



A Humane Education Afterschool Program Improves Empathy and Attitudes Towards Animals

Mia Nguyen
Dominican University of California



Introduction

Humane Education Programs are programs that are directed at promoting the development of pro-animal attitudes, respect for the eco-system, and humane behaviors. Such programs are increasingly being implemented by animal shelters and humane societies, both as classes such as summer camps and after school programs at the shelters and as programs brought into schools and other educational settings. The goal of these programs is to teach youth how to treat pets and wild animals humanely. Tardif-Williams and Bosacki (2015) for example found that children who attended a humane education summer camp program at an SPCA showed improvements on measures of attitudes towards and treatment of companion animals. At the same time, part of the motivation for providing these programs is the hope that by learning to respect other animals children also learn to treat other people better. The potential importance of humane education in changing how children treat other people can be appreciated in light of the well established association between cruelty towards animals and violence towards humans (Miller, 2001; Faver and Strand 2003; 2007). One rationale for humane education programs is that teaching children to treat animals humanely will have a positive impact on the participants attitudes towards themselves and other people (Arbour, Signal & Taylor, 2009; Faver, 2010).

Marin Humane (MH) in Marin County CA offers summer camps, shelter tours, after school shelter clubs, internships and other humane education programs which reach thousands of children in Marin country every year. The current study evaluated the effectiveness of the after school clubs at the MH in improving the participants attitudes towards animals and towards other human beings.

The MH provides two different types of after school service clubs for youth – one is the Animal Care Club which introduces 5th and 6th graders to the humane society's various programs and provides general information on animal care. The Roots and Shoots program involves participants of various ages in projects focused on advocating for animals and the environment. In these two programs, students engage in hands on projects, have presentations by various experts in animal behavior, engage in humane and animal oriented activities such as craft projects and readings, develop and host fundraising activities, participate in advocacy lessons, and assist in the work of the humane society, for example by assisting in the socialization of some of the animals. The animal club focuses more on basic animal handling and care topics, while Roots and Shoots explores the connectedness between people, the environment and animals. The two programs each meet for 1 ½ hours every other week for a semester (8 meetings in total).

The current study assessed the effectiveness of these programs in changing participants attitudes towards animals and towards other people. The primary goal of these programs is to expose youth to animals, teach them appropriate animal care, make them more aware of how to treat animals humanely and encourage them to become advocates for the care and wellbeing of animals. It would be expected that one outcome of a successful program would be an increased awareness of issues related to animal care and wellbeing. In addition, programs where young people are encouraged to help other living things – including animals – may increase their sense of empathy towards other human beings. Just as there is evidence for a link between cruelty towards animals and cruelty towards people (e.g. Gullone & Robertson, 2008), there is evidence that humane education programs may improve pro-social behavior in children. For example, Sprinkle (2008) found that a school based program that brought shelter animals into the classroom lead to a decrease in measures of aggressive behavior in school children.

Hypotheses

In the present study, it was hypothesized that participating in the after-school clubs at the Marin Humane would result in a more positive attitude towards animals. It was also hypothesized that participants would show improvements in their attitudes towards other people by scoring higher on a measure of empathy.

