

Making the Links: Child Abuse, Animal Cruelty and Domestic Violence

The paper sets out the research evidence on the correlation, or the 'links', between child abuse, animal abuse and domestic violence, explores the evidence base available to professionals working with animals or children and describes the process of establishing a national multidisciplinary group known as the Links Group. The paper goes on to consider the challenges in setting up a working group of this kind and its subsequent progress in terms of influencing policy and practice. Finally, the authors make a series of recommendations aimed at continuing the process of change within organizations charged with the welfare of animals, children and vulnerable families. Copyright © 2004 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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The past two decades have seen a growth of interest in the links between how animals are treated and the abuse of children and women. This association, however, is not new and was noted by John Locke early in the eighteenth century:

'They who delight in the suffering and destruction of inferior creatures, will not be apt to be very compassionate or benign to those of their own kind'. (Locke, 1705, quoted in Ascione and Arkow, 1999, p. 197)

Forty years ago, the anthropologist Margaret Mead suggested that childhood cruelty to animals might be a precursor to antisocial violence in adulthood (Mead, 1964). It is also interesting to recall that both in the United States and England, organizations for the protection of children grew out of those dedicated to animal protection. This paper looks at the evidence base for the existence of links between child abuse, animal abuse and domestic violence and reviews the organizational response to those links. The development of a multiagency working group and its impact upon policy and

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'Continuing the process of change within organizations charged with the welfare of animals, children and vulnerable families'

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‘Child abuse terminology promotes a common language across different agencies’

professional practice are described. The authors make recommendations for further developments in research, policy and practice.

Definitions of Abuse

How should we define ‘abuse’ in relation to children and animals? There is greater clarity about what constitutes child abuse, as this is outlined in government guidance (Department of Health *et al.*, 1999) and the concept of ‘significant harm’ is defined in Section 31 of the Children Act 1989. However, there are still debates in relation to the use of physical chastisement of children and about identifying the threshold for intervention (for a comprehensive review of definitions, see Corby, 2000). Similarly, defining animal abuse is complex and it can be difficult to move beyond the debates about definitions. In common with definitions of child abuse, definitions of animal abuse vary across time, place, cultures, countries and beliefs. A range of factors affect the definition of animal abuse: for example, there are socially and culturally sanctioned activities which harm animals such as hunting or killing for food; there are also differing attitudes towards members of different species; and a continuum of behaviours towards animals which can range from teasing to torture. A helpful working definition is provided by Ascione (1999, p. 51), who defines animal abuse as ‘socially unacceptable behaviour that intentionally causes unnecessary pain, suffering, or distress to and/or the death of an animal’. This definition includes physical abuse and neglect, including acts of commission and omission, and sexual abuse that may involve bestiality. The terms ‘animal abuse’ and ‘animal cruelty’ are often used interchangeably.

Several writers in the field use the terms ‘companion animal abuse’ or ‘pet abuse’ to distinguish these abuses from the legal killing of animals for economic purposes, such as for food and clothing. Munro and Thrusfield (2001) put forward a compelling argument that the adoption of child abuse terminology promotes a common language across different agencies. They have adapted the four categories of child abuse in their definition of animal abuse, to include physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse.

In relation to mental health definitions, the diagnostic criteria for conduct disorder in children and antisocial personality disorder in adults (DSM-IV) recognise the link between cruelty to animals and subsequent violent acts (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). In other words, targeting vulnerable animals for gratification is one component

or marker of a wider repertoire of deviant interest. It is now understood that childhood cruelty to animals is an important predictor of later antisocial and aggressive acts and that children showing these behaviours, without intervention, are at risk for enduring disorders in conduct and mental health (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). The importance of early identification of animal cruelty raises the issue of how far this knowledge is being incorporated into current risk assessment and treatment strategies for both adults and children.

