

Elementary and Middle School Focus Group Interview Data

Throughout the 2008-2009 school year Talking Talons Youth Leadership presented its wildlife and conservation education program to students at elementary and middle schools in Albuquerque, Edgewood and Moriarty, New Mexico. The program sought to improve student knowledge and attitudes towards the study of science and to increase student awareness of substance abuse issues. The program curriculum focused on teaching communication skills, fostering positive attitudes towards wildlife and environmental issues, building self-esteem, and increasing science knowledge.

Qualitative data for the evaluation was collected in a series of focus group interviews of students at the participating school sites. The student focus groups consisted of eight students chosen from each class, four males and four females respectively. Separate interviews were conducted for boys and girls. From April to May of 2009 a total of 14 interviews were conducted with 56 students in the 5th, 6th, and 7th grades at A. Montoya Elementary School, and Moriarty and Roosevelt Middle Schools. Six participating students from Moriarty High School, three males and three females were also interviewed. The student interviews sought to gather information about the program in the following areas:

- Students' general level of satisfaction with the program
- Effects on students of participating in peer-to-peer education and wildlife presentations
- Changes in student attitudes towards wildlife and the environment
- Changes in student attitudes towards science as a subject in school

- Changes in behavior related to choices and decision-making

Each focus group interview was transcribed and the evaluator conducted a data analysis process in which the responses to each interview question were collected together. Each set of responses was coded for gender and grade level. The data was examined and further sorted into themes and categories by the evaluator.

The results of the interviews and the interpretation process are in the sections that follow. To protect student confidentiality transcripts of the interviews are not appended. However, quotes that typify the students' responses are used to illuminate the analysis.

- **What have you enjoyed most about participating in the Talking Talons Youth Leadership program?**

Meeting, handling and learning about the animals were clearly the parts of the program the majority of students found most enjoyable. The students' felt the experiential activities with the animals promoted learning in several ways. Several students expressed a new level of respect for the animals along with appreciation for the level of trust and responsibility that handling the animals and participating as a peer educator indicated:

“I liked interacting with the animals. We learn better that way. Holding the animals is different then just looking at them. I felt closer to the animal.”

“We got to see animals we don’t normally see. The only place I would see animals like this would be in the zoo, and even then, you don’t really get to learn about them like we did in Talking Talons. We learned about their habitats, how they help the environment because they are part of the ecosystem, and how some of them were hurt because of actions people took.”

Some students felt that the hands on nature of the program made learning science more exciting and promoted an engaged learning environment:

“I was surprised at how much fun the Talking Talons program was. The activities and working with the animals was the best part and I feel like that made me more interested in the actual science part of the program.”

“I liked holding and seeing the animals. I liked doing the teamwork problems and having to solve them. We had to work together to solve the problems and that made me understand the problem better and the difference we can make in solving it.”

Students expressed appreciation for being able to observe the animals up close and for the trust given to them in handling the animals by the Talking Talons educators:

“I liked learning about the animals and the habitat they live in. Talking Talons made learning have a lot more sense because you could understand what they

meant when they were teaching us new things about animals. And if you didn't get it then you could ask questions and then you would understand it. Having the animals actually there while they were talking about them, and allowing us to hold them and touch them, made me remember facts about them a lot more."

Another large group of student responses focused on the hands-on and experiential nature of the program. Students cited specific activities, fieldtrips, incentives, role-plays, games and presentations as favorite elements of the program. Their comments reflect a healthy and rich learning environment:

"I liked seeing the animals and doing the activities. We did this thing where we had string, we had to throw it across to other people, and we learned how everything is connected on this planet."

"I liked the activities we got to experience. Instead of just being bored by reading a book, we got to interact with the animal and learn about it, what makes it tick, how it lives in the environment and how it helps the environment."

"I liked the presentations, the activities and holding the animals. The activities we did helped me learn more about the animals and the Talking Talons program. It's more fun when you actually do things, rather than just sit there and read out of book."

“I enjoyed the activities the best. One of them was when we each had a piece of corn and we had to put pesticide on the corn, then a cricket ate the corn and a bird ate the cricket. Then the bird dies because of the pesticide that was on the corn. We learned about the life cycle that way and how important each thing is in the life of an animal and how it affects us and how we affect the environment. That was a cool activity.”

