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Animal cruelty by children exposed to domestic violence[☆]

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Abstract

Objective: The first objective of this study was to determine if children exposed to domestic violence were significantly more likely to be cruel to animals than children not exposed to violence. The second was to determine if there were significant age and gender differences between children who were and were not cruel to animals.

Method: A community sample of 47 mothers with two children and a history of domestic violence were compared to a matched sample of 45 mothers with two children who did not have such a history.

Results: Children exposed to domestic violence were significantly more likely to have been cruel to animals than children not exposed to violence. The age and gender of children who were cruel to animals did not differ from children who were not cruel to animals. However, exposed children cruel to animals were significantly older than non-exposed children cruel to animals.

Conclusion: Animal cruelty by children is correlated with exposure to domestic violence.

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Purpose

However disturbing, it is not difficult to visualize a link between family violence and animal cruelty. A violent father who lashes out at his wife, his children, and the family pet is conceivable. It is more difficult to consider animal cruelty carried out by children living in violent homes, but research

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supports this contention as well (Ascione, 1998; DeViney, Dickert, & Lockwood, 1983). An indirect, but equally important finding in the literature is that many children who experience or are exposed to family violence do not become cruel to animals. It is unclear why some children emulate the violence they are exposed to and others do not. The purpose of this study was to determine if a community sample of children exposed to domestic violence were more likely to be cruel to animals than children who were not exposed to family violence. The influences of age and gender on animal cruelty were also investigated.

Review of the literature

The need to understand the role violence may play in childhood animal cruelty has been emphasized by reports that animal cruelty is a serious risk marker for mental health problems. The DSM-IV-TR lists animal cruelty as one of the earliest and most severe symptoms of conduct disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Many studies have also found an alarming connection between animal cruelty by children and violence in adolescence and adulthood (Merez-Perez, Heide, & Silverman, 2001; Slavkin, 2001; Verlinden, 1999). This is especially true when the type of animal abused and the context within which the abuse takes place falls outside culturally sanctioned parameters of animal treatment. For example, cruelty against pets, such as cats and dogs, has been retrospectively linked to criminal violence for both male and female prison populations (Felthous & Yudowitz, 1977) and criminal behavior in general (Ascione, Kaufman, & Brooks, 2000).

When confronted with individual violent behavior, Locke (1693) encouraged his readers to look for experiences that might influence such behavior. Childhood animal cruelty may be a sign of a family environment that is violent or abusive (Duncan & Miller, 2002), but few studies have actually examined this link. A key study has found children committed one-third of pet abuse in homes where physical child abuse had been documented (DeViney et al., 1983). The researchers concluded that these children who were cruel to animals had learned disturbing lessons about power and control. A study by Ascione, Friedrich, Heath, and Hayashi (2003) also found that animal cruelty was more frequent among children who had experienced violence and abuse.

Exposure to domestic violence and animal cruelty by children

Children are often the unseen, unintended, and unassisted victims of domestic violence (Holden & Ritchie, 1998). Children may see the violence or become part of it, but most typically children are exposed by hearing the event and experiencing its aftermath (Edleson, 1999). Violence between parents is often chronic and occurs in an environment most children associate with safety and protection (Margolin, 1998). Moreover, the individuals involved are central to children's lives, and parenting is often disrupted. Thus, it is not surprising, that exposure to domestic violence is associated with childhood maladjustment. Many researchers have concluded that children exposed to domestic violence are at increased risk of developing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive difficulties (see Mohr, Lutz, Fantuzzo, & Perry, 2003 for review). As stated by Holden and Ritchie (1998), "The corpus of empirical literature clearly establishes that children who live in maritally violent homes are at risk for a wide variety of problems" (p. 6). Pertinent to the current investigation, children exposed to domestic violence are more aggressive than children without violent parents (Adamson & Thompson, 1998; Herrera & McCloskey, 2001). Further, domestic violence

