



# 3

Important Reasons

**Not to Take  
Children to  
the Circus**

# 1 Cruelty to Animals

## Beatings Under the Big Top

Animals used in circuses **do not** perform because they want to; **they perform because they are afraid not to.**

Trainers carry tools such as sharp, metal **bullhooks**, various types of **whips, sticks**, and hand-held **hotshots** that deliver a jolt of electrical current. If circuses relied only on positive reinforcement, trainers would be carrying bags of treats instead of weapons.

Videotape and testimony from former trainers and circus employees reveal that **trainers always use force and abusive training methods behind the scenes.**

PETA has received complaints of:

- **covering bears muzzled and leashed while being beaten**
- **doves “kicked like soccer balls”**
- **horses punched in their snouts**
- **dogs who are only fed when they perform properly**
- **big cats hit repeatedly with jagged wooden sticks**
- **primates whacked with metal rods and outfitted with collars that deliver electric shock through remote-control devices**





## Abuse Caught on Videotape

An undercover videotape of an elephant-training session at Carson & Barnes Circus shows an elephant trainer **yelling** and **cursing** at elephants and **viciously attacking** them with bullhooks and electric prods **until they scream**. Other trainers are instructed to sink the pointed hook deep into the elephants' skin, ripping through their flesh, until they scream out in pain—but are warned to conceal the beatings from the public. The Carson & Barnes trainer learned the trade from his father, who trained elephants for Ringling Bros.

Ringling trainers have been videotaped numerous times hitting, gouging, and whipping elephants.

According to Carol Buckley, a former elephant trainer who now runs a sanctuary for elephants, "[U]sing punishment to instill a sense of fear is standard practice in the circus industry. ... The elephants are conditioned through physical pain and mental intimidation that they must obey commands. All elephants used in circuses are trained in this fashion."

## Animal Protection Laws Are Paper Tigers

**Laws protecting animals in circuses are insufficient and poorly enforced.**

The federal Animal Welfare Act, enforced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), establishes only **minimum guidelines** for the care of animals used in exhibitions and does **not prohibit the use of bullhooks, whips, electric prods**, or other devices that cause pain and suffering.



# Life on the Road: Boxcars, Cages, and Chains

Circuses transport animals around the country in **poorly ventilated trailers** and boxcars for up to **50 weeks a year in all kinds of weather extremes**. Puerto Rican authorities found seven polar bears with a USDA-licensed circus sweltering in 113°F heat. In another case, an 8-year-old African elephant was found dead inside a

circus trailer where temperatures soared to 120°F. Two tigers with Ringling Bros. suffered injuries that included a broken tooth in their desperate struggle to escape from cages inside sweltering boxcars after the vent doors had blown shut, causing the temperature to skyrocket.

# Angry, Bored, and a Long Way From Home

**The majority of elephants used in circuses were captured in the wild when they were babies.** Far from their natural homes, they spend most of their lives shackled by two legs or confined to tiny cages. Big cats, bears, and primates are forced to eat, drink, sleep, defecate, and urinate inside the same cramped, barren cages. Extreme confinement is unavoidable given the transitory nature of circuses. Some animals are intentionally kept in dismal conditions. A trainer with Royal Hanneford Circus admitted to a USDA inspector that he keeps chimpanzees in solitary confinement for the majority of the time so that they will be more "motivated" to perform when let out.

Circus animals frequently exhibit stress-induced behavior, such as swaying, pacing,



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or head-bobbing, a clear indication of mental anguish.

Constant chaining, lack of exercise, long hours standing on hard surfaces in feces and urine, and performing physically unnatural and awkward tricks all lead to crippling injuries. Captivity-induced foot problems and arthritis are the most common reasons for euthanasia in captive elephants.

In their native homes, animals such as elephants, tigers, and bears would be free to socialize, roam great distances, raise their families, and play together.



## 2 The Risk to Children Animal Attacks

Rampaging elephants have terrified and injured children clinging to their backs, sent circus crowds scrambling for exits, crushed handlers to death, and been gunned down by SWAT teams in city streets. Just a few examples:

- In three separate incidents, children were injured when the elephants they were riding snapped from the stress and attacked their trainers.
- A 3-year-old girl was treated for injuries after a 15-month-old elephant wrapped his trunk around her neck and attempted to pull her into the arena.
- An elephant pinned eight children under a fence that separated the first row of spectators from the circus rings.
- An elephant went on a rampage while carrying five children on her back.

**She injured 12 people and threw a police officer to the ground before being shot and killed by police.**

- Three children were injured when an elephant giving rides fell into the passenger-loading platform, spilling the riders and bending the platform.
- An elephant charged through an arena entryway and ripped away part of the wall while more than 3,000 children were in the audience.

**Elephants are not the only danger.**

Two leashed and collared chimpanzees went out of control during a circus show and pulled a child from her seat and onto the arena floor, then mauled her. A bear used in the Shrine Circus bit off the tip of a 2-year-old child's finger while being petted by a crowd of children. A leopard with a traveling circus escaped from a pen and bit a 3-year-old girl on the neck.