Whereas the females showed a preference for learning and seeing the animals, the males preferred learning and handling the animals:

Females:

“I liked having the live animals there and seeing them. I didn’t like holding them so much but seeing them up close was cool and I learned a lot about them.”

“I liked actually seeing the animals, not so much holding them. You could see what the teacher was talking about when she pointed out things about the bird feathers, and places on its body. It’s hard to see that when you just read about it in a book.”

“I liked the animals, getting to see them and what they were like up close. Holding them was not my favorite thing to do.”

Males:

“I liked holding the animals, and going to the actual place of the Talking Talons center. I liked actually getting up close to see and hold the animals and learning how they ended up at Talking Talons.”

“I liked holding the different animals and getting to see what they are like instead of just seeing them in pictures.”

“I liked holding the snakes. We got to see what the impact on the environment was with these animals.”

“I liked holding and seeing the animals that we only would talk about in regular science. It was much better than just reading about the animals.”

- **In what ways has doing the presentations helped you?**

Encouraging students to take part in presentations to their peers is a major component of the Talking Talons program. Student responses indicated a high level of satisfaction with their experiences as peer-to-peer educators. Students’ felt this activity helped them in several ways, including helping to build confidence, self-esteem and leadership skills. Many students reported that the presentations had helped them overcome the fear of public speaking:

“I think the presentations built my confidence. I’m pretty shy, but I think I can talk in front of others now. I’m not so nervous and I learned how to get prepared when talking in front of an audience.”

“It helped me learn better and not be afraid to talk in front of a group because I’m really afraid to do that. I learned to relax when I talked and you could tell when someone wasn’t prepared. They would twist their foot and ask the audience how to pronounce words, and they would be constantly looking at their notes, and read them instead of paraphrasing the notes. I didn’t want to look like that so I really tried hard to follow what our Talking Talons teacher taught us to do and be prepared.”

“I think that learning how to talk in front of the class gave me more courage and confidence. I’ve never liked doing that, but I’m not so scared anymore. It gets easier every time.”

Other students felt that presenting to others had helped them with their organization and study skills and to learn:

“It helped with my study skills because before I used to take notes and copy everything down. But now I know how to pick out the important topics, take notes and how to talk about them.”

“I learned how take good notes, and make good outlines, then put it on note cards. Then we learned how to not put in whole sentences, just put facts and how to talk about those facts. We have other presentations in other classes and what I learned in Talking Talons helped me.”

“I learned how to take notes when others were talking so I was able to learn lots of different facts. Also, Talking Talons helped me with my science fair project. When the teacher is talking now I understand what I should be writing down instead of every word.”

“We aren’t scared to speak in front of large groups and Talking Talons put us in with other people to work with other than our friends, that way we would learn to get along with everyone. We learned to take facts and put them in paragraphs and how to make the paragraphs flow together instead of jumping around from fact to fact.”

“I learned about the animals’ habitats. I learned how to get organized with the information we learned about the animals. I learned how to set my information from most important fact to least important fact and I’ve used this in other classes. This has really helped me with learning new information.”

Several students mentioned that the opportunity to hold the animals while doing the presentations helped keep them calm while doing their presentation and learn effective public speaking and study techniques:

“I learned to not be so nervous when I speak, because if I was nervous the animal I was holding would have been nervous too. After awhile I was less nervous about talking in front of people.”

“They helped me stand in front of the class and talk. At the beginning of Talking Talons the first person did not want to go up there and it but now we are fine with it. I learned to not stutter, look at the audience and not just the notes. When we held the animals, that helped us to not be nervous too because that would scare the animal.”

“I learned to not be nervous. The educator taught us that we needed to be as calm as when we hold the animals. The animals get nervous if we are nervous so that helped me realize that I could control how nervous I got when I spoke in front of an audience. I learned to practice what I was saying and if we had big words to say, we learned to sound them out so we could say them correctly when we were in front of others.”

“I learned communication skills and organization skills with my notes. We learned how to stay calm when speaking which affects the animals because they can pick up when you are nervous.”

