



My career as an educator began as a teaching assistant for writing and literature classes in college. Following graduation, I accepted a position teaching ESL in Japan. There I not only taught a wide range of students (elementary school, housewives, college students, and business people) but wrote and illustrated several textbooks as well.

After my return to the states I started my own online school known as “Write from the Start,” where I created and taught courses in journalism, food writing, memoirs, and nature essays. I also created courses on everything from computer science and Photoshop to crafting query letters for companies such as Ed2Go and Writers.com.

In 2008 I discovered the power of 3D virtual spaces where I was able to create immersive and interactive learning environments. My clients included:

- The National Library of Medicine, which hired me to develop an HIV/AIDS education program: <https://youtu.be/1-7ZzR6o9hk> and [https://youtu.be/1Q\\_umA2vQms](https://youtu.be/1Q_umA2vQms)
- US Bank, which hired me to help develop prototypes for banks of the future.
- Smith&Nephew, which hired me to help them prototype factory renovations and kanban programs
- Intersections International, which hired me to create the virtual version of their “Veteran Civilian Dialogues” a program that brought veterans and their families together to share their experiences of war: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPawua0c2G0>
- Johns Hopkins, which hired me to help create training for nurses treating COPD patients
- The US Army (through c4eis) which hired me to translate a technical, in-person training course into both an online and 3D learning program.

My most recent initiatives are CritterKin and Song Flight, both designed to help children between the ages of 8 and 12 develop the emotional intelligence and core literacy skills they need to become kind, competent adults:

- CritterKin: <https://www.braidedlives.com/critterkin>
- Song Flight: <https://Song-Flight.com>

Below are some pieces I've written exploring the importance of two of the major themes in my children's media properties - perfectionism and kindness.



[Change.org Petition](#) - Written in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and chronicling my 14-year journey as an advocate for kids and children's media developer.

On February 24, 2022, Vladimir Putin ordered the invasion of Ukraine. Since then, more than 1.8 million children have become refugees and are now living in other countries. There they struggle to come to terms with the trauma they experienced while adjusting to new languages, cultures, and schools. The 2.5 million children still living in Ukraine have been displaced and are living without basic necessities and the constant threat of violence.

If you're like me, you ask yourself every day, "What can I do to help?" To answer that question we must ask another, more troubling one – why do people like Putin exist?

**I believe the answer lies in one of our oldest and most fossilized institutions - education. What and how we teach our children has a huge impact on the kind of adults they become. In the current industrialized education model, children are treated like cars on an assembly line. Everyone must learn the same things, in the same way, on the same time schedule. At the end of this process, standardized tests and grades are used to measure, rank, and compare children to one another. From this, children learn that some are better and more deserving than others.**

But this approach to education ignores a fundamental truth uncovered by neuroscience. The human brain forms memories by hardwiring facts and feelings together. The two are inseparable. You don't get facts without feelings, but most educational institutions ignore or barely acknowledge the existence of emotions, labeling them "soft skills."

### ***My 14-year Journey***

I first learned about how much emotions impact learning in 2009 from a group of third graders in

rural Iowa. The kids told me that imperfect people are “dirty, bad, stupid, ugly, messed up losers.” To say I was stunned would be an understatement. Even more disturbing was the discovery that this belief was shared by children around the world. In elementary classrooms in more than 16 countries, I heard the same thing again and again. “Imperfect people are losers.” The kids knew intellectually that no one is perfect because we told them again and again. But that was not what they felt.

How was this possible? Why did young children understand one thing but feel another?

Once again, the answer lies in how the brain hardwires facts and feelings to create memories. Any adult knows that children who feel safe, seen, and supported learn better than those who are anxious, fearful, or insecure. That’s because when children experience negativity the emotional center of the brain (the amygdala) initiates the fight-flight-freeze response. At the same time, the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for learning, shuts down making it almost impossible for children to learn. Because our current education systems make light of feelings, the result is adults who do not have the social-emotional skills they need to deal with emotionally charged situations.

Which brings us back to the effects of the diaspora Putin has initiated in Ukraine. I shudder to think what the 1.8 million Ukrainian children who have been displaced by the Russian invasion have experienced so far. Imagine what it would be like to lose your home, family, friends, and pets - to be forced to leave everything you know and love behind and flee to another country where everything is unfamiliar. How do you think these children’s brains are responding to the shock and trauma?

The task facing us today is to help Ukrainian children recover while helping children around the world develop the emotional intelligence they’ll need to grow into kind, caring, and competent adults who won’t start wars.

