

THE LINKS BETWEEN CHILD ABUSE AND ANIMAL ABUSE

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Key points

- Animal abuse does not necessarily lead to interpersonal violence however, there is a need to come to a better understanding of the circumstances in which it does. Research to date has predominantly been conducted in the United States and the sample sizes have generally been small. There is an urgent need for further UK research. Meanwhile, the existing research findings which indicate a relation (often referred to as ‘the link’) between child abuse and animal abuse, should not be ignored.
- Violence against animals cannot be dismissed or treated as an isolated problem. Rather, acts of animal abuse should be considered within the context of a much wider picture of family violence. Consequently policies, service provision, and training should take account of the link.
- Closer collaborative working between child welfare and animal welfare organisations could make a positive contribution to the protection and welfare of children, families, and animals.

Summary of Research Findings

Historical background

Although the past two decades have seen a resurgence of research into the links between how animals are treated and how people treat each other, the association has been acknowledged for centuries. For example, in 1705 the philosopher John Locke observed that cruelty to animals can lead to cruelty to human beings: “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, quoted in Ascione and Arlow, 1999, p.197). The English artist William Hogarth (1697 – 1764) was the first artist to condemn animal cruelty and theorise on its human consequences (cited in Lockwood and Ascione, 1998, p.114) More recently, the anthropologist, Margaret Mead (1964) suggested that childhood cruelty to animals might be a precursor to anti-social violence as an adult.

Definition

Defining animal abuse is complex due to the existence of socially and culturally sanctioned activities which harm animals, differing attitudes toward members of different species and the continuum of severity that can range from teasing to torture. Ascione (Ascione and Arkow, 1999, p.51) defines it as “socially unacceptable behaviour that intentionally causes unnecessary pain, suffering, or distress to and/or the death of an animal”. He says animal maltreatment can include physical abuse and neglect, including acts of commission and omission, and sexual abuse that may involve bestiality. In common with definitions of child abuse, definitions of animal abuse vary across time, place, and societies.

Research

Research over the past 30 years has begun to define and elucidate the possible relationship between child welfare concerns and animal cruelty. One of the first studies to validate the idea of a relationship between child and animal abuse was British. Hutton looked at all the cases of animal abuse that came to the notice 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 were described as having children at risk or there were indicators of neglect or physical abuse (Hutton, 1981). This study stimulated interest in America 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 88% of the cases animal abuse had also occurred. Two thirds of the pets were abused by fathers and one third were abused by the children. Furthermore, persons - including children - living in homes where pets were abused were ten times more likely to have been bitten or attacked by the abused pet.

Since the 1980s further research has been conducted, primarily in America. Unlike in Britain, America has humane societies and associations which are concerned with the protection of both animals and children which might explain why the research interest has flourished there as opposed to in Britain where welfare provision for children and animals have been traditionally compartmentalised and separated.

Major themes

Six major themes emerge from research to date:

1 Animal abuse perpetrated by children

Aggressive acts against animals can be an early diagnostic indicator of future psychopathology, which, if unrecognized and untreated, may escalate in range and severity against other victims (Kellert and Felthous, 1985; Lockwood and Hodge, 1986, Frick et al., 1993). FBI research by Ressler et al (1988) found substantial rates of severe animal abuse in childhood and adolescence in a sample of serial sexual homicide perpetrators. The suspicion in some of this research is that animal abuse may be a form of rehearsal for human directed violence.

2 Acts of animal abuse witnessed by children

Exposure to animal abuse desensitises children to violence (Ascione, 1993). This desensitisation may come through individual traumatic acts against animal companions, or through cultural conditioning (Clifton, 1997).

3 Acts of animal abuse in the context of domestic violence

Animals and children living in violent households may become victims of abuse themselves. Acts of animal abuse may be used in order to coerce, control, and intimidate battered women and their children to remain in, or be silent about, abusive situations (Ascione, 1998; Arkow, 1996; Firmani, 1997).

4 Animal abuse as part of the continuum of family violence

Higher rates of animal abuse by parental figures have been found in substantiated cases of child physical abuse than in the general population (DeViney et al, 1983). Loar (1999) observed that animal abuse could be triggered by the same behaviours as child abuse. The need for high level of supervision, activity, noise, resistant or destructive behaviours and toileting accidents can trigger abuse of both children and animals in circumstances where the caregivers have difficulties in responding to these demands. These and other research findings have led to pioneers in this field to argue that animal abuse should not be regarded as an isolated incident with only an animal victim but rather as an unrecognized component of family violence. (Ascione and Arkow, 1999)

5 Therapeutic potential of animals to promote healing or enhance empathy skills

Abuse victims may find interactions with a family pet a source of comfort (Zimrin, 1986) and learning to touch pets appropriately may be a useful adjunct to therapy (Lew, 1988). Animal - assisted therapy and animal assisted activities are becoming more prevalent in the United States however, research to validate the effectiveness of these interventions remains in its infancy (Arkow, 1998).