is a significant predictor of conduct disorder (Meyer et al., 2000). Still, few studies have specifically examined exposure to domestic violence and animal cruelty by children. Ascione (1998) interviewed 22 women with children who sought shelter at a safe house for battered women. In total, 32% reported a child had hurt or killed a family pet. While this study was the first to address directly exposure to domestic violence and animal cruelty among children, it has some limitations. The sample size was small, and a comparison sample of non-battered women was not included. The use of a shelter sample also has drawbacks, including limited generalizability and situational factors (e.g., fleeing to a shelter) that might affect children's adjustment (Fantuzzo et al., 1991). As noted by Kerig (2000), it is important to look at the effects of exposure to domestic violence in community samples of children. The present research examined the potential association suggested by Ascione (1998) by comparing a community sample of children exposed to domestic violence with non-exposed children. It was hypothesized that children exposed to domestic violence would be significantly more likely to be cruel to animals than children not exposed to violence. It was further hypothesized that children exposed to more severe domestic violence and children exposed to domestic violence for a greater proportion of their lifetime would be significantly more likely to be cruel to animals.

The influence of age and gender on child outcome

Research has not determined an average age for children who are cruel to animals. However, the American Psychological Association (1994) has reported that animal cruelty as a symptom of conduct disorder has a mean onset of 6.5 years. Achenbach (1991) and Achenbach, Howell, Quay, and Conners (1991) have also noted animal cruelty was higher among younger children in both referred and non-referred samples. As such, it was predicted that the mean age of children cruel to animals would be younger than children not cruel to animals. It was also predicted that more males than females would be cruel to animals based on research suggesting boys react more emotionally to domestic violence exposure (Katz & Gottman, 1993; Reynolds, Wallace, Hill, Weist, & Nabors, 2001).

Methods

Mothers with two school-aged children living in a city in central Canada were recruited from the community through local newspapers, flyers, and poster boards. All announcements included a phone number. Callers were screened for the criteria necessary for participation. Families were required to have two children between the ages of 5 and 17 and a self-identified history of male-to-female domestic violence to which both children were exposed (Table 1). In addition, mothers had to have had received counseling concerning the violence. In total 47 mothers and 94 children were recruited in this group, termed the exposed sample. A comparison group of mothers with two children between the ages of 5 and 17 without a history of domestic violence were selected from callers to match the exposed group on demographic variables (Table 2). In total 45 mothers and 90 children were recruited in this group, termed the non-exposed sample. The research project from which the dataset used in this study was derived was approved by the Human Subject Ethics Protocol Review Committee at the University of Manitoba. As well, informed consent was obtained from all participants who took part in the study. Data were collected on 92 families between September 1996 and February 2000; all 92 families were included in the present analysis.

Table 1
Detailed domestic violence exposure information

Mothers ($n = 47$)	
Hospitalized for injuries from partner (%)	55
Children ($n = 94$)	
Exposed to male-to-female domestic violence (%)	100
Exposed to female-to-male domestic violence (%)	67
Mean lifetime exposure to domestic violence	.45 ^a

^a The number of years children were exposed was divided by their age. The findings indicate that on average, children in the exposed group were exposed to domestic violence for approximately half of their lifetime.

Procedure

Mothers completed consent and demographic information in an interview format. The interview included the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach, 1991) for each participating child. Item 15 (*cruel to animals*) was used to assess child animal cruelty. Mothers rated their children on a 3-point scale of 0 (*never true*), 1 (*sometimes or somewhat true*), and 2 (*very often or often true*). Necessitated by the small sample size, answers were converted to a binary scale of 0 (*not cruel to animals*) and 1 (*cruel to animals*) for both samples.

Data analysis

An α level of .05 was used for all tests, unless otherwise stated. The main hypothesis was tested by comparing the frequency of animal cruelty by children who were exposed to domestic violence to the frequency of animal cruelty by children who were not exposed to violence using a χ^2 . To explore how severity and length of exposure to domestic violence might influence animal cruelty, exposed children whose mothers had been hospitalized for injuries due to domestic violence were compared to exposed children whose mothers had not been hospitalized for injuries using a χ^2 . Similarly, exposed children

Table 2
Mother-child demographic information for each sample

Mothers	Clinical ($n = 47$)	Non-clinical ($n = 45$)	p^a
Mean age (years)	34.8	35.2	
Single parent (%)	74	62	
Completed high school (%)	43	59	.04
Annual income < \$30,000 (%)	83	64	
Euro-Canadian (%)	62	82	.03
Children	Clinical ($n = 94$)	Non-clinical ($n = 90$)	p^a
Mean age (years)	9.9	9.5	
Males (%)	60	44	.04
Sister pairs (%)	19	40	
Brother pairs (%)	38	29	
Sister/brother pairs (%)	43	31	