### ***A New Approach to Acquiring Emotional Intelligence***

This petition is both a wake-up call and a call to action. I believe that our best chance to change the war-torn trajectory begun by Putin and others like him is to make programs specifically designed to teach both social-emotional and core literacy skills available to all children globally.

Please help me realize this goal by signing this petition, spreading the word about the need for emotional and literacy training, contacting changemakers who can champion this cause, and donating to make it possible for Ukrainian children (and other children affected by war) to take part in programs like Song Flight.

### ***What is Song Flight?***

Song Flight is a global initiative that brings children from around the world together to learn from and with one another. Based on my 14 years of experience, Song Flight uses stories, songs, and creative collaboration to help kids develop both their EQ and IQ.

To learn more about Song Flight and how to take part, visit <https://Song-Flight.com>



### [Why Do Students Think They Have to be Perfect?](#)

Opinion piece for Education Week, featured on Peter Dewitt's blog

*Why do even the youngest of students believe they are expected to be perfect? Does it come from within or from the adults around them?*

What is perfection? The word itself comes from "*perficere*," a Latin word meaning to complete or finish. Over time, however, perfection has taken on a more pernicious meaning. In today's terms, perfection has come to mean without fault, which in turn assumes that there is one right way to function or be in the world, and that mistakes (faults) are to be avoided at all costs.

We see this definition of perfection played out in our industrialized classrooms, where all students are expected to learn the same things, in the same way, on the same schedule. This mindset is further reinforced by standardized testing, which delivers the demoralizing message that some are better than others, and encourages competition, conformity and self-blame.

Rather than risk failure, students shut down their curiosity and creativity, becoming passive recipients of information that they then regurgitate on tests. This approach flies in the face of how human beings learn (we are emotion-driven, trial-and-error learners) and fails to prepare students for a world in which creative collaboration, innovative thinking and flexibility are the most sought after qualities in the workplace.

Back in 2010, as I was beginning my journey as a children's book author, I had little or no conscious awareness of perfectionism. Like most of my peers, I was a byproduct of the skill, drill, test and repeat model that today's students are struggling with. While I understood intellectually that no one is perfect, that didn't stop me, or my peers, from judging me harshly for making mistakes. I joked that I was a recovering perfectionist, but jokes did nothing to alleviate my suspicions that I would never be "*good enough*."

Fast forward to 2013. I had been invited to read from my book, *Lead with Your Heart*, to a combined class of first, second and third graders in Bolingbrook, Illinois. Following the reading I planned to teach the kids how to draw the main character in the book, a big, black pit bull named Lance.

After the reading, the kids raced to their cubbies to get pencils, paper and Crayons so we could start drawing. Excited chatter filled the air as they voted on which dog to draw. When I asked if they were ready to get started, a resounding, “Yes!” shook the classroom walls.

Imagine my surprise when just a few minutes into the exercise the kids’ expressions went from smiles to frowns, and I began to hear unhappy complaints. “*Mine is ugly,*” said one little girl.

“*This is stupid,*” said another, ripping a hole in his paper with his eraser.

“*I can’t do this,*” said a third.

“*Whoa, time out,*” I said. “*What’s going on? Why don’t you like your drawings?*”

“*Mine’s not perfect like yours,*” lisped the little boy directly in front of me.

That’s when I asked the million dollar question that would change my life and theirs. “*What do you think ‘not perfect’ means?*”

“*Stupid, ugly, messed up, dirty, bad!*” The words poured from their lips like a dam that had burst, filling the air with frustration, anger and self-blame. “*Weird, insane, gross, loser, dumb, broken, unhappy, different, rubbish, stinky, disgusting.*”

I didn’t try to stop them. In fact, I encouraged them to keep going, to get it all out while I scribbled the words down in my notebook. “*All done?*” I asked as silence fell. Silently the kids nodded. I glanced up at their teachers in the back of the room. Their faces were flushed and there were tears in their eyes.

“*Okay, good job,*” I said to the kids. “*I’m really glad you told me how you feel. Let’s talk about being perfect, okay?*”

Since that eye-opening day, I have seen the same scenario repeated in hundreds of classrooms around the world. While no longer surprised, I continue to be deeply disturbed and saddened, both for our children and for adults laboring under the illusion that they are flawed, broken or somehow undeserving because they are not perfect. What was needed, I decided, were ways to combat the myth and give students and their teachers firsthand experience making and learning from mistakes. The result was my book and related programs known as, “***The Not Perfect Hat Club***” (NPHC).

