Nature's great masterpiece, an elephant—the only harmless great thing —John Donne

Elephants are a fascinating species. Besides the fact an adult elephant poops 80 pounds of fecal matter everyday, which is equal to the weight of an average 7th grader or Jennifer Aniston, elephants have a complex social system that may surprise you.

Elephants live in families comprised of a matriarch leader, three or four offspring and new young. Contrary to humans, males do not emerge as the group leader, nor take on the role of provider/protector for the herd.

Instead, adult males lead a solitary life, leaving the work of child rearing to the females. Oh, wait….perhaps there are more similarities between elephant and human behavior than previously acknowledged.

Caring for young is a priority in this species. Orphaned elephants are quickly adopted by other lactating females. Young nurse from their mothers for four to five years, and once weaned, the males continue to live in the family herd until they are expelled between 12-15 years of age. The female young will continue to live with their mother, even after giving birth themselves.

Elephants acquire the majority of their behavior and skills through observation and guidance by the adults in the herd, thus they spend numerous years in close proximity to their mother. Related families meeting at the waterhole greet one another with affectionate touching, caressing and entwining trunks.

The herd cares for injured and ill members and appears to grieve over the death of herd members. They use complex communication, and can send vocalizations to other elephants up to six miles away. Additionally, loud alarm calls by a herd member will result in the adults forming a protective circle around the younger, more vulnerable members.

In the early 1990s, efforts were made to control the elephant population in Kruger National Park in South Africa by killing the parents and relocating the young to other parks. Essentially, groups of young were moved to a new environment, without regard to the natural herd structure. Thus, these young had no teachers, no role models and no social group to guide behavior.

In a healthy elephant structure, males reach puberty in their mid teens; mating however, is withheld until their late 20s, early 30s. In the new environment however, the lack of mature adult males wandering through herds for receptive females, resulted in the orphaned juveniles mating at an earlier age. Testosterone abounded, as did aggressive behaviors.

By 1999, it was evident the orphans had become a group of dangerous, hostile gangsters. Having lacked parental and social guidance, this group began to attack and violently murder rhinoceroses. Many of these were the endangered white rhino. All in all, 39 rhino deaths were recorded.

Nine of the gangster's were shot by park rangers; the remaining delinquents were given a stay of execution until further interventions were attempted.

In a desperate effort to manage the devious orphans, a number of adult bulls were released into the park. These adults immediately took an active mentoring role with their cohorts, preventing the juvenile males from breeding. The resulting decline of testosterone lead to an immediate stop of the violent attacks.

Since the induction of the bulls, not one other rhino murder has occurred. The re-establishment of an elephant hierarchy disrupted the negative path the juvenile delinquents had started down. One could say that's a pretty impressive Big Brother program.