^a p values are displayed for variables on which the two groups significantly differed.

whose mothers had engaged in female-to-male domestic violence were compared to children exposed to male-to-female domestic violence only using a χ^2 . Mean lifetime exposure to domestic violence among exposed children who were and were not cruel to animals was analyzed using a *t*-test. To shed light on behavioral and/or emotional problems that may be associated with children cruel to animals, exposed children who were cruel to animals were compared to exposed children who were not cruel to animals on the remaining 117 items on the CBCL using Kendall's Tau-b tests. To account for multiple tests, the per-test Type I error rate was lowered from .05 to .01 for these analyses. The mean age of children cruel to animals was compared to the mean age of children who were not cruel to animals in the exposed sample using a *t*-test. This analysis was also carried out for the non-exposed sample. One-tailed tests were conducted as it was predicted that children who were cruel to animals would be younger than children who were not cruel. A *t*-test was also used to determine whether the mean age of exposed children cruel to animals differed from the mean age of non-exposed children cruel to animals. A χ^2 was used to measure the influence of gender on animal cruelty among exposed children. Cell sizes were too small to repeat this analysis for the non-exposed sample; however, the exposed and non-exposed samples were collapsed and the frequency of boys and girls cruel to animals across both groups were compared using a χ^2 .

Results

As hypothesized, the results indicated that children in the exposed sample were significantly more likely to have displayed animal cruelty, as reported by their mothers, than children in the non-exposed sample, $p = .03$. An odds ratio comparing the risk for animal cruelty in the exposed and non-exposed groups indicated that children in the exposed group were 2.95 times more likely to engage in animal cruelty than children in the non-exposed group (17% vs. 7%, respectively; 95% CI = 1.10–7.92). Maternal hospitalization for domestic violence injuries, exposure to female-to-male domestic violence, and mean lifetime exposure to domestic violence did not increase the likelihood of animal cruelty among exposed children. When exposed children were compared on each item of the CBCL, several problem items, including a fear of animals/places, were associated with animal cruelty (Table 3).

The influence of age and gender on child outcome

Children who were cruel to animals did not differ significantly in age from children who were not cruel to animals in both the exposed group, $p = .26$, and non-exposed group, $p = .14$. However, exposed

Table 3
Kendall's Tau-b correlations between child animal cruelty and CBCL Items (exposed sample)

CBCL item	Correlation
Destroys own things	.402*
Easily jealous	.287*
Feels not loved	.285*
Has a fear of animals/places	.262*
Other problems (not listed on CBCL)	.452*

* $p < .01$.

Table 4
Age of children cruel and not cruel to animals

Group	X^a	SD	n^b
Exposed sample			
Cruel	9.6	.94	16
Not cruel	10.0	.43	76
Non-exposed sample			
Cruel	8.4	1.30	6
Not cruel	9.0	2.68	84

^a Mean age is reported in years.

^b Information was incomplete for two exposed children.

children who were cruel to animals were significantly older than non-exposed who were children cruel to animals, $p = .04$ (one-tailed). The means and standard deviations for these groups are reported in Table 4.

Gender was not significantly related to animal cruelty in the exposed group, $p = .34$. Near equal frequencies of male (11.84%) and female (9.21%) children were reported to be cruel to animals.

Discussion

This study had two key findings. First, animal cruelty by children was correlated with exposure to male-to-female domestic violence. Second, exposed children cruel to animals were older on average than non-exposed children cruel to animals. The first key finding supports the work of Ascione (1998) who also reported that children exposed to domestic violence were at an increased risk of animal cruelty. It is widely recognized that children learn social roles by modeling what they see and hear (Bandura, 1977), and it has long been argued that animal cruelty by children is a learned behavior:

“... the pleasure [children] take to put any thing in pain that is capable of it, I cannot persuade myself to be any other than a foreign and introduced disposition, a habit borrowed from custom and conversation. People teach children to strike, and laugh when they hurt, or see harm come to others; and they have the examples of most about them to confirm them in it.” (Locke, 1693, §110)

