

The association between violence to children and violence to animals remains largely unacknowledged in the child abuse/neglect arena. Several reasons justifying further exploration of this link are discussed, along with suggestions for enhancing our awareness, knowledge, and services.

The Relationship Between Violence to Children and Violence to Animals An Ignored Link?

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The association between violence to children and violence to animals has received implicit acknowledgment throughout the history of movements to address both forms of abuse. However, a literature search scanning thousands of psychological articles from 1980 to 1990 revealed only two articles on animal/human violence. Is there a link that we who work in the areas of violence, trauma, abuse, and neglect are ignoring? Are there questions and observations about children's experiences with animals that might provide us with useful information about risk status? And, if such links do exist, are they deserving of further exploration? I believe the answer is "yes" based on the five following reasons.

(a) Research and anecdotal reports on violence to children and violence to animals point to a connection. Even though there is minimal research on this topic, intriguing links between animal and child cruelty have been demonstrated and described in a review by Ascione (1992). For example, higher rates of animal abuse by parental figures have been found in substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect than in the general population (Deviney, Dickert, & Lockwood, 1983).

Abused animals were found in 88% of the homes of 57 families with pets in which child abuse or neglect had been substantiated. Two thirds of the pets were abused by fathers; one third were abused by children.

Data on adults document a relationship between patterns of chronic interpersonal aggression and childhood histories of animal cruelty (e.g., Kellert & Felthous, 1985). There is evidence that children exposed to ongoing wartime violence display more cruel behavior toward animals (Randal & Boustany, 1990). Physical cruelty to animals is listed as a symptom indicative

of conduct disorder (*DSM-III-R*), and hurting animals is considered one of the earliest reported symptoms (Frick et al., 1992).

In addition, nearly everyone who works with childhood abuse and trauma has a story to share about the animal abuse connection. Anecdotal reports by several authors describe the abuse, torture, and killing of animals as related to battering of women, sexual abuse of children in day care settings, and acts of bestiality (e.g., Browne, 1987; Dutton, 1992; Gelles & Strauss, 1988; Russell, 1988; Faller, 1990). Forcing children to interact sexually with animals and ensuring children's silence by threatening to hurt or by actually killing or maiming pets and other animals are noted in case studies of sexually abused children (Boat, 1992; Faller, 1990; Finkelhor, Williams, & Burns, 1988; Kelley, 1989).

(b) A second reason to explore the link is that the etiology and expression of cruel behavior in children are not well understood, and the study of children's cruelty to animals may be a revealing source of information. "Cruelty" is a difficult concept to define, whether the cruelty involves children or animals. One reason for our difficulty is that perceptions of humane treatment to both have varied—and continue to vary—historically and culturally. For example, the monetary value of an animal has determined the extent to which cruelty is perceived and punished. In the hierarchy of importance, cruelty to horses is subject to the largest fine, followed by cruelty to dogs and then cats.

People also have personal hierarchies of the value of different kinds of animals. Three teenaged boys in Utah caught a 6-month-old kitten in a leg hold trap, shot arrows into the kitten, and then stomped it to death, laughing and joking while they videotaped the entire event. The tape was later confiscated. When questioned, one boy remarked, "But it was *only* a cat!" His mother, too, was confused about the uproar her son's behavior created. She protested that he was not a cruel child because he had never mistreated his dog.

Likewise, the reasons behind children's cruel behavior to animals are complex and multidetermined (Ascione, 1994). For example, in young children, lack of modeling and monitoring appropriate behaviors with animals can lead to cruel interactions, including hitting with objects, poking, choking, stepping on, kicking, and restraining (e.g., tying up or putting in a box). Peer reinforcement for "showing off" or "daring" may result in collective cruel acts to an animal that would not occur if the child were alone. Tying a cat to a railroad track can win peer approval, enhance personal aggressiveness, and be an exciting and elating feat to a group of children. Children may identify with the aggressor in settings where animals have been hurt or killed to frighten or coerce the child, or they may imitate punitive actions of adults.

The child's cruelty can reflect a desire to control and inflict pain, have the quality of repetitious posttraumatic play reenactment, or be a displacement of hostility onto animals. Ascione describes an unusual motive for a child's cruel behavior toward a cat in which the child, as a means of self-mutilation, provoked the cat to severely scratch her arms. Killing animals also may signal great distress on the part of the child and a possible wish to die, according to Gil (1994). She cites cases in which children hurt or killed animals and also evidenced suicidal behaviors.

(c) A third reason for interest in the animal/child abuse link is that society appears to have a lower tolerance for cruelty and damage to animals than for cruelty and damage to children, and the link between violence to both may be used for mutual benefit. Illustrations of this difference in tolerance can be seen in public responses to reports of animal abuse, loss, or endangerment relative to those of humans. In California, a mountain lion attacked and killed a female jogger. The lion left one cub; the woman left two young children. By September 1994, \$22,000 had been donated to support the orphaned cub, now residing in a local zoo. Only \$9,000 had been donated to the grieving family.

Professionals, knowingly and unknowingly, use this link. A pediatrician, subpoenaed to court on a case of physical abuse, was describing the severity of the injuries that had been inflicted on the young child by his stepfather. She noted the extreme choking, bruising, and battering that had occurred, but the judge appeared unmoved. Frustrated and wanting to convey the desperateness of the child's plight, she asked the judge to imagine someone choking and battering a young puppy in a similar manner. She later was told that the animal image immediately evoked an empathic response that led to more severe restrictions on the offender. In another example, a prosecutor described a case in which a woman had tried to protect a dog from being shot and was herself shot, but not killed. The prosecutor said that she had no difficulty winning the case because the woman's actions were targeted at saving an animal. If there had been no animal involved, questions of the woman's motives and her role in provoking the shooting would have been raised.

