

The relationship between animal abuse and human violence

Cruelty to animals and abuse of humans have historically been viewed as separate subjects, yet there is increasing research and clinical evidence which suggests in some cases there are inter-relationships, between the abuse of children, vulnerable adults and animals.

A National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) UK report states: If a child is cruel to animals this may be an indicator that serious neglect and abuse have been inflicted on the child. While recent research in the UK suggests that animal abuse by children is quite widespread, in a minority of more extreme cases it appears to be associated with abuse of the child, or subsequent abusive behaviour by the child.

- Where serious animal abuse has occurred in a household there may be an increased likelihood that some other form of family violence is also occurring, and that any children present may also be at increased risk of abuse.
- Acts of animal abuse may in some circumstances be used to coerce, control and intimidate women and children to remain in, or be silent about, their abusive situation. The threat or actual abuse of a pet can prevent women leaving situations of domestic violence.
- Sustained childhood cruelty to animals has been linked to an increased likelihood of violent offending behaviour against humans in adulthood.
- If a child exhibits extreme aggressive or sexualised behaviour toward animals this may in some cases be associated with later abuse of other children or vulnerable adults unless the behaviour is recognised and treated.

It appears that animal abuse can be a part of a constellation of family violence, which can include child abuse and domestic violence. However, this does not imply that children who are cruel to animals necessarily go on to be violent adults and adults who harm animals are not necessarily also violent to their partners and/or children.¹

Professor Frank Ascione, a leading researcher in the field says 'since 1987 the psychiatric profession has acknowledged animal abuse as a significant symptom of current and, potentially, future antisocial behaviour..... research shows animal abuse is particularly prevalent in homes where children are maltreated or women harmed by their intimate partners. Professor Ascione says that people who abuse animals often do so to punish family members attached to the pet. Creating an atmosphere of fear, as a way of illustrating the power of the abuser, to show, 'I could do this to you.'

In the late 1990s, Ascione conducted a study in a Utah women's shelter. Out of the 38 women involved, 74 percent had pets, which matches the national average for families with kids. More than half of the women said their abusive partner had also hurt or killed the family pet. A further study in 2007 interviewed 101 women who'd taken refuge in shelters. He also recruited a control group of 120 women with no abuse history. The earlier findings were confirmed: 54 percent of the battered women reported their partner had also hurt or killed their pet. Five percent of the women not in shelters gave that answer.

This view is supported by Professor Eleonora Gulone, Associate Professor of Psychology at Monash University, Australia. At a conference in 2007 Professor Gulone said 'it is indisputable that aggression directed at animals and aggressions directed at humans are not two separate behaviours – the two are predictably linked', she said. 'Indeed, animal abuse can be used as a marker of other types of violence with considerable accuracy be it family violence, violent crime or child abuse'.

The Society & Animals Forum reports on a number of high profile criminal cases of individuals involved in the massacre of children - often classmates in US schools and the animals they were reported to have killed.

- In 1997, Luke Woodham stabbed and bludgeoned his mother to death, before killing two students and injuring seven others at the Pearl High

School, Mississippi. Luke Woodham, reportedly beat and burned his own dog, Sparkle, describing his dog's painful and tortured death as a "thing of true beauty"

- In 1997, 14 year old Michael Carneal shot a group of praying students killing 3 young women, injuring 5 others at Heath High School in Kentucky. Michael Carneal had been known to previously throw a cat into a bonfire.
- In 1998 Kipland Philip Kinkel at the age of 15, murdered his parents before perpetrating a school shooting at Thurston High School, Springfield, Oregon, killing 2 students and wounding 22 others. Kip Kinkel had reportedly decapitated cats, dissected live squirrels and killed cows.
- In 1998 Andrew Golden and Mitchell Johnson committed a massacre at Westside Middle School, Arkansas, killing 4 students and one teacher, and wounding ten others. Andrew Golden had previously been reported to have shot dogs before he turned his guns on his classmates.²

In light of this evidence, an integrated and collaborative response to animal abuse is therefore essential and must involve members of the police force, departments of health, community services and animal welfare organisations. Working in such collaboration, agencies may be able to prevent possible abuses taking place by identifying them at an early stage. Policies are changing across the world with vets, animal welfare inspectors and child protection agencies now collaborating and practical programmes emerging.

The US state of Oregon was the first state to recognize this link, enacting a statute in 2003 which provides for increased penalties if someone charged

with an animal cruelty misdemeanour has prior convictions for family violence.