The salience, affective relationship, and importance of parents in children's lives make them powerful models. Parents who engage in aggressive acts teach children that aggression is a powerful and appropriate tool for interpersonal relations (Wolak & Finkelhor, 1998). Some children may find aggression against animals provides an outlet to model adult behavior that is more easily concealed and/or less likely to be punished than aggression against humans. Children who find a modeled activity self-satisfying will be more likely to repeat it. Research has found that children from violent homes have lower levels of empathy (Hinchey & Gavelek, 1982), and are able to generate outlooks that justify their own use of violence (Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990). As noted by Ascione (1999) “In a climate of pervasive terror, the roots of human empathy may wither and die, or fail to develop at all” (p. 51). As a result children

in violent homes may be able to relish in feelings of power over the animals they hurt without suffering emotionally.

Animal cruelty may also be self-satisfying, as modeling the aggressor may provide feelings of power and control in what is otherwise an uncontrollable situation. Ascione (1993) noted that powerlessness is frightening and demoralizing for a child, and exerting control over another can restore a sense of self-efficacy. Indeed, research has found rates of animal cruelty are significantly higher among physically and sexually abused children as well (Ascione et al., 2003). In the present study, it may be that children exposed to domestic violence and cruel to animals were identifying with the aggressor in their home and replaying those experiences with animals. Yet, the majority of exposed children were not cruel to animals. While it may be some mothers were unaware of their children's behavior, it is also improbable to expect all would model the aggression they were exposed to as models teach only general lessons, tactics, and strategies of behavior (Bandura, 1977).

From an ecological systems theory viewpoint (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the findings suggest children exposed to violence at the microsystem level were more likely to be cruel to animals than non-exposed children. Apfel and Simon (1996) noted that memories of violence do not fade in children's minds but stay fresh, with very little threat needed to sustain feelings of insecurity and danger. In the present study, exposed children who were cruel to animals were more likely to feel jealous, unloved, and fear animals/places as compared to exposed children who were not cruel to animals. These children viewed their environment as more threatening and unpredictable than other exposed children. Fear and uncertainty may have prejudiced these children to misinterpret the signals of animals as threatening and lash out.

Age and gender

The second key finding, that exposed children cruel to animals were older on average than non-exposed children cruel to animals, lends credence to the typology developed by Ascione (2001) who suggested children cruel to animals fall into two general categories. Children in the first category, termed *exploratory/curious animal abuse* are of preschool/early elementary age and lack training in the physical care and humane treatment of animals. Educational interventions were likely sufficient to deter cruelty among these younger children. Children in the second category termed *pathological animal abuse* are older and animal cruelty is a symptom of psychological disturbances related to factors including the experience of abuse and clinical intervention is warranted.

The absence of gender differences among exposed children cruel to animals was surprising as boys were exposed to domestic violence for a longer proportion of their lifetime than girls. While studies have documented that boys exposed to domestic violence were more likely than girls to demonstrate externalizing behavior, future research should also consider mediating variables. For example, Kerig (2000) found the effect of exposure to domestic violence was mediated by perceived threat for boys and self-blame for girls. Foo (2002) has also found self-blame was associated with physical aggression for girls exposed to domestic violence. Among sexually abused children, experiencing physical abuse increased animal cruelty among boys, while exposure to domestic violence increased animal cruelty among girls (Ascione et al., 2003); the combined experience of domestic violence and physical abuse increased animal cruelty among sexually abused girls only. Clearly, the experience of violence, animal cruelty, and gender interact in complex ways that should be explored in future research.

Limitations

The present study has several limitations. First, animal cruelty was assessed by mothers using a single item. Animal cruelty is often a solitary and secretive behavior (Felthous & Kellert, 1987). Mothers may not be aware of their children's behavior or may have wanted to present their children in socially desirable ways. Offord, Boyle, and Racine (1991) found maternal reports of animal cruelty among non-exposed children suggested a prevalence of 2% while children's self-reports indicated a prevalence of 10%. Thus, findings in the present study likely underestimate the prevalence of animal cruelty in both samples.

