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PETS, FAMILIES AND INTERAGENCY WORKING

All agencies, professions and individuals who have contact with children have a duty to safeguard them.[1] Government guidance has highlighted the need for agencies to work together and share information to achieve this aim. It has been suggested that organisations that work with animals should be included in the safeguarding agenda on the basis that there may be an association between cruelty to animals and family violence. This POSTnote examines the evidence base for this assumption, and the rationale for cross-reporting between different agencies.

Background

There is growing interest in the possible relationships between cruelty to animals and violence towards people.[2] For instance, animal cruelty sometimes occurs as part of a constellation of family violence involving partner and child abuse, and animal cruelty by children may precede violence in later life. In 2001 the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) hosted conferences discussing the 'link' between animal cruelty, domestic violence and child abuse. A multi-agency group, the Links Group, was established to raise the profile of the issue, to encourage relevant research, and to promote good working practice in relation to cross-reporting between agencies.

Cross-reporting

Cross-reporting between different agencies occurs on a limited scale and in a sporadic manner. In 2008, the RSPCA estimates it received 600 referrals from social services; these were for a variety of reasons and there are no figures for the number that related to safeguarding children. New RSPCA inspectors receive some training about child protection issues and there are plans for inspectors to begin formally recording concerns about children in households during investigations of alleged animal cruelty or neglect, to report to social services or the police if necessary. In 2008, a draft joint protocol between the RSPCA and the London Safeguarding Children Board was published. This provides guidance on when and how agencies should share information.[3] No date for implementation has been agreed, though similar guidelines are in use by social services in other parts of the country.[4]

Despite these developments, there is no overall consensus on what cross-reporting should encompass. This reflects factors such as differences in organisational priorities, fear of additional workload, and lack of knowledge of, or differing opinions about, the nature of relationships between animal cruelty, child abuse and domestic violence.

Evidence

Associations between animal cruelty and other violence can be broken down into the categories discussed below.

Domestic Violence and Child Abuse: Risk to Animals?

Interviews with women who have been victims of domestic violence show that some violent partners also harm pets. However, figures vary widely between studies, ranging from 25 to 80%.[2] Animal cruelty is integral to some cases of domestic violence, with threats to harm pets being used to control partners or children. In these cases, animal cruelty may act as a marker of more severe violence. Men who abuse both their partner and the family pet use more violence and controlling behaviours against their partner than men who abuse their partner but not pets.[5] Finally, in families where there is confirmed child abuse there can be high rates of animal cruelty and neglect. For instance, a US study found animal abuse in 88% of families where children had been physically abused, and 34% of families where children had been sexually abused or neglected.[6]

Many studies are based on samples from domestic violence refuges or families where child abuse has been confirmed. These are likely to be the most extreme cases and may not represent the full spectrum of domestic violence or child abuse. Correlations between animal cruelty and partner abuse are moderate and the relationship between them is not straightforward.[5]

Animal Cruelty by Adults: Risk to Family Members?
In the US, those prosecuted for animal cruelty are more likely to have a criminal record for violent offences (37%) than those not cruel to animals (7%), but it is not clear if offences involve family violence.[2] Fifty-eight per cent of US college students who report exposure to animal cruelty during childhood also report exposure to either domestic violence or child abuse.[7] Similarly, in Australia, 62% of those with animal cruelty convictions have committed assault and 55% domestic violence.[8] There are few good quality UK data for comparison.

Animal Cruelty by Children and Adolescents
Studies on animal cruelty by children and adolescents have tended to focus on two main questions:

- are children exposed to child abuse or domestic violence more likely to be cruel to animals?
- are (adult) violent offenders more likely to have been cruel to animals when they were a child?