6 The role of animals in child development

Animal companionship can help children move along the developmental continuum and promote the development of resilience (Levinson, 1970, Gilligan, 2000). The death or loss of a pet can have a profound effect on children, particularly in adolescence and if they have no one to talk with about their grief (Levinson, 1967; Robin et al, 1983; Boat, 1999).

Cautionary note

Bell (2001) suggests that while the existing research into the links provides some useful data, some of the findings must be treated with caution because of the problems with some of the research studies. For example:

- Defining animal abuse is complex and studies to date use different definitions.
- Information about animal abuse is most often derived from self reports by potential perpetrators – often there is a lack of corroborative evidence.
- Issues of under reporting – parents may be unaware of their children's animal cruelty as animals may be abused secretly or adults may rely on children's own accounts of animal abuse but may not have witnessed this happen. Evidence is also emerging

from Scotland, that most vets acknowledge that animal abuse exists but many consider they are not trained to identify it (NSPCC and RSPCA, 2001, p.23).

- Young people may be reluctant to admit to acts of animal abuse for fear of the reaction of others.
- Research using clinical case histories may fail to uncover animal abuse not because it did not take place but rather because no one asked about it.

Recent UK Research

Three recently published UK studies contribute to further understanding of the link:

- Piper (2001) completed a study in order to understand more about why people harm animals and the attitudes of children and young people. More than 1000 young people engaged with the research at some level. They conclude that the links between different forms of violence and future behaviour patterns will apply to some individuals (who are probably at the more severe end of the harming continuum) but that this is only a part of the picture. The majority of children said the reason they would harm a pet was either to retaliate because it had harmed them or for fun. They found that boys are more likely to harm animals than are girls. They conclude that education is the best way for RSPCA and others to effect change in children who harm animals.
- Bell (2001) conducted a survey to ascertain what, if any, resources or services were available for children and young people who are abusive to animals. Of 164 questionnaires returned, 56 per cent indicated they had provided services to children who had abused animals, with most services being provided by child and adolescent psychiatry. She found that no agency has a service or therapeutic intervention directed specifically towards children who abused animals. Bell (2001, p.232) concludes that given the increasing body of research which highlights the possible links that 'it might be an opportune time for service providers to consider the inclusion of animal abuse in their risk assessment instruments'.
- Cawson *et al* (2000) undertook a study of 2,869 young people aged 18-24 years across the UK in order to ascertain the prevalence of child abuse and neglect. Among the many questions posed they asked respondents if they had experienced 'proxy attacks' that is threats or attacks on pets or on treasured possessions. Cawson and colleagues found that 2% had experienced a pet being got rid of or put to sleep even though it was healthy.

Recent UK Developments

Child welfare and animal welfare organisations are starting to take account of the growing body of research on this subject and the implications for policy and practice. Paws For Kids operates a pet fostering scheme for women who are seeking refuge following domestic violence. In 2001, NSPCC and RSPCA jointly organised a conference to increase awareness of the links and explore their meaning for policy, practice and training. Intervet UK limited are hosting a conference in November 2001, to explore the links between child abuse, domestic violence and animal abuse.

Cross-reporting schemes, where there is a police, RSPCA and social services protocol for the sharing of concerns about children or animals, are being piloted in several parts of

England and in Tayside in Scotland. However, no published evaluation of these initiatives is as yet available. Some Area Child Protection Committees are beginning to consider the issue of the links however, RSPCA representation on ACPCs has yet to become established.

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NSPCC Position Statement

The NSPCC's mission is to end cruelty to children. NSPCC believes that all children must be protected from all forms of violence and exploitation. Given the mission of the organisation NSPCC is committed to learning more about the relations between child abuse and animal abuse and the implications for practice, policy and training. NSPCC intends to work collaboratively with other organisations to this end. A research project and the formation of a working group are both under consideration. The implications of the link are also being integrated into training provided by the organisation.

Other Organisations to Contact

Humane Society of the United States
<http://www.hsus.org>

Latham Foundation for the Promotion of Humane Education
<http://www.latham.org>

Paws for Kids
<http://www.pawsforkids.org.uk>
UK-based charity which 'fosters' the pet animals of women and children escaping domestic violence.

Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA)
<http://www.rspca.org.uk>

Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
<http://www.scottishspca.org>

This Information Briefing is based on a review of research and literature. It reports the findings and views of a range of authors. These views are not necessarily the views of the NSPCC.