NPHC uses multimedia, story-driven projects to give students the chance to experience, discuss and express their feelings about perfection. Creative expression is a vital piece of the process, because it allows each child to discover, develop and share what makes him or her unique. In

addition, NPHC creative projects are collaborative, making the point that we are better together - that each person has a piece to contribute to our collective puzzle.

Creating The Not Perfect Hat Club started me on the road to recovery from perfection, but there are many other ways to combat the myth. Here are a few that educators have shared with me.

### **Teach the Whole Child - Heart, Mind and Body**

Breakthroughs in [neuroscience](#) have definitively proven that heart, mind and body are irrevocably intertwined. How a child feels emotionally has a profound impact on his/her ability to learn. Children who are anxious, upset, fearful or depressed cannot learn because their bodies produce chemicals that shut down higher cognitive functions.

### **Refuse to Data Dump**

Children are not empty hard drives waiting to be filled with facts and figures, but complex, emotional beings who are motivated by what interests and excites them. My new motto, reinforced by children themselves, is "*know your kids, grow your lessons.*" My job is not to impose preset lesson plans, but to get to know my students and adjust how I teach based on what gets them excited and helps them learn effectively.

### **Cultivate Mindfulness and Self-reflection**

Real learning (meaning the integration of information and experiences), requires: quieting the mind; being fully present in the moment; acknowledging but not judging thoughts, feelings and physical sensations; time to get to know one's heart and mind; and practice expressing thoughts and feelings.

### **Cultivate Empathy and Kindness Through Story**

Human beings are storytellers. Stories allow us to make sense of our world, and take down the walls of prejudice, fear and judgment. Giving children the opportunity to exercise their creativity, and explore who they are through a combination of storytelling and real-world projects, will teach important literacy skills, and help them develop into caring, compassionate and collaborative adults.

Finally, help your children fall in love with the iterative process of learning; to see mistakes and errors as stepping stones to discovery. Thomas Edison, who as a child was told he was, "too stupid to learn anything," said, "I haven't failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work." Make sure your students know that they are seen and encouraged to explore who they are, and that while perfection is not an option, excellence is!

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## **The Science of Kindness**

Blog post for CritterKin, LLC

Social-emotional skills are vitally important to the health and well-being of our children, but for

decades they've been labeled "soft skills" and all but ignored in most classrooms. This is true despite the fact that any teacher worth their salt will tell you that how students feel dramatically affects their ability to learn.

Happily, neuroscience is finally providing scientific proof that students who are anxious, fearful, hungry or angry are unable to learn well – literally. This is because negative emotions provoke the fright-flight-freeze response in the lower part of the brain, and shut down higher cognitive functions. But don't take my word for it, watch this simple, two-minute video explaining how it works by a pioneer in the field of neuroscience, Dr. Daniel Siegel:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gm9CIJ74Oxw>

The other exciting development in neuroscience has to do with the brain's plasticity, meaning its ability to change in response to experiences and training. Dr. Richard Davidson (the William James and Vilas Research Professor of Psychology and Psychiatry, Director of the Waisman Laboratory for Brain Imaging and Behavior, and Founder of the [Center for Healthy Minds](#) at the Waisman Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison) does a superb job of explaining neuro-plasticity in this presentation entitled, "[Well-being Is a Skill](#)." However, it all boils down to four scientific discoveries:

### **The Brain Changes and Shapes Itself in Response to Experiences**

Even though the brain is malleable and responds to training, most of us are simply reacting to the world around us. It's important to realize that we can teach, and give our children opportunities to practice, healthy responses to adversity. A challenge then becomes a chance to learn rather than something to be feared and avoided.

### **Genes are Dynamic**

The way in which our genes regulate and express themselves is dynamic. Davidson suggests we think of genes as having volume controls. The extent to which a gene's volume is turned up or down, or even on or off, can be affected by experience.

### **Bi-directional Highways Exist Between the Body and Mind**

The brain and body are interconnected and impact each other. Davidson calls these connections "bi-directional highways," and the health of one directly affects the health of the other. It should come as no surprise then, that people who are physically healthy tend to feel better emotionally and mentally. Likewise, we are discovering that by consciously directing our thoughts and feelings we can affect our physical health.

### **Innate Goodness**

Human beings are born innately good. This means that even a six-month-old baby, given a choice between a kind, warm-hearted experience and one that is aggressive and selfish, will always choose kindness. It is interesting to note that Davidson compares this innate propensity for kindness to our inborn capacity for language. In order for children to develop language, they must be immersed in and have plenty of opportunities to practice their language skills. The same is true for empathy, kindness, and compassion. Children need to be part of a

compassionate community that will nurture and encourage them to practice and strengthen their social-emotional skills to become kind and caring adults.

