

Animal Abuse and Child Maltreatment: The Need for Interagency Cross-Reporting

The Evidence

Researchers in such fields as psychology, child development, sociology, criminology, social work, law and veterinary medicine are addressing the multi-disciplinary nature of animals and family violence. Key findings include:

- If a child is cruel to animals, this may be an indicator that serious neglect and abuse have been inflicted on the child.
- Where serious animal abuse has occurred, other forms of family violence are often occurring and other family members may be at increased risk of abuse.
- Acts or threats of animal abuse may be used to coerce, control and intimidate women, children and elders to be silent about their abusive situations. These threats to pets often prevent women and children from leaving situations of domestic violence and sexual abuse.
- Childhood cruelty to animals has been linked to an increased likelihood of violent behaviors against other people both in childhood and in adulthood.
- When an animal has been abused there is a greater risk that adults and children in the home have been bitten or attacked by the pet.

"A growing body of evidence suggests that bonds formed or broken with companion animals reverberate and resonate across the lifespan."

– Mary Renck Jalongo, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, author of "The World's Children and Their Companion Animals: Developmental and Educational Significance of the Child/Pet Bond"

Policy and practice based on knowledge of The Link may enable professionals to intervene earlier in order to detect or prevent abuse to children, animals and vulnerable adults. To achieve this it is essential that arrangements for communication and cooperation between relevant statutory and voluntary organizations are developed and enhanced. With the compartmentalization of social services, these agencies have traditionally focused on distinct victim groups. As we begin to recognize that the ecologies of families include both people and pets, it is apparent that victims may experience many forms of overlapping maltreatment, and that interagency collaboration would be beneficial.

“He opened the car door and ordered my daughter Christine to kick our dog Dusty out. When she refused, he told her...she could watch while he tortured and killed Dusty and dumped her off the side of the road, too. Then he said he would come home and kill me and Christine would be left alone with him. He raped Christine her first night alone in our new home while I was at work. She had just turned eight.”

– Marsha Millikin, describing her family’s experience in “Life and Death Inside the Cycles of Violence”

Many studies indicate that animal maltreatment is part of a complex constellation of family violence. While not all children who harm animals go on to become violent adults, and while not all adult animal abusers necessarily harm their partners or children, compelling evidence is causing researchers and practitioners to view animal abuse as a “red flag” for other antisocial behaviors. Investigation and assessment are keys to determining whether there are any links between these forms of violence and possible risks to the safety and welfare of children, adults and animals.

Phil Arkow
Consultant – The Link
American Humane Association