Animal Cruelty, Child Abuse and Domestic Violence
North American studies have shown increases in childhood animal cruelty in children abused or exposed to domestic violence.[2,9,10] Adolescents in residential treatment for conduct problems who have been abused show increased rates of animal cruelty (60%) compared with those who have not been abused (40%).[9] Children exposed to domestic violence are 2-3 times more likely to be cruel to animals than those not exposed, though most such children are not cruel: between 1 in 6 and 1 in 9 commits animal cruelty.[10]

Association with Subsequent Interpersonal Violence
Studies asking people about their past behaviour show that 25-66% of violent offenders and 20% of adults in the general population report animal cruelty in childhood.[2] A meta-analysis of 10 studies, using criminal or psychiatric records, found that 25% of those who were violent had been cruel to animals, compared with 14% of matched controls.[11] In children tracked through adolescence and early adulthood there was only a small association between cruelty to animals at 6-12 years and later violent delinquency.[10] Cruelty that is persistent, varied, lacking in self-restraint and remorse is most likely to predict later violence.[2]

The view that childhood animal cruelty predicts adult violence and criminality is now widely regarded as simplistic. It is believed that animal cruelty is just one of many manifestations of antisocial behaviour that occur in no particular order and that may have similar underlying causes. This view is supported by:

- US research showing that childhood animal cruelty is as likely to be associated with non-violent crime as with violent crime and that animal cruelty is as likely to follow as to precede other offences.[2]
- A recent UK study in Edinburgh looking at youth transitions and crime.[12] Some 13% of respondents stated that they had harmed an animal on purpose between the ages of 13 and 17 years, although most had done this only once or twice. Animal cruelty peaked between the ages of 14 and 15 years and then gradually declined. For most of these adolescents, low level animal cruelty was a transient stage that was part of a pattern of other low level violence and antisocial behaviour. Persistent and frequent animal cruelty was seen in 1% of children, many of whom were also involved in persistent interpersonal violence.

Using Cruelty to Animals as a Marker

The limitations of existing research (see below) have led some to call for caution to be exercised before using animal cruelty as a marker for identifying children or families at risk of violence.[2] While certain factors are likely to be associated with greater risk of violence – persistent, varied cruelty lacking in restraint or remorse, in adults or children with other problems[2] – there is concern that qualitatively different acts, such as neglect of pets, are being used as indicators of risk to children.[11]

It is also important to note that there can be a statistically significant association between two behaviours without one being a good marker for the other. Overall, childhood animal cruelty is unlikely to be a good single marker for child abuse or to be highly predictive of future violence. A wider assessment of family context and general measures of health and adjustment are more likely to be useful in this respect.

Limitations of Existing Research

Limitations of existing research that may explain contradictory or inconclusive results include the:[2,11]

- Lack of an accepted definition of animal cruelty. This may vary between studies or may not be defined at all. Often a single item on a checklist is used, whereas asking about the context, motivation, and nature of cruel acts would be more informative.
- Reliance on information from perpetrators, who may downplay or exaggerate this aspect of their behaviour. Combining information from multiple sources such as perpetrators, teachers, and parents may be more reliable.
- Lack of longitudinal studies that follow a representative population through childhood, adolescence and into adulthood. Much existing evidence comes from studies that examine a group of people at one point in time, or are retrospective or are based on groups such as psychiatric inpatients. Furthermore, many studies have not controlled for factors such as social deprivation.
- Lack of a) studies that ask specific questions about attitudes and behaviour towards people and animals and b) studies that test whether programmes that use animals to try to develop empathy are effective in reducing aggression in general.

Interagency Working

Cross-reporting Between Agencies

Working Together to Safeguard Children sets out advice on inter-agency working which is relevant to both animal and family agencies when cross-reporting:[1]

- communication and transparency are essential and families should be made aware of what information will be shared and for what purpose;
- consent should be sought, though data can be shared without consent in some circumstances;
- information should be up to date, accurate, necessary for the purpose, proportionate to the problem, secure, and shared only with those who need to see it;
- if there are any doubts then advice can be sought without revealing the identity of the family.

When to Cross-report?