Much of what I just explained seems obvious. It makes sense because it is what “feels” right, and is what we as parents, teachers, mentors, and friends have seen and experienced with our own children. The fact that science is finally able to support what we know intuitively is just icing on the cake. However, it is the icing that has the potential to make a huge difference in what and how our children are taught.

Those of you who have met me or read one of my books know how passionate I am about this subject. I believe that the health and well-being of the planet and our species depend on raising our kids to be creative, outside- the-box thinkers. They need to see and appreciate the value of differences, be willing to roll up their sleeves and collaborate, and see mistakes as opportunities to learn. Most important of all, they must understand how their brains and emotions work, to understand that the inevitable kerfuffles and snafus of life are just part of being human.

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*Creating Kindness One Story at a Time*

## **Does Kindness Really Count?**

Guest blog for Champagne and Cheerios

It's 12:53pm on a Monday afternoon when I sit down at my desk, wake up my computer and prepare to connect with classrooms in Florida, Iowa, Minnesota and Texas. I've just finished transforming myself into Ms. Jenaia, the retired teacher turned dog trainer whose love of kids and canines plays a central role in all my [CritterKin](#) books. Dressed in Ms. Jenaia's signature overalls and floppy green hat, I will spend the next 45 minutes helping the kids experience and explore what it means to be kind through storytelling and creative, project-based learning. I can hardly wait!

Kindness is just the tip of the social-emotional iceberg of course. In order to become competent, caring adults they will need to master empathy, compassion, respect for differences and an appreciation for the often emotion-fraught process of collaboration as well. That's because the



world has changed. A recent study commissioned by Adobe Systems out of Stanford revealed that 65% of the jobs our children will hold have not yet been invented. That means employers are looking to hire people who are willing and able to adapt and learn new skills; people who are creative, outside-the-box thinkers who will help their companies rethink and reshape how business is done. Even more important are two important discoveries made by neuroscience:

- **Emotions Affect Learning:** Children who are anxious, angry, fearful and self-critical do not learn well. These emotions trigger the lower brain's "flight-flight-freeze response, thereby shutting down higher cognitive functions. Dr. Daniel Siegel, a pioneer in the field of neuroscience explains it beautifully in this short, two-minute video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gm9CIJ74Oxw>.

- **Neuroplasticity:** Our brains, particularly those of children, change and shape themselves in response to experiences. It's important to realize that we can teach and give our children opportunities to practice healthy responses to adversity. A challenge then becomes a chance to learn rather than something to be feared and avoided.

But today, as I log into my video conferencing program and adjust audio controls, future jobs and neuroscience are the last things on my mind. As each of the four classrooms comes online, we greet each other with an exuberant, "[Hello!](#)" and I jump feet first into the story of Ricky Bobby, a paralyzed puppy mill survivor who was rescued by kindness.

Together we read, discuss, draw and create plans for how to help others dogs like Ricky find their forever homes. By the time our 45 minutes together is over, all the learning I could hope for has taken place. The kids have improved their listening, vocabulary and self-expression skills. They have reflected on and used their creativity to express and share their feelings.