Finally, in order to provide some context in the United Kingdom, it may be useful to consider recent RSPCA statistics. In 2002, there were 114 000 investigations for 'animal cruelty'. Out of those, 910 prosecutions arose, 15 of which were of children (RSPCA, 2003). From the RSPCA figures, it is evident that although the number of prosecutions was small, very severe and deviant acts of cruelty were represented in these cases, suggesting that only the most extreme forms of violence towards animals are currently likely to be successfully pursued in the legal arena.

Key Themes from the Research

Research over the past 20 years, predominantly from the United States and Canada, has begun to define and elucidate the possible relationship between child abuse and animal abuse. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a full literature review, it is possible to identify four dominant and interrelated themes within the research:

1. Animal abuse as part of the continuum of abuse within the family
2. Animal abuse perpetrated by children who show later aggressive and deviant behaviour
3. Animal abuse as an indicator of the existence of child abuse
4. The therapeutic potential of animals in child development and within post-abuse work

1. Animal Abuse as Part of a Continuum of Abuse Within the Family

One of the first studies to find evidence of a relationship between child and animal abuse was British (Hutton, 1983). Hutton looked at all the cases of animal abuse that came to the attention of the RSPCA in one social services area in 1980. He found that out of 23 families participating in the study, 82% were also known to the social services department and 61% were known to the probation service. These families

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were described as having children 'at risk' (Hutton, 1983). This study stimulated interest in the United States and consequently DeViney *et al.* (1983) studied 53 families being treated by the New Jersey Division of Youth and Family Services for incidents of child abuse. In the majority of the families where there was evidence of physical abuse there was also animal abuse. In approximately two-thirds of the pet-abusing homes, fathers were the abusers; in the other one-third, children were the abusers. Furthermore, both adults and children living in homes where pets were abused were 10 times more likely to have been bitten or attacked by the abused pet.

The testimony of survivors of child sexual abuse reveals that threats and abuse of their pets are sometimes used to gain control over child victims, while also ensuring their silence, by forcing them to decide between their victimization or the pet's death (Adams, 1998).

In the context of domestic violence, acts of animal abuse are used in order to coerce, control and intimidate children to remain in, or be silent about abusive situations (Ascione, 1998; Arkow, 1996; Firmani, 1997). Ascione (2000) compared 100 women who were battered and had entered a shelter with a sample of non-battered women all of whom had pets. Fifty-four per cent of the battered women as compared to 5% of the non-battered women reported that their partner had hurt or killed pets. Children's exposure to this animal abuse was reported by 62% of the battered women. In nearly one in four cases, battered women reported that concern for their pets' welfare had prevented them from seeking shelter sooner. This finding was replicated in another large-scale research project: The Ontario Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in Canada, in a study of 21 refuges, found that 44% of women reported that their partners had abused or killed family pets and that 43% of women reported that concern for their pets' welfare prevented them from leaving the relationship sooner (Ponder and Lockwood, 2000).

Similar findings have been replicated in England (Intervet Conference Report, 2001; Medway, 2001), however, they have not been fully integrated into the literature on domestic violence as yet. *Paws for Kids*, a pioneering pet-fostering service in the north of England which has operated since 1999, has helped nearly 900 women and children access safe refuge accommodation by providing a pet-fostering service. This project reported that many children in these families had witnessed violence towards their pets. In recognition of the importance of pet-fostering services, the RSPCA and the Dogs Trust are now providing such services in some areas of England.

2. Animal Abuse by Children

The conclusions emerging from much of the United States research are that animal abuse may be a form of rehearsal for human-directed violence and that it should be regarded as a serious problem rather than minimized. It is suggested that if these acts of animal abuse go unrecognized and untreated, they may escalate in range and severity against other victims (Kellert and Felthous, 1983; Lockwood and Hodge, 1986). Exposure to animal abuse may desensitize children to violence (Ascione, 1993) and aggressive acts committed by children against animals can be an early diagnostic indicator of future psychopathology. For example, research on adolescent serial killers conducted for the FBI (Ressler *et al.*, 1988) found that many of these killers had perpetrated severe animal abuse in their childhood; as a youth, Jeffrey Dahmer, a serial killer, impaled the skulls of dogs he had killed on sticks and displayed them in his backyard (Squires, 2000). Ressler *et al.* (1988) examined the histories of 28 incarcerated sexual homicide perpetrators and found that 36% had committed acts of animal cruelty in childhood and 46% had done so in adolescence.