Second, mothers were not asked to provide a definition of animal cruelty. Because a parent is the most important and prominent figure in the social composition of a child's world (Nash & Calonico, 1996), it is appropriate to use a mother's definition of animal cruelty to determine whether a child's treatment of animals falls outside what is acceptable within the microsystem of a family. Asking mothers to provide a definition of animal cruelty within the subculture of their family and ethnic belief system would have added depth to this analysis. Third, the present study did not address whether children exposed to domestic violence also experienced other forms of child abuse. Exposure to domestic violence and physical child abuse are known to overlap in families (Saunders, 2003). It is suggested that future studies on animal cruelty by children examine co-occurring risk and protective factors in the family.

Fourth, it is not known whether there were pets in the homes of children. Ascione (1998) found 71% of women with children exposed to domestic violence reported that their partners were cruel to animals. In some cases, exposed children may have been modeling behavior they saw directly rather than transferring the inter-spousal violence they witnessed to animals. Future research should include a careful inventory of family pets and domestic animals.

Fifth, mothers who had experienced domestic violence were less educated than mothers who had not. Still, mothers who reported their children cruel to animals in the exposed sample were no more or less educated than mothers who reported their children cruel to animals in the non-exposed sample. While mothers in the exposed sample were also more ethnically diverse than mothers in the non-exposed sample, mothers of Euro-Canadian descent were no more likely than non Euro-Canadian mothers to state that one or both children were cruel to animals.

A final limitation involved the small sample size. As prevalence rates for animal cruelty are generally low (below 4%), sample sizes of at least one hundred participants are recommended to allow researchers greater statistical testing options and to allow for minimal power to detect significant differences (Ascione et al., 2000).

Conclusion

The findings of the present study suggest exposure to domestic violence is correlated with animal cruelty by children. Future research with larger samples and more detailed information about behavior toward animals, using the Boat (1999) Inventory or even a simple checklist, are needed to learn more about this link. The lessons that a violent home may teach children about power, control, and empathy should be considered in future research. As noted by Lockwood (1996) “. . . the way we treat our animals is mirrored in the way we treat one another” (p. 1). Indeed, to confront violence against humans and animals alike, research must continue to focus on the classrooms within which the lessons of violence are taught, of which the home may be the most influential.

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Résumé

Objectif : Le premier objectif de cette étude fut de déterminer si les enfants exposés à la violence domestique seraient considérablement plus aptes à manifester la cruauté envers les animaux que des enfants non exposés. Le deuxième objectif fut de déterminer s'il existe des différences importantes au niveau de l'âge et du sexe, entre ces deux groupes d'enfants.

Méthode : Un échantillon communautaire de 47 mères de deux enfants et ayant une anamnèse de violence domestique fut comparé à un échantillon apparié de 45 mères ayant connu aucune violence domestique.

Résultats : Les enfants exposés à la violence domestique étaient largement plus aptes à être cruels envers les animaux que les enfants non exposés. On n'a noté aucune différence par rapport au sexe ou à l'âge, entre les deux groupes. Cependant, les enfants témoins de violence et manifestant de la cruauté étaient plus âgés que leur équivalent non exposés.

Conclusion : La cruauté que manifestent des enfants envers les animaux s'associe au fait d'avoir été exposé à la violence domestique.

Resumen

Objetivo: El primer objetivo de este estudio fue determinar si los niños expuestos a violencia doméstica tenían más tendencia a ser crueles con los animales que los niños no expuestos a violencia. El segundo objetivo fue determinar si había diferencias en edad y género entre los niños que fueron crueles y los que no lo fueron.

Método: Una muestra comunitaria de 47 madres con dos niños y con historia de violencia doméstica fue comparada con una muestra emparejada de 45 madres sin tal historia de violencia.

Resultados: Los niños expuestos a violencia doméstica tenían más tendencia a ser más crueles con los animales que los niños no expuestos a la violencia. No se observaron diferencias entre los dos grupos de niños en edad y género. Sin embargo, entre los niños crueles con los animales, los niños expuestos a la violencia doméstica fueron significativamente más mayores que los niños no expuestos a la violencia doméstica.

Conclusión: La crueldad de los niños con los animales está relacionada con la exposición a la violencia doméstica.