# Breeding Ground for Disease

Some animals **carry diseases** that can be transmitted to people. A human strain of **tuberculosis has recently been infecting and killing** captive Asian elephants in the United States. Despite the **risk to the public**, TB-carrying elephants stay on the road. This highly contagious bacterial lung disease is spreading among elephants and handlers who work with

them. Several circuses also travel with petting zoos, and health experts warn that these animals are **notorious for infecting children** with potentially lethal bacteria such as *E. coli* and **salmonella**. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 130,000 cases of salmonella every year result from casual animal contact.

# Child Psychologists Say Circuses Send a Dangerous Message to Children

Dr. Melvin E. Levine, professor of pediatrics at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine and director of the Clinical Center for the Study of Development and Learning, warns that taking kids to the circus may end up costing more than just the price of admission.

Levine, like most child psychologists, believes that it is **vital for children to learn empathy**, or the **ability to put themselves in someone else's shoes**. Events in which animals are forced to perform demeaning tricks teach the opposite.

Levine wrote, "Certainly there is nothing more cruel that a child can do to another child than to embarrass him in front of

peers. Equally devastating is the practice of exposing an animal to ridicule, laughter, and devaluation."

When children watch animals being hit or prodded or see them humiliated and deprived of their natural behaviors for amusement, their **impressionable young minds are at risk of developing aberrant social values**. Levine discourages parents from taking kids to see live animal acts, saying that what children see at such places teaches them to disregard "the feelings, the needs, and the rights of other living individuals."

In nature, bears **don't ride bicycles**, elephants **don't sit upright on tubs**, and tigers don't **jump through flaming hoops**.

Animals would never perform these grotesquely exaggerated maneuvers on command, over and over, hundreds of times a year, **without the constant threat of punishment.**

Years ago, circuses commonly showcased "freaks of nature." People with physical

deformities and medical conditions, such as conjoined twins and severely obese women, were objects of ridicule. We've come a long way, but we're still learning what is appropriate and what isn't. **Dressing animals in clothes and making them perform like clumsy clowns is a relic from less sensitive times past.**



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# 3 Circus Workers With Violent Records

Circuses routinely pick up transient workers on the road and are **magnets** for the criminal element, including **child predators, violent convicts**, and other unsavory characters.

Here are some examples:

- A Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus clown was found guilty of sodomy, sexual abuse, and endangering the welfare of a child.
- A Shrine Circus clown was arrested on charges of molesting three girls, ages 6, 7, and 10, whom he had met at the circus.
- Texas authorities arrested an ex-circus worker for rape, the murder of two young girls, and slashing the throat of another.
- A Ringling employee with previous convictions of aggravated burglary and drug possession was arrested near Chicago for allegedly holding a terrified woman at knifepoint while demanding money.
- Another Ringling employee, who was on parole after serving seven years on a murder conviction, was arrested in connection with two break-ins at a liquor store.
- Ringling's former vice president of animal care, Gunther Gebel-Williams, was arrested in St. Louis and charged with disturbing the peace for threatening a police officer with the whip that he used on tigers.
- A Ringling employee was arrested and charged with assault and battery when he stabbed a horse trainer.
- A transient who came to Omaha, Neb., with the Shrine Circus was convicted of second-degree murder for beating a woman to death.
- Cedarburg, Wis., officials canceled the Liebel Family Circus because the circus owner had refused to comply with a city code that requires a list of employees for background checks.
- A circus employee with Hawthorn Corporation wanted by federal authorities for probation violations was charged with attempted murder, aggravated battery, and armed violence for allegedly stabbing a coworker.

## Drug Abusers on the Payroll

A former Ringling ringmaster has written that he found drug and alcohol abuse among Ringling employees. During his tour, a worker was found dead in a railcar from a drug overdose. He had been dead for three days when a foul odor finally led to the discovery of his decomposing body. A trainer with another circus was found to have cocaine and alcohol in his system

after he was trampled to death by an elephant. Federal agents confiscated more than 3 tons of cocaine hidden inside the tent posts of yet another traveling circus. An undercover video shows the animal care director for Carson & Barnes Circus scolding elephant trainers for spending too much time smoking marijuana.



# Animal-Friendly, Child-Friendly Circuses

With the growing number of spectacular animal-free circuses, such as Cirque du Soleil, families can enjoy amazing acrobats, funny clowns, and talented jugglers with the assurance that no animal is suffering.

**PETA** maintains a list of animal-free circuses, a database of dangerous incidents involving captive elephants, big cats, bears, and primates, and factsheets detailing Animal Welfare Act violations and other problems with individual circuses at **Circuses.com**.



**PETA** also offers educational materials for students and guides for teachers.  
E-mail [Education@peta.org](mailto:Education@peta.org);  
call **757-622-7382**, extension **1522**;  
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