Some students felt that doing the presentations played an important opportunity to teach others what they learned and to be a role model for others:

“I learned how to take care of the animal better because I had to teach others about this. I learned new information as I was studying about the animal.”

“We learned how to present to people, how to have eye contact and to not fake smile. Not to scream or yell, but to talk in a calm voice. We learned to keep our eyes on the people. We learned more about the animals because we had to teach others about them. I learned to not scream or yell when talking because we couldn’t scare the animals.”

Another group of students felt that the presentations were helping them acquire important public speaking skills that would be useful in other situations:

“I learned how to present well, how to start and how to finish a presentation, and to not be afraid to do that. I also learned how to answer questions from the audience. I know I’ll have to do that again in other classes.”

“I’ve been able to apply the things we learned to a different class. I learned how to take notes and rephrase things instead of just copying them down. This helped me in Language Arts and when we had to present on a different country.”

Several students mentioned that the presentation helped them get over their fear of being around animals and understanding them better:

“I learned how the animals live and what they eat. Also their habits and what is cool is that some of these animals live right near us but I would never had a chance to get so close to them except from Talking Talons.”

“Because I was the one talking about the animal I got more comprehension about the animal and the topic I was talking about.”

“I think I understand the animal better now. Also, I had to learn memorize more and not read my paper. We had to look at the audience and stand up straight, and not get nervous.”

“We were given information to study on our animal so we had to learn a few more things than the other students. I learned what caused things to happen with the animals and how you suffer the consequences of your actions. When you kill a bird you might be taking it away from it’s babies, then the babies won’t survive.

Being in Talking Talons has made me think of whether I want to hunt animals or not.”

Other students mentioned they developed teamwork skills and consideration and empathy towards other students and towards the animals by learning presentation skills that forced them out of their comfort zone:

“I learned how to memorize and be more confident. Also, I learned to not judge people so quickly because I didn’t want them judging me if I made a mistake.”

“I learned that everyone has their own part in an assignment and you needed to follow through on what your assignment was. Some kids didn’t study and you could tell they weren’t prepared. You could really tell who studied and did their part like the Talking Talons educator taught us.”

“I learned how to organize information and to not let my classmates down if I was supposed to learn something or get some information for them. We had a project where we had to rely on each other to pull it together. I actually forgot some of my paperwork and I realized how it affected everyone else because I didn’t have my act together.”

“The presentations helped me learn to work in groups and how others rely on you. I learned to work as a team.”

- **What impact has participating in the program had on your personal attitude or feelings toward science?**

The majority of students felt there had been a causal relationship between participating in the Talking Talons program and liking science more. For some participating in the Talking Talons program had a profound impact on their attitude:

“I think science is easier now because it’s easier to understand. And when it’s easier to understand I learn better and I can learn more because I’m not worried and thinking about something I don’t understand. Talking Talons helped open my mind up more so that I can understand the animals better.”

“Talking Talons makes learning about science more interesting. Most ways about learning science is not fun and is boring, but Talking Talons made me see that science can be fun. If the teachers would actually allow us to do things in science like we do in Talking Talons, I would enjoy it more.”

“I like science better now. I pay attention on days we have Talking Talons and I read all the information we are supposed to. I remember more facts that our Talking Talons teacher tells us about the animals than I do with our regular teacher.”

Several students experienced a raise in their grades in science and felt that this was directly attributed to their participation in the Talking Talons program:

“I like science better now. My grades have gone up and I pay attention more because it’s not boring. Much better than just reading from a book.”

“I like science more now, it’s not as boring as before. Also, Talking Talons has helped me do better in my humanities and my English class. We have to do presentations in those classes too, so I learned ways to study better and make me a better speaker too.”

“I like science better now. Talking Talons has helped me see that hands on science is where I do best and that I can get good grades. Also, it helps me pay attention more because I don’t think science is so boring.”

Even those students who already had positive attitudes towards science saw a maintenance effect to participating:

“I make good grades in science and I’ve always liked it. But Talking Talons makes it fun and exciting. I like science class better now because it’s not so boring.”

“I’ve always liked science too but I like it better since we’ve been in the Talking Talons program.”