Merz-Perez *et al.* (2001) found that violent offenders were significantly more likely than non-violent offenders to have committed acts of cruelty towards pet animals as children. Lockwood (cited in Squires, 2000, p. 3) concludes: 'While not everyone who abuses animals becomes a serial killer, virtually every serial killer first abused animals'. Kellert and Felthous (1983) identified the features of childhood cruelty to animals which are most predictive of later aggression. These included lack of remorse, carrying out a variety of cruel acts, victimizing a variety of species and being cruel to socially valuable animals, for example dogs, not rats. It is now known that Ian Huntley, responsible for the murder of two children in 2003, showed a history of childhood animal cruelty, including strangling his bull terrier puppy in front of friends, 'because it disobeyed him' (Sweeney, 2004).

3. Animal Abuse as an Indicator of Child Abuse

Along with the evidence that there may be a continuum of behaviours that predict later violence, the role of neglect and abuse also features in the development of abusive behaviour towards animals. Friedrich *et al.* (1986) found that 35% of boys who were sexually abused had abused animals, whereas only 5% of boys who were not sexually abused had abused animals. A study of 499 seriously mentally ill 5–18-year-olds

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hospitalized at a tertiary care psychiatric facility also found cruelty to animals to be more prevalent among patients who had been sexually abused than among those who had not (McClellan *et al.*, 1995). In the UK, The Young Abusers Project, a national specialist service with 12 years' experience of working with 300 children who sexually abuse other children and who commit other violent offences, found in early case histories that approximately one-fifth of these children had a history of sexually abusing animals (Duffield *et al.*, 1998) and many of these children had been severely abused themselves during childhood. Furthermore, 'It has been noted that in most cases the sexual acts were carefully planned with pet animals targeted, isolated, groomed and abused (rather like their child victim counterparts)' (Duffield *et al.*, 1998, p. 301). Later analysis of this cohort shows a consistent figure of just under 20% of a larger sample of sexually abusive children, all with histories of severe abuse and neglect, who had a history of serious cruelty to animals (Bladon *et al.*, 2004).

4. Therapeutic Potential of Animals in Child Development and in Post-Abuse Work

Of course, the relationship between children and animals may have very beneficial outcomes. There is evidence from UK research that animal companionship can help children move along the developmental continuum and promote the development of resilience (Gilligan, 2000). McNicholas (quoted in Sale, 2001) found that the majority of primary school age children whom she interviewed regarded their pet as being in their top 10 'most special relationships'. She argued that interacting with pets can help children to develop their social skills and their ability to show empathy for others.

Gilligan (2001) suggests that in some circumstances pets may be a valuable tool for helping traumatized children in the care system to rebuild trusting relationships and develop positive self-esteem. Caring for a pet provides an opportunity for children to take responsibility for the care of a living thing and to receive warmth, recognition and attention which may have been lacking in their past.

There is also evidence that the use of animals within therapy can promote healing or enhance empathy skills. Abuse victims may find interactions with a family pet a source of comfort (Zimrin, 1986). In some countries, animals are being used within therapeutic work with children post-abuse or as part of a programme of work with children who have committed

acts of animal abuse (Lockwood and Ascione, 1998). Two approaches are identified in the literature: firstly, animal assisted therapy (AAT), in which an animal is an integral part of the treatment process, and secondly, animal assisted activity (AAA), in which trained animals are used within activities in order to allow children to interact spontaneously with animals or other group members, for example grooming and feeding animals. Before the introduction of animals into these types of therapeutic approaches, therapists need to assess children's experiences with animals in order to identify any implications for treatment, including the safety of the animal. Arkow (1998) argues that validating the effectiveness of AAT and AAA remains in its infancy; however, projects using these therapies identify positive outcomes for children involved (Ascione and Arkow, 1999).

