CHILDREN WHO ABUSE ANIMALS

Cruelty to animals may be the first sign that there is something wrong in a child’s life. It is also one of the early symptoms of conduct disorder. When a child hurts an animal, people need to pay attention (Lewchanin & Randour, 2008).

Risk Factors for Animal Abuse by Children

Children who abuse animals, compared to those who do not, are much more likely to have been treated violently by their families or to have witnessed domestic violence or animal abuse. They also have higher frequencies of sexual victimization as well as higher rates of sexual offenses against peers (studies reviewed by Ascione, 2001; Currie, 2006; DeGue & DiLillo, 2009; Deviney et al., 1983 cited in McPhedran, 2009; studies cited in Henry & Saunders, 2007; Henry, 2004a, cited in Ascione & Shapiro, 2009; McEwen, Moffitt & Arseneault, 2014; Randour & Davidson, 2008).

For example, Currie (2006) surveyed 92 families. In 47 of the families, children had witnessed domestic violence. The child witnesses of domestic violence were 2.95 times more likely to display animal cruelty (17% compared to 7% of non-exposed children). However, most child witnesses of violence did not engage in animal cruelty. Comparing them to child witnesses who did abuse animals, the study found that children who abused animals were likely to feel jealous, unloved and were more likely to be afraid of the animals. The children who were cruel to animals viewed their environments as unpredictable and more threatening compared to children who were not cruel to animals.

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Becker et al. (2004, reported in Peterson & Farrington, 2007) had similar findings to Currie. Child witnesses of domestic violence were significantly more likely to be cruel to animals than children from non-violent homes (11% compared to 5%). A number of studies have found gender differences, with boys more likely to abuse animals than girls (Lucia & Killias, 2011; studies cited in Gullone & Robertson, 2008).

Children involved in multiple episodes of animal abuse are more likely to be both victims and perpetrators of bullying (Henry & Saunders, 2007). Baldry (2005), studying 9- to 12-year-old Italian school children found that being a victim of bullying at school was a strong predictor of perpetrating animal abuse. Gallone & Robertson (2008) found bullying victimization and perpetration were related to self-reported animal abuse in a sample of 12-to 16-year-old Australian youth.

**Long-term Outcomes for Children Who Abuse Animals**

Children who abuse animals are felt to be at higher risk for later aggressive behaviors during childhood, adolescence, and as adults. Cruelty towards animals has also been cited as a predictor of later pathology as well as delinquent and criminal behaviors (studies cited in Gullone & Robertson, 2008; studies cited in Henry & Saunders, 2007; Lucia & Killias, 2011). After a review of literature, Ascione (2001) concluded that animal abuse may be characteristic of the developmental histories of between one in four nonaggressive adult criminals and nearly two in three violent offenders. However, some researchers claim that abuse of animals may not precede abuse of humans and is equally likely to occur after a child has already been violent towards children or adults (Arluke, Levin, Luke & Ascione, 1999).
Other researchers (McPhedran, 2009; Piper, 2003) reject the idea that children who are cruel to animals will escalate into more violent behaviors as adults. They note that a substantial proportion of violent adults do not report a history of animal cruelty (although many report exposure to family violence and/or child maltreatment). Piper suggests that some young people who harm animals have been hurt themselves, others have observed violence and some are going through a phase, along with friends. McPhedran notes that there is an absence of longitudinal information where children who abuse animals are followed into adulthood to trace the developmental progression of behavioral problems. Due to the limitations in literature, these authors suggest that the hypothesis that animal cruelty in childhood precedes other antisocial behaviors does not have sufficient support. Rather, a range of developmental and behavioral problems may occur concurrently and share a similar contextual background.

Additionally, some more recent studies fail to replicate earlier findings. For instance, Hensley, Tallichet & Dutkiewicz (2012) used a regression analysis with 180 inmates and found that sexual activity with animals was the only method of childhood animal cruelty that predicted later commission of adult violent crimes. Bestiality was found most often in violent offenders and often these individuals had themselves been sexually abused.

Studies on long-term effects of children’s cruelty to animals appeared to VCPN staff to have numerous problems. There appears to be no standardized definition of what constitutes cruelty to animals. Studies not only define cruelty to animals differently (if they define it at all), but also accept varying levels of frequency and severity. A single instance of hitting an animal or pulling its tail may be much different than a pattern of chronic cruel behavior. The severity can range from squeezing an animal too tightly to an action such as setting an animal on fire and killing it.
In addition to lack of standardized definitions, studies have used convenience samples such as comparing ‘violent’ and ‘nonviolent’ incarcerated inmates or surveying college freshman. Some studies rely only upon self-report. Volunteer inmates, in particular have been known to exaggerate or even fabricate when describing violent acts (Arluke, Levin, Luke & Ascione, 1999). Some studies rely upon parent report of the child’s behavior, even though others have found that children relate more frequent and more severe acts of cruelty towards animals than their parents report. Many studies examined by VCPN staff did not gather data related to exposures to positive modeling of proper animal care and nurturing.