The hands-on aspect of the program seemed to add to the level of understanding of information and enjoyment by the students. In general the students’ stated that Talking Talons had enlivened their science program and made the subject fun and interesting:

“I’ve always liked science. But before all we did was read out of a book, but in Talking Talons we got to actually DO things with the animals and with the activities. I think I learned a lot more in Talking Talons.”

“I disliked science before, but I like it more now. In the past, science was boring. We always had to read out of a book, sometimes we saw videos. But getting to see the animals and touch them, it’s much more interesting.”

A number of students also made it clear that they much preferred the Talking Talons program’s approach to the traditional textbook-based approach to science:

“I like science and I like learning about animals. So Talking Talons just made it even better for me. I can see the difference in how you learn things and I wish all classes were taught the Talking Talons way, like everything hands on.”

Students' also made some broader connections to learning in the sciences following their experiences in the program. They felt the program had engaged them in a bigger picture of what science could be:

“I've always like science but being in Talking Talons was a lot more fun. Talking Talons helped me see important animals are to our environment and the impact they have on us. It also made me care about them more. It makes science more understandable to me.”

“I only liked science before because I was good at it. Now I like it because I think it's interesting.”

There were no negative responses to this question. Most of the students who reported that the program had little or no impact on their attitude towards science qualified their responses by stating that they had always felt neutral about science.

- **Think back to before you were in the program. How has your attitude changed toward wildlife and the environment since you've been in the program?**

Students' reported a variety of changes in personal perspective towards wildlife following their participation. Their responses showed increased levels of understanding towards the animals and viewing wildlife as fellow creatures, capable of feelings, and of experiencing problems and difficulties:

“My attitude is better now towards the environment and wildlife. I care more for animals since I can see how what we do hurts them. They are part of the web of life. Some of the things that we do hurts the animals, like using pesticides or when someone throws a cigarette butt on the ground and an animal thinks its food. A bird can take it to its nest and, or try and eat it and get sick.”

Many of the students expressed increased empathy and a protective spirit towards animals:

“I’m not as mean to animals. I like to hunt with my Dad but now I’m not sure I want to do that since I learned what happens when you take an animal out of the ecosystem and how it might hurt another animal that you might not have thought of.”

“I care more for the animals now. I never really thought about how what we did hurt the animals. My parents smoke all the time and they don’t throw their butts on the ground now because they know if I see it I’ll talk to them about how that hurts the animals.”

“I take better care of all animals because we learned about his big web of life and how everything is connected. One of the activities we did was learn how the whole ecosystem works and how all living creatures are connected. The animals

and people need each other. It's important that we take care of the animals because they take care of us in their own way by being part of the web of life."

Some students saw themselves as less fearful of animals or the environment which helped them enjoy them both more:

"One thing I learned is that not all snakes are poisonous and how to act around certain animals."

"I used to be scared of all wild animals but now I know they are just as scared of me. I'm not so scared of them and I would help them if I had to. Talking Talons helped me get over my fear of snakes too."

Students' also reflected on changes in perspective towards the environment, and their awareness of the impact of personal choices on wildlife habitat and environmental cycles. Several students spoke of the awareness they had of the impact of their choices on the ecosystem and the connections between themselves and other living things:

"My attitude has kind of changed. I've always cared about wildlife but I think I notice litter more now because there's a lot of it around here. I see all the human imprints around us. We learned about that in Talking Talons, like all the things that people leave in the natural environment that can hurt the animals. I never really noticed that before."

“I didn’t really know about pesticides and how that hurts animals and how the poison can go from one animal to the other depending on who eats who. Also, I know now some of the things that people do that hurt the animal but lots of people don’t even know they are doing this.”

“Now I know what DDT does to animals. I never knew that. I would never want to participate in anything that had anything to do with DDT or hurting animals with it. Farmers use that for a pesticide. They need to learn others ways to control pests because using DDT hurts the animals.”

“We learned about this oil rag and how because it was left on the property, it would eventually decompose, or could poison the well water, or start fires in the forest. You would never think about what some of the consequences could be way in the future.”

“I think I’m more conscious now about what I do with the environment, like one piece of trash when it gets thrown out, it affects a lot more than just pollution because an animal might pick it up and choke on it, or take it to its nest and make the babies sick.”