For confidentiality to be breached by allowing cross-reporting between agencies, a child must be considered to be at "risk of significant harm". There is uncertainty about what this means with cross-reporting. Some argue that an animal protection agency must have evidence of possible harm to a child (e.g. observation of a child with injuries) before cross-reporting. However, the recent draft Joint Protocol between the RSPCA and London Safeguarding Children Board assumes that *suspected animal cruelty or neglect* in a home with children is sufficient grounds to deem a child at risk of harm.[3]

This latter approach is based on the idea that it is better to investigate every case in which there *might be any risk* of harm to children. In practice however, lowering the threshold for what is considered a "risk of significant harm" could increase the case load for children's social services and is likely to put the families investigated under significant strain. For instance, parents whose children are made the subject of a child protection plan may subsequently be unable to work in certain jobs through the Vetting and Barring Scheme (see Box 1).

Neglect

Most interventions, by both social services and animal protection agencies, are to combat neglect. These are often cases where, due to financial or social adversity, families require support to care for family members and/or pets. Cross-reporting by animal agencies may highlight cases of human neglect that have gone unreported. *Working Together to Safeguard Children* provides guidance for information sharing between agencies, such as housing, education, health services, and the police, to support families with multiple needs. Coordination with animal charities could allow additional assistance – veterinary care or the provision of pet food – for families who are also struggling to care for pets.

Pet Fostering Services

Domestic violence that harms or threatens pets can indicate a greater risk of interpersonal violence.[5] Research has shown that concerns about pets' safety can be a factor that prevents or delays women from leaving an abusive home.[2] One consideration for these women is that most domestic violence refuges do not allow pets.

Box 1. Vetting and Barring Scheme

This scheme, run by the Department for Children, Schools and Families with the Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA), aims to prevent unsuitable people from working or volunteering with children and vulnerable adults. From November 2010, it is illegal to hire someone to work with children or vulnerable adults if they are not registered with the ISA. Individuals can be barred from these jobs if:

- they are convicted or cautioned for certain offences (e.g., murder, sexual offences, child abuse or neglect, child abduction by parent, disorderly and indecent behaviour);
- the ISA decides that the person may pose a risk to children or vulnerable adults (see below).

Agencies such as social services and the Criminals Records Bureau will have a statutory duty to make referrals to the ISA if they have information that they believe may indicate that a person poses a risk to children or vulnerable adults. A conviction, caution, or investigation for animal cruelty or neglect will be referred to the ISA. This is unlikely to lead to a bar on its own, but if it co-exists with other offences (such as possession of drugs), or other 'soft' information (such as police or social services reports), it may lead to a bar. If individuals are considered for barring, they will be invited to make representations, within 8 weeks, as to why they should not be barred.

Pet fostering services (see Box 2) can help, but they often lack funding, so that some families are turned away and some areas of the country are not covered.

Cruelty to Animals and Children

Different agencies use a number of standard assessments for children and young people in need of services. Including questions about pets in these would have a number of potential advantages, such as:

- identifying severe, persistent animal cruelty by children, which accompanies other conduct problems and so warrants further investigation;
- asking children about pets may encourage them to talk more openly about their experiences in the home, including family violence;
- pets can foster resilience in children who are vulnerable because of abuse or youth offending.[2]

Involving animal protection professionals in case conferences or multi-agency panels may help in making decisions about whether to support the family in keeping its pets, to remove pets from the household, or to enable children to have supervised contact with pets.

Barriers to Cross-reporting

Cross-reporting between animal and human services is currently not widespread. Veterinary surgeons (vets) may be reluctant to report suspected animal cruelty or neglect to the RSPCA if they have not received specific training in this area, do not have ready access to 'expert advice' about animal cruelty or other family violence, or are worried about their reputation if they are seen to be breaching client confidentiality. The following sections describe approaches to dealing with such barriers.