Limitations of Existing Research

The overview of the current research evidence illustrates that the links between child abuse and animal abuse are complex and have been described as a 'tangled web' (Lockwood and Ascione, 1998). However, there are limitations within the existing research base. Firstly, in relation to the definitional problems identified at the outset of this paper, it is evident that studies to date use different definitions of what constitutes animal abuse (Piper *et al.*, 2001). Secondly, the samples for these studies are often very small scale, with no control groups, and are frequently based on highly selective groups (such as women entering refuges, or convicted murderers), which makes the findings hard to generalize to wider populations. Thirdly, research using clinical case histories may fail to uncover animal abuse simply because no-one asked about it (Ascione and Arkow, 1999). Fourthly, the issue of under-reporting is also linked to parental awareness of child animal cruelty; animals may be abused secretly or adults may rely on children's own accounts of animal abuse (Ascione, 1999). In relation to professional awareness, most veterinarians acknowledge that animal abuse exists but many consider they are not trained to identify it (Munro and Thrusfield, 2001). Finally, young people are likely to be reluctant to readily admit to acts of animal abuse without skilled and systematic assessment methods.

Despite the limitations, it is the view of the authors that there is enough evidence from existing studies to justify this issue being taken seriously and acted upon. Bell (2001) aptly summarizes the position:

'Projects using these therapies identify positive outcomes for children involved'

'Animals may be abused secretly or adults may rely on children's own accounts of animal abuse'

'Anecdotal examples from professionals further support the need for more research'

'Developments in England and Wales are in their infancy'

'It is clear from the research that not all children who are cruel to animals go on to be violent adults and not all adults who harm animals are also violent to their partners and/or children. Nevertheless, the research does indicate that there is some correlation between children abusing animals and children harming people, and between adults abusing animals and adults abusing family members'. (Bell, 2001, p. 226)

Anecdotal examples from professionals further support the need for more research. For example, professionals have identified episodes of animal abuse in the chronologies prepared for child death inquiries. However, the meaning and significance of these incidents and the implications for the eventual outcome are unclear. A review of a number of child death reports to explore the prevalence and implications of animal abuse could prove helpful. Additionally, there is evidence that certain animals are misused by their owners to intimidate professionals seeking to protect children. For example, Munro (1998, p. 94), reporting on the death of Sukina Hammond, suggests, 'The presence of a Dobermann pinscher and a boa constrictor understandably made interviews with Sukina Hammond's father difficult'. This father went on to beat his young daughter to death for failing to spell her own name correctly.

Policy and Practice: An International Perspective

The literature does suggest that some organizations concerned with the welfare and protection of children or animals are taking account of 'the links' in policy and practice. America, Canada, South Africa, New Zealand and Scotland have been addressing this issue (see Lockwood and Ascione, 1998; Intervet Conference Report, 2001; Arkow, 2003), whereas developments in England and Wales are in their infancy. For example, in the United States, there is a greater awareness of the links across child and animal welfare organizations and the judiciary. The existence of humane societies and associations, some of which are concerned with the protection of both animals and children, may explain why research, policy and practice have been able to develop. 'The First Strike Campaign' organized by the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) (also adopted in parts of Scotland) has sought to increase awareness of the links and to encourage those involved in anti-violence efforts to work together (HSUS, 1997). Cross-reporting protocols for animal and child welfare concerns exist, as well as joint training initiatives for staff in these services

(Arkow, 1995). Questionnaires have also been developed, for two purposes: firstly to screen for animal abuse for children being assessed for services (Boat, 1999, and personal correspondence), and secondly, to identify if animal abuse is an issue for women and children entering refuges following domestic violence.