Figure 1. Scores on the Children's Treatment of Animals Questionnaire

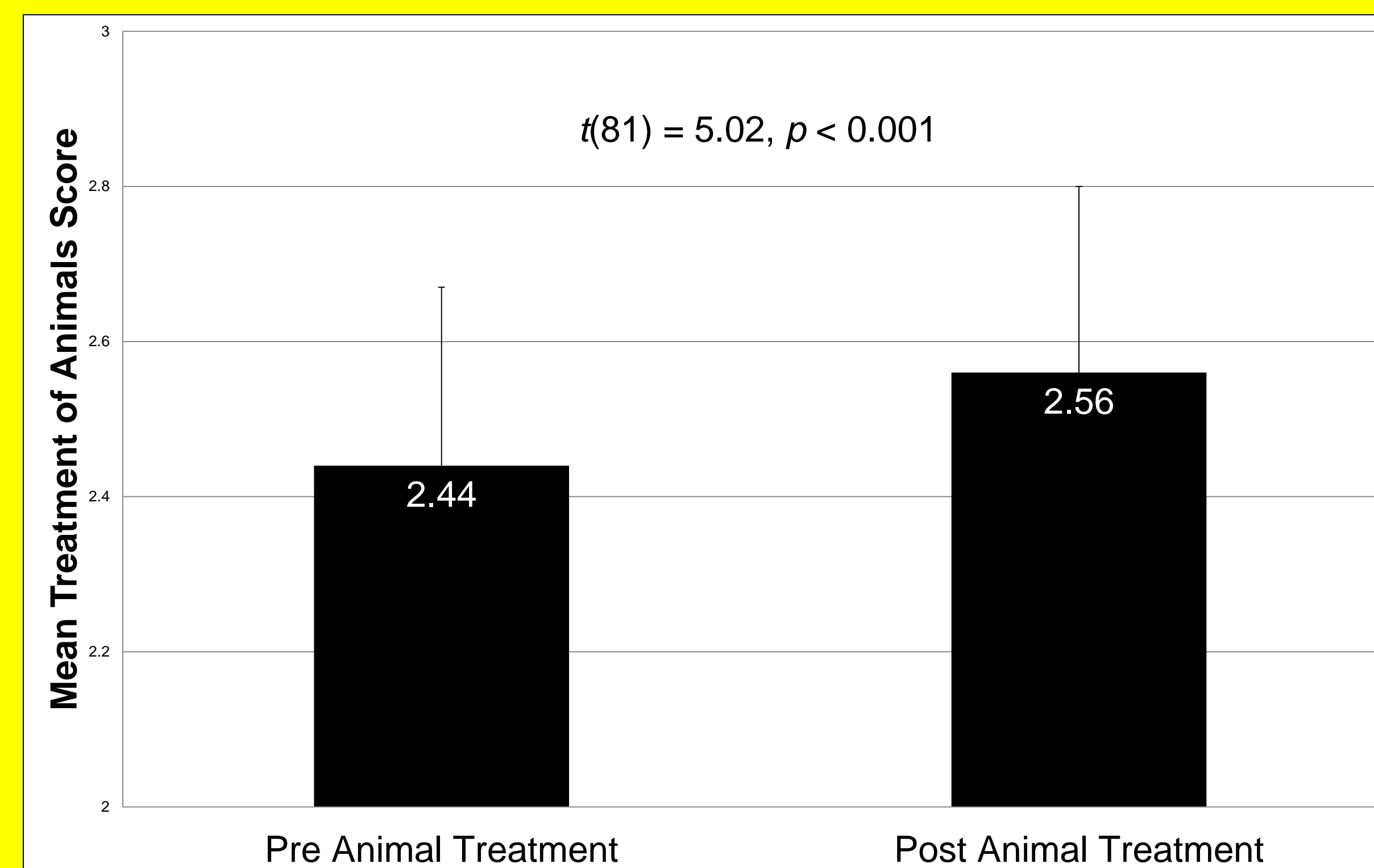
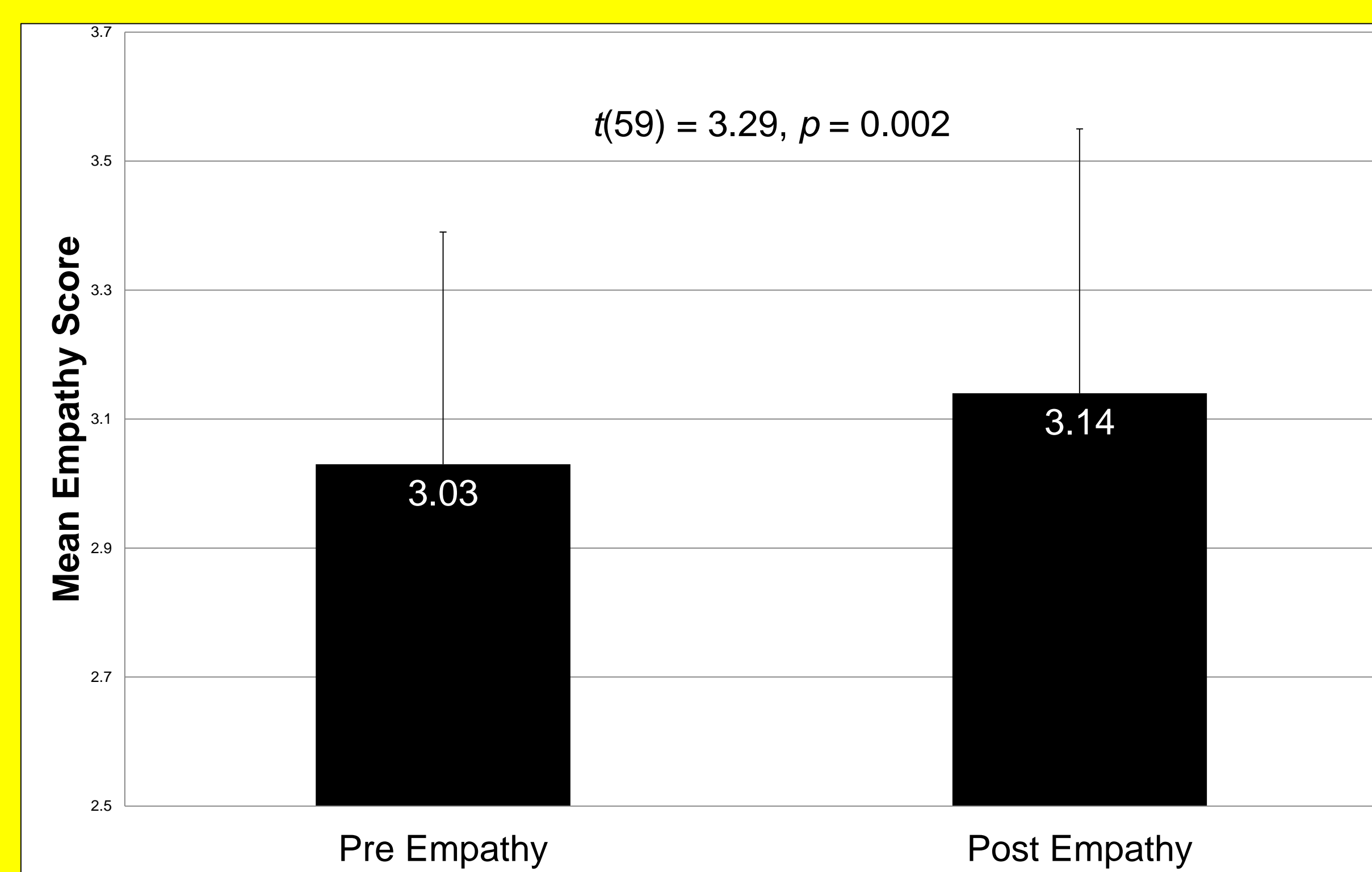


