

Do circuses still need animal acts?

For over a century, touring circuses have provided family entertainment with a mixture of human and animal acts. As more information about animal behaviour becomes available, the question arises of whether it is any longer acceptable for animals to be kept for performing.

Supporters argue that circuses are part of our tradition, and that many families visit a circus who might not go to other sorts of live entertainment. But traditions can and do change with time, and a circus without animal acts still provides plenty of variety, with clowns, trapeze and high wire acts, jugglers and acrobats.

It is claimed that circuses are educational, as they give many people the chance to see wild animals such as lions and elephants at close quarters. However, it could be argued that zoos and safari parks offer this opportunity more successfully, since they contain a far wider range of creatures living in a more natural habitat. They also usually provide additional information in the form of leaflets, signs and captions, and have staff available to answer questions.

Those in favour of animals in circuses say that the animals enjoy performing and are trained using rewards and tit-bits, so no cruelty is involved. Nevertheless, opponents point out that animals do not perform in their natural environments, and therefore it is not right to coerce them into doing this merely for the entertainment of humans. They also criticise the cramped living conditions in which circus animals are forced to spend most of their time.

Through watching informative programmes on television, more people have a growing understanding of the needs of wild animals, such as plenty of space to roam and the freedom to live with their own kind. In the 21st century, it seems unnecessary and even cruel to confine wild animals and train them to do tricks for the public's amusement.

Is homework necessary?

Secondary schools have been setting their pupils homework for many years, and more recently this has been extended into primary classes, including those for the youngest children. Recent articles in the press about standards in schools, and about the stresses placed on some pupils to achieve, have highlighted the role of homework.

It is argued that providing children with tasks to complete outside school hours helps them to develop the ability to work independently, without the supervision of an adult. This is important as pupils are increasingly expected to take responsibility for their own learning as they progress through secondary school. Most adults are expected to use their initiative at work, and to be able to do the job for which they are paid without constant supervision: in this sense, homework is a preparation for real life. Those who support homework point out that it would be impossible to cover in school time everything necessary, and that regular homework allows children the opportunity to practise and revise certain skills.

However, critics of homework argue that if the curriculum cannot be covered within the school day, there is clearly too much content and it should be reduced. They further claim that since some children have access at home to computers and books and others do not, certain children are at a disadvantage. They believe that this amounts to a lack of equal opportunities. In terms of encouraging children to become independent learners, they point out that in some cases, parents provide so much help and support for their children's homework that, far from learning to tackle problems on their own, these children are simply relying on adults even more. Furthermore, some critics argue that children are under a great deal of pressure to work hard at school, and that they need plenty of time to relax and develop hobbies and personal interests.

Schools have to balance the desire to prepare their pupils properly for the future against the risk of subjecting them to too much stress. Clearly, schools must think carefully about the homework tasks they set, in order to ensure that some groups of pupils do not struggle because they happen to lack certain resources at home.