Increased awareness is also reflected in the United States legislation: for example, some states have passed laws mandating individuals convicted of animal cruelty to receive psychological evaluation and counselling (Ponder, 2000). In several states, vets have become mandated reporters of child abuse and are regarded as 'health professionals' in a wider sense. Animal-assisted therapy and animal-assisted activities, for those who have experienced child abuse or for those who are perpetrators of animal abuse, are also more prevalent there (Duel, 2000).

Barriers to Change

In relation to developing policy and practice in England and Wales, change which takes account of 'the links' is impeded by legal, political and attitudinal constraints. Legislation against animal cruelty is distinct from that governing other forms of physical abuse (Protection of Animals Act, 1911). The abuse of pets has been institutionally dealt with in isolation. The RSPCA, not the police, usually deal with the person who harms a pet. Animal charities and private veterinary practices may be reluctant to become involved in issues of child abuse and family violence for fear of losing their identity, income and independence. They also fear that they will be in breach of client confidentiality. There is confusion, as already noted, about what constitutes cruelty to animals and how to recognize it, along with a lack of training about the links and their potential implications for practice for those in child welfare and animal welfare agencies. Competing priorities within child welfare and animal welfare organizations has meant that this issue has been given low priority in the past. While some Area Child Protection Committees (ACPCs) are aware of the 'links' issue, there is no provision for joint training for child welfare and animal welfare professionals. There has been a reluctance to acknowledge the potential significance of the links both as an indicator of family pathology and as a means to help children to overcome difficulties. There has also been a lack of research conducted in the United Kingdom and professionals have been reluctant to act on the international research findings despite the recent growth in such research (for example, Baldry, 2003; Becker *et al.*, 2004).

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‘The two forms of abuse should not be seen as mutually exclusive’

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Development of the Links Group

Given the systematic themes emerging from research, we suggest that professionals in the United Kingdom can no longer afford to ignore the potential links between child abuse and animal cruelty. The two forms of abuse should not be seen as mutually exclusive; it needs to be recognized that they can coexist or there may be associations between the two and that there are consequently implications for policy and practice. For example, at present in England and Wales a person may be banned from keeping animals for 10 years, but no questions are necessarily asked about his/her ability to care for children. Nor should we ignore the child who is repeatedly cruel to animals by rationalizing their behaviour as childhood curiosity or an adolescent ‘phase’. Rather, we need to be asking direct and persistent questions about what factors may have triggered or maintained this behaviour.

In 2001, two conferences were held in England for professionals interested to learn more about the links (Steele, 2001). In response to the interest and willingness to pursue this area of work a multiagency group formed in 2002, convened by the NSPCC, involving representatives from key child, animal and law enforcement agencies, pet-fostering services, veterinary organizations, health and domestic violence services. The group has been set up on a voluntary basis. Its aims and objectives are to: raise awareness of the links between child abuse, animal abuse and domestic violence; consider the changes needed in policy and practice; develop working relationships between member agencies and other agencies; share and disseminate information about the subject and promote evidence-informed practice among the relevant professional disciplines involved in the care and protection of children, victims of domestic violence and animals.

The Links group or ‘coalition’ represented a new type of collaboration. What this meant in practice was that there were some agencies working together that, historically, had had little direct contact with each other. This proved to be the biggest strength, but also a major challenge for the group. Securing representation from children’s social services has been a significant difficulty, due to scepticism that this work could make a difference to children and families and because of their other demands and priorities. There were competing priorities when it came to defining the objectives of the group. This was perhaps best illustrated by the differences apparent in the group regarding ‘who is the client’, that is, the pet animal, the pet owner, the child or the vulnerable adult. Complexities were also apparent from the organizational ethos of

animal agencies with many vets operating in private independent practice compared to free animal welfare agencies serving primarily an economically disadvantaged client group. Debates about the definitional issues were also prominent.