Box 2. *Paws for Kids* 'Safe Haven' Project

Paws for Kids is a domestic violence charity based in the North West of England. When women are leaving violent households the whole family – parent, children, and pets – need services. If a woman is entering a domestic violence shelter that does not accept pets then *Paws for Kids* arranges for pets to be placed in foster homes for up to 9 months, reuniting owner and pet when the family is settled in a new home. Additional services aim to provide practical and emotional support and include individual and family group counselling, peer support groups, and projects (art and drama, outdoor pursuits, etc). The project helps women to escape from violent homes knowing that their pets will not be left behind, and then supports the family as it comes to terms with its experiences. The project's record for improving outcomes for families, such as fewer subsequent evictions from public housing and reduced antisocial behaviour in children, has led to partnership with the local authority.

Mandatory Reporting of Animal Cruelty

Mandatory reporting by vets of suspected animal cruelty has been suggested as a necessary first step to effective cross-reporting.[13] This would require: legislative change; the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) to govern training and assessment of vets in identifying animal cruelty; and clear reporting procedures to be established locally and nationally. Mandatory reporting has been introduced in the US, Canada and New Zealand. The RCVS does not currently support such a move, suggesting this would remove vets' capacity to make professional judgements and mean that the veterinary profession would be out of step with other professions (where mandatory reporting has not been introduced). There has been no systematic attempt to establish the extent of under-reporting of animal cruelty.

It has been suggested that mandatory reporting might lead to greater reporting of cases with a relatively low index of suspicion, thus increasing the workload of the RSPCA and the risk that innocent families might be investigated. There is evidence that the introduction of mandated reporting of suspected child abuse in the US and Australia coincided with an increase in the number and proportion of unsubstantiated reports.[14]

Improved Education

Some suggest that the full range of groups that deal with families and pets could benefit from education about the relationships between cruelty to animals and other violence. While the RCVS provides some guidance, there is no requirement for vet schools to teach about animal cruelty, and it is not often covered as part of continuing professional development. One way of addressing this would be via a cross-disciplinary education pack approved by all the professions involved.

In autumn 2008, the Links Group initiated discussion with the veterinary professional associations about the future direction of veterinary education about animal cruelty and family violence. A guidance document outlining how veterinary practices should deal with cases of animal cruelty and family violence will be published shortly with an executive summary sent to practices to raise awareness.

Local Networks

Effective inter-agency working requires professionals to make local links with other agencies to build a network that can provide advice and support, even when formal cross-reporting might not be appropriate. One approach would be to develop and distribute posters to agencies, which contain local information about whom to contact if there are concerns about animal cruelty or family violence. This could include domestic violence shelters, social services, the NSPCC, the RSPCA, and the police. Links between local agencies would also ensure that they received feedback about the outcome of referrals and that work is coordinated. For example, the Scottish SPCA aims to communicate with social services and the police, to avoid its interventions from interfering with police or social services operations.

Overview

- There is evidence of an association between animal cruelty and interpersonal violence.
- However, animal cruelty alone is unlikely to be highly predictive as a marker for violence towards people.
- Nevertheless, agencies that work with animals and those that work with families are starting to work more closely together and to cross-report cases.
- While there are benefits of closer inter-agency working, there is a debate over when cross-reporting between animal and social care agencies is appropriate.
- Professional education, formation of local links between relevant animal and social care agencies, and mandatory reporting of suspected animal cruelty by vets have all been suggested as options.

Endnotes

1 *Working Together to Safeguard Children*, 2006, HMS Government.
2 *Animal abuse and child maltreatment*, 2007, NSPCC.
3 www.londonscb.gov.uk/files/procedures/rspca/final_draft_rspca_lscb_protocol_july_08.doc
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13 Robertson, in The *Link Between Animal Abuse & Human Violence* (ed. Linzey), 2009.
14 Bell & Tooman, *Inter. J. Law & the Fam.*, 1994, 8, 337-356.

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The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, 7 Millbank, London, SW1P 3JA; Tel: 020 7219 2840; email: post@parliament.uk

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