We also must be aware that our judgment as professionals may be clouded when animal cruelty is perpetrated by a child. Recently, a colleague described two youths who doused a kitten with lighter fluid and set it on fire. The kitten ran under a car and the car blew up. This professional said he had worked with children who had perpetrated extreme violence, even murdered other children, but this was, without exception, the "worst" case of cruelty he had ever seen. Hence, he felt quite hopeless about the future of these boys.

(d) We can broaden coverage for children by linking child and animal abuse prevention and early intervention programs (American Humane Asso-

ciation, 1993). "Cross-coverage" and "cross-training" programs promote interactions among law enforcement, protective services, and animal welfare agencies to detect and prevent violence to both children and animals. In such programs, if an animal-control officer determines that an animal is suffering, the officer also checks on how the children are doing. Child protective services workers reciprocate by noting the condition of animals when they investigate a case. Even where the connection is not formalized, professionals are cooperating. In one state, a sheriff's deputy responding to a domestic violence call noticed that three pit bulls were chained in the front yard. He became suspicious and returned with an animal-control officer and a search warrant. Behind the house the officers found the bodies of three dogs, 30 live pit bulls in cages, 10 of them puppies, and a pit bull fighting ring. They also confiscated videotapes of the dog fights. Social Services later investigated the welfare of the children living in this setting.

Expansion of mandated reporting of child abuse and neglect to include veterinarians and animal-control officers is another potential form of cross-coverage. Many veterinarians and animal-control officers go into people's homes to care for animals and have access to observing the children. The importance of mandated reporting in the protection and early intervention for children is obvious. For example, animal-control officers entered a home where numerous turtles were kept in cages and pens. Four children lived among the cages, and a toddler was observed poking her fingers into the turtle feces and then putting her fingers in her mouth. The risk for the child's contracting salmonella was substantial, and these children benefited from an animal-control officer who recognized that they, as well as the turtles, needed assistance.

Animal-control officers also can be instrumental in helping parents recognize the seriousness of a child's cruel acts, as demonstrated when a 10-year-old boy tied a dog's legs and mouth and strung the dog over a barn rafter, where its body was discovered 2 weeks later. The boy's parents dismissed the behavior until an animal-control officer urged them to be very concerned and to seek help.

(e) Finally, we can explore the animal/child abuse link when we are concerned that children may live in an abusive or traumatizing environment by asking questions of children and caregivers about the existence and treatment of pets. Reports by children of frequent pet turnover or loss of pets may "red flag" a chaotic household where the safety of the children is also compromised. Many men who resort to violence to control women reportedly seek to perpetuate that control by harming or killing family animals, or by threatening to do so. Persons who counsel battered women report that dogs

and cats have been stabbed, shot, hung, and otherwise mutilated by abusive spouses. Sometimes the animals simply disappear or die mysteriously. Battered women's shelters may obtain important information by asking about treatment of pets at intake. For some women, concern about their pets' welfare may delay seeking shelter for themselves and their children.

Although anecdotes abound, to date we have not systematically gathered information about experiences with animals. The Animal-Related Experiences Inventory was developed to elicit information about a wide range of events to determine whether animal-related trauma, cruelty, and/or support are part of the child's, adolescent's, or adult's history. Areas explored include:

- Pet ownership history
- Experiencing animals as a source of support
- Loss of animals
- Cruelty to animals
- Killing of animals
- Use of animals to coerce/control a person
- Sexual interactions with animals
- Animal-related fears

Currently the Inventory is being piloted in a study exploring traumatic experiences and symptoms of posttraumatic stress syndrome in female and male veterans. The Inventory also is being employed in a preliminary study on screening for trauma indicators in psychiatrically hospitalized adolescents. In the latter study, the responses of a 14-year-old boy provided information that the hospital staff believe was shared because of structured questioning. One area discussed during the interview was the loss of a favorite dog that the teen believed was "made really mean" by a neighbor who would hit the dog with garden tools whenever the dog went into his yard. In response to Inventory questions, the boy described an undiminished sense of loss since age 8 and continued anger at the person responsible for the loss. "I *still* hate him!" he said vehemently.

When the same teenager was questioned about ever having hurt or tortured an animal, he replied, with a slight smile, that he had put his sister's cat in the microwave. The cat died 2 days later, and he had a friend drive over the cat's body with his truck so the death would appear accidental. Why did he choose the cat? "I hate cats, the way they act—all cocky. Like they rule the world. They just piss me off." Later, again in response to specific questions on the Inventory, the boy acknowledged that he had witnessed a friend "butt-fucking his dog."

Increasing awareness and knowledge about the relationships between violence to animals and violence to children is an opportunity to expand our knowledge and services. Cross-coverage by child and animal welfare professionals to detect neglectful and abusive settings, and mandated reporting of child abuse by veterinarians and animal-control officers, are underutilized prevention and early intervention strategies. Systematic questioning can provide us with data on the frequencies of animal-related cruelty, violence, loss, and support, and the impact of these experiences on the child, adolescent, and adult. One hopes that this knowledge can be used to develop creative interventions and programs to reduce violence to both children and animals.

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