Progress of the Links Group

The Links Group has been in existence for over 2 years and has sought to influence changes in policy and practice among agencies concerned with safeguarding children and agencies concerned with animal welfare or protection. In terms of tangible outcomes from the group there have been some achievements, including production of a booklet (NSPCC, 2003) for professionals in order to raise awareness of the links and clarify what should be done where there are concerns about a child or animal. Members of the group have provided a one-day training event for final-year veterinary students across the UK. Work has been undertaken with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, such that their professional code now acknowledges the potential links and specifies the options open to vets if they have concerns about animal abuse or child abuse. Within the Links Group two sub-groups were formed: one focuses on the provision of pet-fostering services and the development of good practice, the other on the review and development of a cross-reporting protocol between child and animal protection agencies and the police.

Perhaps less tangible but critically important is that the Links Group has opened up dialogue between agencies that hitherto did not communicate with each other. Separate organizations exist to protect children and animals and they have not been in the practice of working across boundaries and disciplines. The focus of attention within these organizations is very different, but there has been a recognition from within member agencies of the Links Group that, despite the many differences, protecting children is everybody's business.

Summary and Recommendations

Acknowledging 'the links' and addressing these in policy and practice may offer new opportunities to safeguard children and would contribute to the need to address the general culture and levels of violence within society. There are early signs that the issue of child abuse and animal abuse is starting to be addressed in England and Wales, albeit in an incremental and uneven fashion. However, there is a long way to go. It is

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'The prevalence of animal cruelty and the strength of the correlation between child abuse and animal abuse'

important that the changes which have been initiated so far are maintained and that further action is taken in order to institutionalize 'the links' within policy and practice. This will require a shift in attitudes within those organizations concerned with the protection and welfare of children or animals and those concerned with crime prevention and detection, in order to overcome the resistances identified in this paper and promote joint working towards a common goal of protecting both children and animals from abuse. The following proposals for research, policy and practice are suggested as ways forward.

Research

- While the authors' view is that Munro and Thrusfield's (2001) definition of animal abuse adapted from child abuse terminology should be universally adopted, it is clear that such a definition needs to be agreed by all main agencies and form the baseline for research, development of policy and guidelines for practice.
- Further research conducted in the UK is needed to empirically address the prevalence of animal cruelty and the strength of the correlation between child abuse and animal abuse. The NSPCC is currently funding a research project at the University of Durham in order to contribute to the research base (publication due in 2005).

Training and Education

- Further awareness-raising activity is required in order to influence professionals within children's services (including those within youth offending teams and children's mental health services), the judiciary and professionals concerned with animal protection.
- Joint or single agency training of animal protection and child protection professionals should be developed. Current ACPC training should seek to integrate these issues as appropriate and ACPC trainers should consider extending their target audience for foundation child protection training to involve animal protection professionals.
- In the medium term, the development of a training resource for use with child welfare and animal welfare organizations would be a valuable contribution to interagency working.

Policy

- Clear mandates to support this new area of work from child welfare, law enforcement and animal protection organizations.
- Integration of 'the links' within domestic violence practice and policy work.

- A cross-reporting protocol, which is endorsed by senior managers within key agencies (police, RSPCA, NSPCC and children's social services), should be implemented and reflected within ACPC (local safeguarding children boards) policy and procedures.

Practice

- The integration of animal abuse related questions into existing assessment frameworks, risk assessment instruments or questionnaires and evaluation of the results are recommended. Questions and observations about the treatment and care of pets should be routinely integrated into assessments of children in need and their families, and into assessments of children and young people who sexually harm others. Practitioners undertaking core assessments (Department of Health *et al.*, 2000) should integrate questions about animal abuse within the domains of the assessment framework.
- Specific interventions to treat those who seriously abuse animals in childhood should be piloted. This might include piloting similar interventions that have been undertaken in the USA and evaluating them.
- The recognition of the significance of animals to children, including those children who are looked after by the local authority, would be timely.
- Extension of pet-fostering services so that all refuges can offer this facility. This will require a mechanism to provide secure funding for such projects.

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