Figure 2. Scores on the Bryant Empathy Index for Children



References

- Arbour, R., Signal, T. & Taylor, N. (2009). Teaching kindness: The promise of humane education. *Society and Animals*, 17, 136-148.
- Thompson, K. & Gullone, E. (2003). The Children's treatment of Animals Questionnaire (CTAQ): A psychometric investigation. *Society and Animals*, 11, 1-15.
- Faver, C. (2010). School based humane education as a strategy to prevent violence: Review and recommendations. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32, 365-370.
- Miller, C. (2001). Childhood animal cruelty and interpersonal violence. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 21, 731-749.
- Sprinkle, J. (2008). Animals, empathy, and violence. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 6, 47-58.
- Tardif-Williams, C. & Bosacki, S. (2015). Evaluating the Impact of a Humane Education Summer-Camp. *Anthrozoos*, 28, 587-600.

Method

Participants

•257 students (162 females) 10 – 17 years of age (mean age=12.6, SD=1.8) enrolled in after school programs at the Marin Humane between the Fall of 2014 and the Spring of 2018.

Materials

•The Bryant Empathy Index of Empathy for Children and Adolescents (Bryant, 1983), a 22 item measure of empathy towards other people scored on a 4 point scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree

- Sample items: "Sometimes I cry when I watch TV", "I get upset when I see a girl being hurt"

•Children's Treatment of Animals Questionnaire (Thompson & Gullone, 2003). A 13 item measure of attitudes towards and treatment of animals scored on a 3 point scale from Often to Never

- Sample items: How often do you do the following with your pets; "Play with", "Tell my secrets to"

Procedure

Participants were enrolled in an afterschool program at the humane society that met for 1 ½ hours every other week for 8 weeks. In the program, students learned about the humane treatment of animals and the work of the shelter, had guest presenters including vets and animal experts lead discussions about how to treat animals, engaged in various educational and artistic activities related to animals, played animal themed games and participated in the care of socialization of animals at the shelter. Students whose parents agreed to participate in the study completed the pre-test questionnaire that included the measures and demographic questions on the first day of the program. They then completed the same measures at the last day of the afterschool club as part of a post-program survey.

Results

• Scores on the measure of treatment of animals increased after participating in the afterschool program compared to scores before (see Figure 1).

•Scores on the measure of empathy increased after the afterschool program compared to scores before (Figure 2).

Conclusions

•Participating in humane education programs resulted in improvements in self reports of treatment of and attitudes towards animals, and improvements in empathy towards other people

•These findings suggest that a relatively brief (1 ½ hours every other week for 8 weeks) program can have important beneficial effects on young participants empathy and humane attitudes. These types of programs should be encouraged and supported.

Limitations and Future Directions

•The current study did not include a control group of non-participants. Future studies should try to recruit some of the children who are not selected to participate in the afterschool programs to be part of a control group. As selection is by lottery, such a control group should help rule out the possibility that the changes found in the present study were due to the passage of time or to repeated testing

•Previous research has found that the effects of humane education programs vary depending on the age of the participants. We plan to continue assessing the afterschool programs in future years in order to collect a larger sample of participants of different ages

•Future studies will also investigate the effects humane education programs at other humane societies.