“We’ve always cared about the environment because we recycle and stuff like that. But now that I know how to help some of the animals by calling Talking

Talons, and how people hurt the animals by what they do like leaving oily rags out and throwing cigarette butts on the ground, or leaving plastic rings from bottles where the birds can choke on them, I think I care more about wildlife.”

For some students the changes they reported were behavioral rather than attitudinal. Several students provided powerful examples of behavioral changes that they attributed to their participation in the program in particular towards smoking or towards others who smoked:

“I’ve always cared about wildlife and the environment but now I notice litter and pick it up. Before I would only pick up my own litter but now I pick up litter if I see it on the street or something.”

“I told my family about human imprints and we all went out in the desert and found so much like trash, plastic bottles, dirty clothes. We even found an old mattress and I told them how animals might think some of this was safe and how it could hurt them. We found lots of cigarette butts too and picked them up.”

“My family never really recycled or anything before Talking Talons, but now we do. We even have a special place for cans and glass and newspapers. My mom always asks me what I learned in Talking Talons and I tell her and then she helps me try to do the things I learned in class. I hope my little brother can be in a Talking Talons class one day.”

For students who felt the program had little or no impact on their attitude towards wildlife and the environment, the majority stated that this was because their pre-existing attitude was very positive.

- **We all make choices regarding our behaviors. How has being in the Talking Talons program changed the way you think about the choices you make?**

Students' responses to this question often revolved around the program's impact on their decision-making processes, and how it had influenced the way they thought about personal choices and consequences:

“Smoking affects the animals too because of second hand smoke. I never really thought about that and now we make my mom go outside to smoke because we have 2 dogs and 2 cats and I don't want them to get the smoke. I never want to take up smoking.”

“I knew about the effects of drugs and tobacco but Talking Talons showed some of the worse things. How people cough up this stuff because they smoke was really gross. I don't understand why anyone would even want to try a cigarette after seeing that, especially since you learn you can get addicted fast. Same as drugs. My mom and dad used to smoke but they don't now.”

“I learned to that you suffer from decision that you make. Like it I get in trouble here at school, then I’ll be in trouble with the principal and its my own fault. I might try to blame it on someone else, but I learned that lots of what happens in our life is because we created it. I learned from the smoking unit, what happens when you smoke. I will never even try a cigarette after seeing that.”

“I learned that we control how much water we use and that we waste a lot of water and we don’t realize it. I take shorter showers now. I recycle and pick up trash now but I didn’t do that before.”

“I used to go shooting with my big brother and we would try to get any animal that just came up around our yard. Now I don’t do that. We think about whether it would be hurting another animal, like maybe we are shooting the mother of some baby animals or something.”

For some students’ the impact was on future choices:

“I think that one thing different in my choices is how when you make a decision on something, like to smoke a cigarette, it ends up affecting a lot more than just yourself. Even though what it does to a person is really bad, the second hand smoke hurts the environment and the animals, and then the cigarette butts really hurt the animals too. My parents have always smoked and now I see how that is hurting me and my dog. So I would make a choice to not ever start to smoke.”

“I don’t think I would want to ever smoke after finding out what smoking does to you. I mean, I’ve always heard people say ‘don’t smoke’ but one good thing about the Talking Talons program is that they show you why you shouldn’t smoke.”

“I would choose not to smoke. Everyone in my family smokes and I have asthma so I’ve stayed away from it, and from the examples that our Talking Talons educator brought to show us, I now have the proof of how bad it is for you.”

Caring for animals and the environment and caring for themselves and each other were some of the connections that students made. Some students felt compelled to make the choice of sharing the information they had learned in the program with others:

“When I see other kids being cruel to animals, I tell them ‘no’ and to stop it now. I might not have done that before but now that I have facts and I know about these animals I feel close to them. They can’t talk. We need to talk for them and defend them if we need to.”

“I don’t want to smoke either. It was pretty bad what they showed us in the jar. I’m trying to get my Dad to quit smoking. At least he goes outside now, but we learned how smoking affects the animals too, even our pets.”

“My parents smoke a lot and so does my grandma. I wish she would stop and I tell her why she should quit. She’s trying and she says its because I’ve taught her things that I’ve learned in Talking Talons.”

