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Childhood Socialization and Companion Animals: United States, 1820-1870

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Between 1820 and 1870, middle-class Americans became convinced of the role nonhuman animals could play in socialization. Companion animals in and around the household were the medium for training children into self-consciousness about, and affection for, other creatures including, ultimately, other people. In an age where the formation of character was perceived as a matter of parental control, middle-class Americans understood cruelty to animals as a problem both of individual or familial deficiency and of societal failure. Teaching children to be self-conscious about kindness became an important task of parenting. Domestic advisors also argued that kindness was critical for boys who were developmentally prone to cruelty and whose youthful cruelty had implications both for their future and for the body politic. The practice of pet keeping, where children became stewards of companion animals who were the recipients of such virtues as gratitude and fidelity, became a socially meaningful act.

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