free health checks, desexing and education.

The RSPCA identified the need for the organisation to engage more actively with communities that were diverse in culture, religion, race and language. Engaging with target communities in a non-paternalistic manner creates a more receptive audience, allowing greater success in promoting animal welfare messages. The implementation of outreach education programs to inform and promote knowledge and responsibilities around animal welfare and pet ownership in culturally diverse communities is one major priority. Equally of importance is the ability to demonstrate sensitivity when engaging with diverse communities, as well as the use of participatory rather than top-down approaches. Support from leaders and high profile community members is imperative and this enabled the department to work collaboratively in creating resources.

The Lake Tyers program aimed to provide RSPCA with an opportunity to engage with this very important cultural group, develop connections, and demonstrate a willingness to be involved positively in the management of issues around dogs in the community.

Building positive relationships in new communities takes time, commitment and effort — our aim was to set up a welcoming space where we could establish trust and develop an authentic rapport. Everyone loves to talk about their animals, and this gave us a safe and common topic to discuss with community members when they initially presented their animals to our clinic hub. We were able to ask questions, listen and share experiences with community members, all simple behaviours that enabled both parties to feel trust and communicate more effectively.

A suite of activities was developed to sit alongside the animal health and desexing program and instant photo printers were a great addition to our Lake Tyers toolkit. Community members were able to have their photographs taken with their pets and these images were highly valued by the participants. We were aware of the cultural sensitivities around photographs and their use; however every person who visited the program gave us permission to take their picture with enthusiasm. This simple activity broke barriers and created an instant point of familiarity, that we too, value animals enough to think they should be included in photographs. From a welfare strategy, this access gave us the opportunity to make visual health assessments of the animals and determine what follow up might be needed.

By offering a photo as a gift, we created a bond that allowed us to take the next steps in offering advice or care, and instead of being viewed with suspicion or judgement, it was viewed as an extension of our mutual involvement with caring about animals.

Children, who attended the hub without pets, were able to dress up as vets and have their photo taken with a toy dog or cat. We sought to maximise their participation by offering age-appropriate activities whilst being engaging, culturally sensitive and enabled meaningful talk.

The visit was followed up via emails and telephone calls. The coordinator at the Health and Children’s Services reported that they were thrilled by the service provided; they felt a lot safer working in the community since the visit because there were less pregnant dogs and dogs with pups around, which were often quite aggressive. They also reported that the community members had told them they really appreciated the work and had all seen the benefits and hoped the program could continue.

The success of the education element of the program far exceeded our expectations and we believe this was due to our genuine efforts to build trust with community members. Time invested in engaging and responsive conversations yielded heart-warming results. Over two days, approximately 60 people participated in the program’s photo sessions, and many of these participants attended as a result of ‘word of mouth’ from earlier participants and just wandered down to say hello.

Variety of community members visited with their pets to have their photos taken.