

Learning About Skunks & Stereotypes



This is a photo of a skunk, a *Mephitis mephitis* to be exact. We'll call him Hank. If Hank feels threatened, he will make himself look larger by raising his fur and tail. He will also hiss and stamp his feet. If needed, Hank can spray a smelly, oily substance at a predator. He'd rather not do that, however, due to his limited supply of spray. It takes him about six weeks to replace it. As a backup, Hank relies on his striking appearance and a stereotype to save his life. This story is about Hank, people, and stereotypes.

© Carol Gray, 2013. Exclusive and restricted permission is hereby granted to print the Stories and activities in *The Social Story Sampler* for use with an individual or small group in a home, educational or clinical setting. May not be copied or used in presentation, or for financial gain. All other rights and restrictions apply.

A *stereotype* is a set belief about someone or something. Woodland animals learn quickly that skunks have a horribly stinky spray, and they try to stay away. Hank is black with a large white stripe. This makes him easy to spot in the woods. Animals avoid Hank because of *how he looks* and their *belief* that they will be sprayed. It's a stereotype that will likely save Hank many times, especially when he's totally out of spray. It may not save him *every* time, though. If Hank is spotted by a hungry Horned owl, the stereotype that usually protects him will fail. Owls can't smell. They eat a lot of skunks.



Stereotypes have a rather bad *reputation*. In other words, many people think that a stereotype is *always* bad. People make so many mistakes with stereotypes that they try to avoid them altogether, in the same way that the woodland animals avoid Hank. Believing that *all* stereotypes are bad is a common mistake, and it is also a stereotype. It's the stereotype of stereotypes. What many people don't realize is that we use stereotypes each day to make fast decisions in situations like driving, or visiting an unfamiliar area. A stereotype is not always unhelpful or bad.



If people understood stereotypes better, they'd be less likely to make mistakes with them. The facts are that sometimes a stereotype is helpful. The skunk stereotype works quite well for Hank and the other animals in the woods. It's *people* who historically have made the big mistakes with stereotypes.

History is full of examples of stereotypes that were tragic mistakes. In many cases, the most tragic stereotypes have been a mistaken bad or negative belief about a person or group of people. Instead of gathering factual information, a stereotype was used instead, with hurtful and often lasting results.

The good news is that people may be more aware of damaging stereotypes now than they were before. They are learning. That may help them to avoid some mistakes, or at least catch and correct them sooner. Many laws have been written and passed to protect people from harmful stereotypes. Little by little, people are learning when – and when not to – use stereotypes.



It is often possible and safe to take some time to gather facts and information about another person or group of people. Information has helped many people avoid the mistake of using a stereotype when intelligent thought and understanding is what is needed.

Does this mean that if we study skunks, and learn about them, we will understand them better? There's a good chance of that. For example, we'd probably learn that skunks are sometimes good family pets, like Daisy in the photo above. Pet skunks, of course, have their scent glands removed.

Does this mean that if we study skunks, and learn about them, it will change what we do when we see one in the woods? Well, uh...no. Why toss aside a perfectly good stereotype? Go with it and we'll be "good to go".