Some US states now require vets and animal welfare workers to report suspected child abuse, in the same way as doctors and police officers are obligated to do. In the UK the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) and the NSPCC have adopted protocols for cross-reporting, highlighting potential child abuse in a home with children present found to be abusing animals, and likewise highlighting potential animal abuse in a home with animals present where householders are found abusing children.

In 2009, Wolf Clifton writing in the independent newspaper Animal People wrote 'Cruelty to animals and human rights violations may be seen as part of a continuity if one considers the process of dehumanization, by which a victim or enemy comes to be exempted from ethical considerations'.³ Animal People reports 'As dehumanization progresses from insult to homicide to genocide, the victims are not only compared to animals, or treated in the same manner, but are considered animals'

Animal People also reports on additional research demonstrating the association between criminal animal abuse and violent crimes against humans. Among the landmarks, is a 1983 study by E DeViney, J Dickhert, and Randy Lockwood which found that in 88% of families where children are physically abused, animal abuse is also present. A 1999 study by Arnold Arluke, Jack Levin, Carter Luke, and Frank Ascione found that animal abusers were 5.3 times more likely to have a violent criminal record than non-abusers.

A notorious serial killer and sex offender in the USA, Jeffrey Dahmer, who murdered 17 men and boys had, in his teens, biked around his neighbourhood looking for dead animals which he would dissect at home – even going so far as to put the head of a dog on a stake. ⁴

In addition in 1994/95 Animal People discovered a positive correlation between the number of licensed hunters and rates of family violence at county level in NY, Ohio and Michigan (USA).

In 2007, an NSPCC study concluded 'For the majority of people engaging in lower-level animal cruelty acts, these behaviours are unlikely to be predictive of any future psychosocial risk, impaired parenting or interpersonal violence. However, it is likely that for a small number of individuals, the correlation between animal harm and other forms of psychosocial distress and/or problematic behaviour is strong. Such individuals are likely to experience a range of other difficulties in their lives, in addition to animal cruelty. The emphasis for practitioners should, therefore, be on animal cruelty in the presence of other significant psychosocial risk factors. Additionally, the findings suggest that when children and young people are identified for abuse of animals, a balanced approach is needed which targets not only their own behaviours but seeks to meet their broader developmental needs.

There is a range of motivations which might underpin a person's abuse of animals. Careful assessment of individual cases is needed to explore the meaning and significance of behaviours on a case-by-case basis. Similar acts may have very different meanings for the individual engaged in them. Assessment should focus on:

- The nature of the animal concerned (its social status generally and the specific relationship to the person engaging in the behaviour)
- The specific nature of the act of cruelty (the presence of violence or aggression which is beyond what might be understandable in the context of the presenting situation – e.g. disciplining a pet or protecting a child from insect bites)
- The meaning of, and the motivation for, a specific behaviour.

Where assessments indicate that behaviours of concern exist, varying levels of support and intervention are likely to be needed. These are likely to range from low-level educative work to more intensive programmes which seek to address the multiplicity of unresolved issues faced by individuals, including, where appropriate, their own experiences of trauma and victimisation.⁵

Experts Stephen R. Kellert and Alan R. Felthous conclude, “The evolution of a more gentle and benign relationship in human society might be enhanced by our promotion of a more positive and nurturing ethic between children and animals.”⁶

Animals Asia Recommend

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- Education authorities encompass 'respect and care' for people and animals as part of their teaching plans. Social and Animal Welfare to be part of a national educational system;
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- Parents, teachers and those in regular contact with children are made aware of this field of study and therefore able to recognise potential problems and act appropriately at the first signs of possible animal abuse taking place;
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- Law enforcement agencies work closely with schools, child protection agencies and animal protection organisations to address cases of animal abuse/cruelty (including those classed as minor) at an early stage;
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- Children are provided with a supervised opportunity to engage positively with animals throughout their childhood and young adult years;

¹ Understanding the links: *Information for professionals* child abuse, animal abuse and domestic violence. NSPCC

² http://www.societyandanimalsforum.org/beyond_violence.html

³ Animal Cruelty & Dehumanization in Human Rights Violations by Wolf Clifton, *Animal People* Nov/Dec 2009

⁴ [△]Dahmer, Lionel. *A Father's Story*. William Morrow and Co., 1994, [ISBN 068812156X](#), p. 61

⁵ Animal abuse and child maltreatment: A review of the literature and findings from a UK study, October 2007. NSPCC

⁶ Stephen R. Kellert and Alan R. Felthous, "Childhood Cruelty Toward Animals Among Criminals and Noncriminals," *Human Relations* 38 (1985): 1113-29.