Even with many methodological problems noted in studies, cruelty to animals appears to be associated with the persistence of aggressive and criminal behaviors, especially those offenses with an anger component. One of the early symptoms of conduct disorder is cruelty to animals. Of children with conduct problems, those who have abused animals have more severe symptoms (Lucia & Killias, 2011; Luk, Staiger, Wong, & Mathai, 1999).

Several theoretical models have been proposed to explain the associations between being a victim or witness to violence and becoming a perpetrator (Gullone & Robertson, 2008; Henry & Saunders, 2007). Children may identify with the aggressor and model or act out actions that have been witnessed or experienced. Abuse of animals or others may be seen as a way to be powerful and in control. It has been proposed that empathy is disrupted in child witnesses or victims of violence, producing a callous disregard for the welfare of others. Children who grow up in a home with violence
and animal abuse may simply generalize these behaviors towards others. However, it is likely that the relationships between violence against people and animals are complex (Arluke et al., 1999; Lucia & Killias, 2011).

Detection of Animal Abuse

Animal cruelty can be one of the earlier signs of a child or family at risk. Factors associated with animal cruelty range from experiencing corporal punishment to witnessing domestic violence (studies cited in Baldry, 2005 and in Gullone & Robertson, 2008). There is serious family dysfunction in the histories of children who abuse animals. Further, these children tend to show other aggressive and antisocial tendencies (Arkow, 1997). For these and other reasons, detection of animal abuse by a child can offer an early opportunity to intervene and to perhaps divert future aggressive behaviors (Baldry, 2005).

Health care providers need to be particularly vigilant when children or adults suffer animal-related injuries. A pet who is being abused can lash out in reaction to being teased, terrorized, or tortured. A person is far more likely to be bitten in a home where a pet is abused than in a home where pets are not abused (Onyskiw, cited in Zorza, 2008).

Assessment

Discovery of animal abuse by a child should prompt further inquiry (Baldry, 2005). When animal abuse is detected, it is helpful to learn in detail about the occurrences. The ‘who, what, when, where, why, and how’ the incident occurred should be determined, as well as the extent to which the child demonstrates empathy for the animal (Lewchanin & Randour, 2008). As with child maltreatment, clinicians need to ask about physical, sexual, and emotional abuse of animals as well as animal neglect. The severity and frequency of incidents should be determined, in addition to first and most recent occurrences (Ascione & Shapiro, 2009).
VCPN staff found a number of assessment tools designed to measure animal abuse. These include the Cruelty to Animals Inventory and the Childhood Trust Survey on Animal-Related Experiences. Interested readers can find reviews of assessment instruments on the VCPN website.

**Interventions**

Twenty-eight states provide that the court may or shall order counseling for juveniles convicted of animal cruelty (Randour & Davidson, 2008). Randour & Davidson outline essential features of treatment for children who have shown cruelty to animals. They suggest:

- Address the behaviors of animal cruelty directly;
- Treat any animal in the family as a part of the family when assessing, treating, or evaluating progress;
- Explore the relationships between each family member and the animals;
- Incorporate the affected animal or a therapy animal into the treatment;
- Use representations of animals (such as photographs or tapes or stuffed animals) in the assessment and treatment;
- Include educational components as needed.

Randour & Davidson (2008) stress that therapists do not necessarily need new therapeutic methods to be effective in addressing animal maltreatment. A variety of therapeutic methods (such as family therapy or cognitive-behavioral therapy) can be used. Animal-assisted therapy techniques are described in a separate article, this issue.

One example of training for therapists interested in treating animal abuse is Arizona State University (see VCPN website for more information). That institution offers a *Treating Animal Abuse Professional Development Certificate Program* that is in collaboration with the Animals and Society Institute.

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Prevention

Animal welfare organizations have developed humane education programs that teach young people to train, care for, and interact with animals in a nurturing manner. An underlying theme of these programs is that developing empathy for animals will reduce the propensity for abuse or cruelty (Ascione, 2001). This concept has been part of conventional wisdom as well. Unfortunately, there is a lack of evidence-based practices that have demonstrated effectiveness (Arkow, 2006). VCPN was unable to locate any studies that examined whether or not these programs were effective in functioning as prevention tools.

Summary

The relationship between childhood cruelty towards animals and later aggressive behavior is debated. Interventions targeting cruelty to animals may not prevent later abusive behaviors. Rather, understanding the context within which animal abuse occurs may lead to identifying common factors contributing to violent and antisocial behaviors within a family. Interventions designed to address the complex nature of abusive home environments may have the best likelihood of breaking a cycle of violence that includes animal cruelty as well as other interpersonal violence.

References Available on the Website or by Request