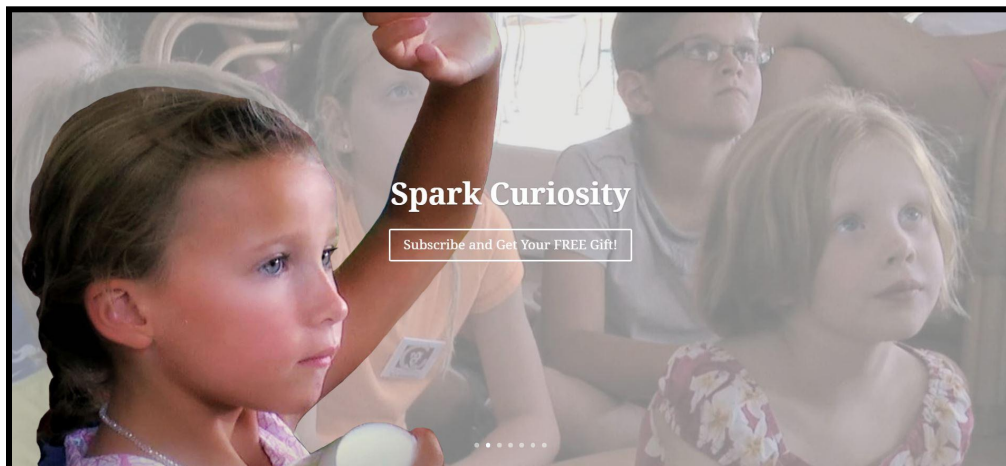
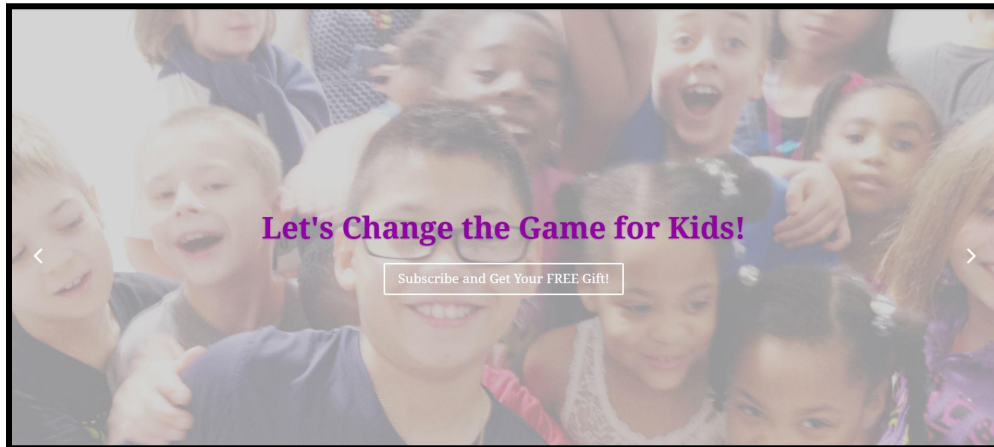
***Most important of all, they have learned that proactive kindness can make a difference in the lives of other living creatures in the real world.***

**Make no mistake about it. KINDNESS COUNTS!**



## The CritterKin Message

Below are the series of header images developed for the CritterKin website articulating the goals of education systems that include social-emotional learning and creative collaboration between children from around the world.







An 8-week campaign in collaboration with the Canadian Federation of Humane Societies that included videos and a weekly post by one of the CritterKin dogs discussing a topic or theme that was relevant to both the federation and CritterKin. Here is the PSA created for the project:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3nMCAv6vKU>



### Meet the CritterKin Mutts

Welcome to the CritterKin world of mixed breed mutts – a place where pups withchutzpah tackle the challenge of “puppy training” their people, and kids learn the invaluable lesson that animals (Critters) are family (Kin).



The first item on the “to do” list is to choose a CritterKin Ambassador to work with the kids and families who visit the Finding Fido site. Each of the 8 CritterKin candidates will post an application for you to read and consider. To learn more about the job opening, requirements, and posting dates, visit [this link](#).

### Applicant #1 : Clue

Breed: Maltese-poodle mix  
Age: 5 years



Dear Finding Fido:  
It is my pleasure to apply for the position of CritterKin Ambassador. As the self-appointed VIC (very important canine) of the CritterKin pack, I have extensive experience managing mutts and ensuring that their behavior complies with accepted canine standards of conduct. I have also memorized and mastered the “Rules of the Pack,” and strive to be an exemplary role model for my fellow canines.

Like all graduates of the CritterKin program, I am trained in both the basics of dog care and the “Power of Play” program developed by Ms. Jenaia, the CritterKin pack leader. For those who are unfamiliar with “Power of Play,” it is both a belief and a technique. Ms. Jenaia believes that all learning should be fun and has introduced elements of play into all CritterKin classes.

I myself have had the good fortune to apply the “Power of Play” principles when training my person Melissa. Like most humans, Melissa initially lacked discipline and focus. This resulted in some obedience issues. However, with patience and persistence she is now able to give clear, positive instructions while walking on a leash, and no longer uses long, incomprehensible strings of words when speaking to me. She still has a tendency to lose her focus and stops often to talk to other dog owners, but I see that as a challenge as opposed to a serious issue.

In your job posting, you asked about children. I confess they are not my strong suite as my interactions with them have been limited to brief encounters at the dog park. Based on these encounters, I would say that the top 3 things children need to know about dogs are “respect, self-control” and “place in the pack.” Children must respect a dog’s view of the world, which is often different from their own. They must also learn to exercise self-control in order to ensure that a dog is not frightened or injured. Finally, they must know their place and role in the pack so that there are no misunderstandings about who is in charge.

