Children & Animals Together Assessment and Intervention Program

- Animals are silent victims of abuse.
- A study of late adolescents found that approximately 50% of participants had experienced animal abuse in their lives; half had witnessed the abuse of animals, while 20% actually committed the abuse themselves. In the same study, killing strays and torturing animals were the most common types of animal abuse (Flynn, 2000).
- Despite knowledge among professionals of the occurrence of childhood animal abuse, there is a dearth of intervention programs for children who abuse animals (Haden & Scarpa, 2005).
- Youth who commit delinquent acts before age 13, including acts of animal abuse, are at much greater risk of becoming serious, violent, and chronic juvenile offenders (U.S. Dept. of Justice, 2003).

Children and Animals Together Assessment and Intervention Program (CAT) is an innovative program provided through the ASU School of Social Work in collaboration with the Arizona Animal Welfare League & SPCA (AAWL). Its mission is to prevent and reduce childhood abuse to all animals. Through age-specific interactive activities, CAT taps into the human-animal bond to build respect and connections to animals as a means to end childhood animal abuse and potential other societal violence.

CAT’s intervention and treatment philosophy is guided by ecological systems theory, a major tenet of social work practice. Rather than utilize a purely psychological framework to focus on the diagnosis of an individual child or youth, the “person-in-environment” approach of social work practice emphasizes the ways in which children and families live in and interact with their environments. Thus, each child who is referred to CAT receives an in-home assessment from a Master-level social worker, the core component of CAT’s holistic approach to intervention. In addition, at least one caregiver, and siblings if appropriate, are required to attend the CAT sessions along with the client child.

Each assessment includes a clinical evaluation of juvenile animal abuse, which explores any cultural support or non-support for acts of animal abuse, as well as the motivation for, duration and severity of such acts. An extensive exploration of the child’s family history also occurs, with an emphasis on the presence or absence of child abuse, domestic violence, and elder abuse. Findings from this in-depth assessment guide CAT staff in tailoring services and recommendations to meet the child’s and family’s unique needs; children and their caregivers may be referred to CAT’s 16 hour (14 sessions) group intervention; and/or additional counseling services than they may currently be getting. CAT is not therapy but a family intervention designed to be an adjunct to other therapeutic services. The CAT intervention is held over 14 Sundays at AAWL. It is lead by two Master-level social workers and has one child client along with their caregivers and at least one sibling (if they have them). The focus of this group is the development of prosocial skills: responding to the feelings of others; responding to anger, fear, and peer pressure; helping others including animals; and understanding animal needs and behavior. Activities include prosocial modeling, working with therapy dogs, making things for the animals at the shelter, interacting with and caring for shelter cats and kittens, and weekly homework. It is required that the caregiver attend all sessions along with the child. In addition, CAT staff must have access to the child’s therapist/child family team to engage them in reinforcing what is happening in CAT.
This innovative program is supported by national experts in the field of animal abuse such as Dr. Randall Lockwood, Senior Vice President, Anti-Cruelty Initiatives, American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals; Dr. Mary Lou Randour, and Dr. Kenneth Shapiro, Cofounder and Board Chair, Animals and Society Institute.

CAT’s intervention model utilizes a framework based on a typology of juvenile fire setters, which is used by the Salt Lake City Area Juvenile Fire Setter/Arson Control and Prevention Program. Frank Ascione (2007), an international and national leader in the field of animal cruelty, recommended such a model as potentially relevant to children who abuse animals.

Troubled children and youth, ages 6-17, who have committed acts of cruelty against animals, need an intervention like CAT. Indeed, the program began as a direct attempt to fill an unmet community need. In December 2008 a Maricopa County probation officer began looking for an animal abuse diversion program for two of her clients, 9 year-old boys who had killed a kitten. Outside of a strictly educational and non-individualized 1.5-hour class in a different part of the state, the officer was unable to find any program across the nation to address childhood animal abuse. The probation officer was ultimately referred to Dr. Christina Risley-Curtiss, CAT’s founder and executive director, due to her involvement and expertise in the field of animal abuse and human-animal interactions.

Without treatment, these children and youth likely will continue to abuse, torture, and kill defenseless animals. However, making intervention a possibility for children who carry out such acts of cruelty may help break the cycle of violence against animals and humans, and other criminal activity.

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