“I know my big sister smokes and so do her friends. I told her about what I learned in Talking Talons and how smoking hurts you and people around you and the animals and she says she does it because all her friends do it. So, I guess a choice for me is to have friends that don’t smoke because I never want to start. It’s really addicting.”

“My parents are hard core smokers too. When they need one they just stop the car, get out and smoke no matter where we are. But I’ve been talking to them about what I learn in Talking Talons and they think about it now, and they joke about it when they feel like having a cigarette and say things like: “I better be careful. The smoking police is here.” And so I know that what I’m saying to them is making a difference. But they are both addicted and I know I can’t change them but I do know for sure that I won’t smoke cigarettes when I get older. I don’t even want to try one.”

“My Mom and her parents, they all smoke. But then they made a rule that they had to smoke outside and when it got cold outside they wanted to come inside. But when I learned what smoke does to you, like second hand smoke, we

wouldn't let them come in and now my grandma quit smoking. I tell them what I learn in Talking Talons. I don't think they like hearing it, but I tell them anyway."

Students' also reported feeling more respectful for wildlife habitat and environmental issues, and more aware of the impact of the choices they made:

"I used to get grasshoppers and take all their wings off, but I don't do this anymore. And I don't hurt crickets anymore either. I used to blow them up with firecrackers."

"A choice that I have made is to pay attention to some little things that didn't used to make a difference with me. Like now I take shorter showers to save water. And I try to recycle plastic bottles and cans. And pick up litter that is flying around that someone else left."

"I'm kinder to animals. Also, I think that if I saw an animal that was hurt I would know to call Talking Talons to come and get it. Before I probably wouldn't do anything to help it, not because I didn't want to, but because I wouldn't know what to do. Now, I know what to do."

"I think Talking Talons has made me think about how we hurt the animals when we think we are helping ourselves. The animals can't speak for themselves so we have to learn about them and before we make decisions should think about them."

- **Would you recommend the Talking Talons Youth Leadership program to others?**

There was a 100% consensus among all the students interviewed that the program was important and they would recommend it to others.

If so, why?

Students indicated that the knowledge they learned about wildlife and the environment was what made the program a priority:

“I would recommend Talking Talons to everyone who wants to learn about animals and how to take care of them. And have fun with learning science too.”

“I would recommend Talking Talons because you learn about pesticides and how that hurts the animals and how to stop doing things that could hurt them. You learn how to make the earth safer for people and for animals.”

“Yes, you learn about what you do could to help the animals and the environment. You don’t just learn about the problem, but how we can solve the problem if we want to.”

Students indicated that the lessons they learned through interaction with the animals was the reason they would recommend it to others:

“We learned how we help and hurt animals and how we can endanger the planet with our choices and how we can stop them, also we learned why not to smoke or do drugs and especially Talking Talons makes science fun.”

“I think the program should start with younger students. If they understand how they can help animals and the environment, and also how some behaviors hurt them, then maybe they wouldn’t start on some things like smoking and drugs. I think the program should be offered at a younger age.”

“Yes, when you get to hold the animals, because you have to stay calm, you can’t freak out and that helped me not be so scared of the animals. We learned what to do to keep the animals calm and that helped us stay calm.”

“Talking Talons cares about animals and humans and teaches us to live together and how to help each other.”

Many of the students responded that it was the enjoyment they felt while engaged in the program that made it special:

“Talking Talons is a lot more fun than reading out of a book and makes science interesting. All kids should be in a Talking Talons class.”

“Talking Talons makes science less boring and you understand things much easier. I think it fun and all kids like fun things.”

“Talking Talons is a better way to get into science, especially if you want to get over fear of animals, like snakes. I didn’t know what to do if I saw an animal hurt on the ground, but now I do.”

Some mentioned that the life skills and choices they learned to make for the future were important:

“You learn how to preserve precious resources like water and how to treat animals better. I think this program should go to littler kids, like 4th grade. If Talking Talons would start earlier then they would better understand why things happen when they get older. They could talk to their parents about not smoking too.”

Others felt that the interactive activities included in the Talking Talons program made it special:

“Talking Talons is a good way of learning, much better than just reading out of a book. It’s a more hands on way of learning and it would be great if all science classes, even all classes were taught the way Talking Talons is taught.”