As the CritterKin VIC, I believe that my inherent leadership skills combined with my thorough grasp of pack protocol and mastery of CritterKin techniques make me uniquely qualified to become Finding Fido’s CritterKin Ambassador. I am hoping that during my time in this position I can manage to bring clarity and direction to the program. I am also exceptionally good at taking walks, which will undoubtedly help the Finding Fido staff cope with stress and shed any unwanted weight.

If you have any questions or would like personal references, please don’t hesitate to contact me.

Clue

**More ...**

- When dog-buyers make bad decisions...
- Not ready for a full-time Fido?
- Fido’s 15 questions
- What to do if you have lost or found a dog

**Recent posts**

- Coat the Bubbly Bundle of Fun
- Pet Detectives in the Globe and Mail
- Penn Vet study finds pet store puppies come with increased risk

**Share your story**

Do you have a story to share about how you found your dog?  
Help other Fido-seekers learn from your experience! Submit your story, photos, or video [here](#).

**Donate Now**

Help the CFHS stop the cycle of abuse

# International Fund for Animal Welfare

I wrote a book (Poco a Poco) for the launch of the IFAW's "Cats Dogs and Us" campaign. It was based on an actual story and situation in Cozumel, Mexico. Below is the campaign artwork and poster that was sent to more than 24,000 schools promoting the program.

## OUR SHARED HISTORY

These extraordinary animals have been with us for a long time.

<p><b>AROUND 20 MILLION YEARS AGO</b> First members of the modern cat family appear.</p>	<p><b>AROUND 6,000 YEARS AGO</b> Wildcats approach Egyptian farms—with their large rodent populations—and domestication there begins.</p>	<p><b>1981</b> Cats, one of the most successful musicals of all time, hits the stage.</p>
<p><b>12,000 – 15,000 YEARS AGO</b> Hungry wolves approach human habitats and become domesticated over time.</p>	<p><b>ABOUT 2,000 YEARS AGO</b> Dogs first appear in literature in Marcus Terentius Varro's <i>De Re Rustica</i>.</p>	<p><b>AROUND 1918</b> First guide-dog training schools are established in Germany.</p>

**ABOUT 28 MPH**  
45 KPH

**ABOUT 31 MPH**  
50 KPH

**ABOUT 35 MPH**  
56 KPH

How fast can cats and dogs run compared to us? Don't blink or you'll miss them!

# CATS, DOGS & US

## WE'RE ALL PART OF THE PACK.

There are hundreds of millions of cats and dogs on the planet. They have been part of human communities around the world for thousands of years.

### BODY TALK

Cats and dogs don't just communicate with meows and barks. They use their whole bodies.

DOGS	CATS
Let's play!	Purr!
Bark off!	Hiss!
I'm curious.	Sniff!
I like you.	Nuzzle!

### JUST A FEW OF THE THINGS WE WOULD MISS

How do you think life would be different without cats and dogs?

Protection

Love

Sense of Community

Laughter

FUN!

### NOSE KNOWS

A dog's sense of smell is **10,000 times** more powerful than ours.

One sniff can tell a dog almost all she needs to know about another dog:

- Boy or girl dog
- Age
- Mood
- Health

### PACK PACT

Over the centuries, we've established a DEAL with cats and dogs. If we're good caretakers to them, they will give us so much in return!

### CATS BY THE NUMBERS

32

Number of muscles cats use to control the outer ear (humans have 6)

6x

ITS BODY LENGTH

Distance a cat can leap (that's like a human leaping the length of a bus)

### DOGS WORKING TOGETHER

Humans have partnered with these four-legged coworkers in many ways.

Herd livestock	Protect crops
Hunt rodents	Rescue humans
Provide friendship	

Visit [IFAW.ORG](http://IFAW.ORG) for more about Cats & Dogs.

## Education Videos

Storyboarding and video content by Jena Ball

- **CritterKin's First Year:** <https://youtu.be/LQQrG6yERis>
- **Why CritterKin:** <https://youtu.be/LhWQWeEijYY>
- **Preparing Kids for the Joy of Pet Ownership:** <https://youtu.be/LhWQWeEijYY>
- **PBS Visits CritterKin:** <https://www.youtube.com/live/pHpAUZqTK9E?feature=share>
- **Bella Weighs In:** <https://youtube.com/shorts/7aYvuGY8wnk?feature=share>
- **Best Library Day Ever:** <https://youtube.com/shorts/Z65TbutjSWA?feature=share>