Animal Abuse and Children: What All Professionals Need to Know
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About the Animals & Society Institute
ASI helps improve and expand knowledge about human-animal relationships in order to create safer and more compassionate communities for all. We:

• Promote Human-Animal Studies (courses, degree programs, journals)
• Translate research into evidence-based practice (animal abuse prevention, diversion programs, registry of promising human-animal programs and practices)

Overview
• The continuum of human-animal relationships
• Animal abuse and family violence
• The law
• What you can do: ROAR!
• Making a difference: A matter of perspective
Take aways

• Why should you care
• How animal abuse fits into family and community context
• What you can do

Your Interests

• How many of you have pets?
• What is your profession/background?
• What prompted you to attend this session today?
• What one thing do you hope to take away from this session?

Companion Animals in the U.S.

Almost 73 million (62%) American homes currently have companion animals (2011-12 National Pet Owner’s Survey)
78 million dogs
86 million cats
and various other animals
Human-Animal Relationships: A Continuum

Negative: Animal abuse/neglect
Positive: Humans helping animals and vice versa

Let’s Start with the Positive
Effects of the human-animal bond on physical and emotional health:

• In a study of lifetime dog and cat exposure and sensitization, teenagers who lived with a cat during the first year of their life had a 48% lower risk of cat allergy than their peers (Wegienka et al., 2011).

• Dogs can reduce stress reactions of children performing a stressful task (Wohlfarth et al., 2014).

Let’s Start with the Positive
Effects of the human-animal bond on social development:

• The presence of an animal can significantly increase positive social behaviors among children with autism spectrum disorder (O’Haire, 2013).

• Studies have found that classroom pets lead to higher social integration, fewer aggressive children (Hergovich et al., 2002).
And Now the Negative...The Violence Connection

• In a nationally representative sample of 43,093 adults in the U.S., cruelty to animals was significantly associated with all assessed antisocial behaviors (Vaughn et al., 2009).

• Animal abuse is associated with interpersonal violence, including bullying, juvenile delinquency, and adult violent crimes.

The Violence Connection

Massachusetts SPCA study found animal abusers to be:

• 5 times more likely to commit violent crimes against people
• 4 times more likely to commit property crimes
• 3 times more likely to have a record for drug or disorderly conduct offenses

(Luke et al., 1997)

The Violence Connection

Of 236 people arrested for cruelty to animals:

› 55% also arrested for non-animal-related felonies
› 81% had 2 or more crimes in their history
› 69% also arrested for battery of all sorts
› 41% are confirmed gang members

(Chicago Court Advocacy Study, 2009-2012)
Who’s At Risk in Violent Families?

“Being a member of the family means that not only do humans and other animals benefit from that association—they can also be victims of it.”
- Christina Risley-Curtiss

Animals and Families

• How many of us consider our pets to be family members?
• Even if we don’t, how many people do we know who do?
• How many of us were trained from a systems perspective?
• So if animals are part of the family, then how can we talk about family violence/family functioning without them?

The “Link”
Some Historical Perspective...

The link between efforts to prevent cruelty to animals and cruelty to children

“You are so troubled over that abused child, why not go to Mr. Bergh? She is a little animal surely”

Henry Bergh, Founder American SPCA

Mary Ellen Wilson

Animal Abuse and Child Abuse: What Does the Research Say?

- Animal abuse was reported in 88% of 53 families referred for physical abuse of children, compared with 34% of homes referred for neglect or children-at-risk
- Animal abuse perpetrated by fathers (67% of cases) and children (33% of cases)
- Pets had injured a family member in 69% of animal abusive households vs. 6% in non-abusive households

*International Journal for the Study of Animal Problems*

Animal Abuse and Child Abuse: What Does the Research Say?

- Longitudinal study of 2,232 children living in the UK; mothers reported on cruelty to animals when children were 5, 7, 10, and 12 years, on child maltreatment, and adult domestic violence
- 9% of children cruel to animals; 2.6% persistently (≥2 time-points).
- Children cruel to animals were more likely to have been maltreated than other children (OR = 3.32)

Animal Abuse and Child Abuse: What Does the Research Say?

The role of socio-economic disadvantage:

- In disadvantaged families, 6 in 10 children cruel to animals had been maltreated.
- In other families, the likelihood of maltreatment increased with age (from 3 in 10 5-year-olds to 4.5 in 10 12-year-olds) and persistence (4.5 in 10 of those persistently cruel).

Animal Abuse and DV: What Does The Research Say?

- Animal abuse can be a marker of family violence (Ascione et al., 2007; Volant et al., 2008).
- Batterers who also abuse pets use more forms of violence, more controlling behaviors, and are more dangerous than batterers who do not abuse pets (Simmons & Lehmann, 2007).
- The partners of women who experienced dv were more likely to lack a high school diploma, have abused alcohol or drugs, have fair or poor mental health, and have abused or threatened to abuse pets (Walton-Moss, et al., 2005).
Animal Abuse in the Context of DV

- Hurting/killing a pet to punish/retaliate
- Forcing victims to watch or participate in the abuse
- Depriving a pet of food and/or medical care
- “Next time it will be you”
- Pet “disappears” as way to send message to victim
- Seeking custody of pets: “I can still get to you”
- Threats against pet if victim flees or discloses abuse

A Story of Survival: J Matthew and his Person

- https://youtu.be/5ehrxOqrhBs
So Why Might She Stay?

- Fear of pet being harmed or killed if victim leaves
- Pets may not be welcome in...
  - Domestic violence and homeless shelters
  - Family/friends’ houses
  - Public housing and rental properties
- Legal battles over custody
- Logistical issues (e.g., transport)
- Financial issues

What About the Children?

A child’s bond with a pet may be:

- healthy for social, emotional, cognitive development
- a key source of comfort during trauma
- a unique non-violent, unconditionally loving relationship

However...

- Incidents of animal abuse occur in front of children
  - What effect does exposure to animal abuse have on children? What about exposure to animal abuse as an adverse childhood experience (ACE)? (More this afternoon!)
- Children may feel guilty about not being able to protect their pets from the abuse
- Children may be harmed when attempting to protect their pets.
Continuing the Pattern...

- Ascione (2005) found sexually abused children to be more likely to abuse animals.
- Witnessing animal abuse is a significant predictor of both animal abuse and bullying (Gullone, 2011; Gullone & Robertson, 2008).
- Currie (2006): Youth exposed to domestic violence were 3 times more likely to abuse animals.
- Animal cruelty is one of the diagnostic criteria for conduct disorder.

But Hold on for a Minute...

It’s *not* all about the serial killers!

Sometimes There’s More to the Story...
So Let’s Not Paint with Too Broad a Brush

• It’s complicated!
• Animal cruelty has many different forms and motivations and trajectories
• Do different types of animal abuse need different responses? YES!

Let’s take a step back and talk about the law…

The Law In Michigan

Three primary provisions related to animal cruelty:
• Intentional infliction of pain and suffering (most severe penalties and automatically a felony)
• Duty to provide care (initially a misdemeanor, which becomes a felony for a second or subsequent violation)
• Anti-animal fighting (either a misdemeanor or a felony, depending on the severity of conduct related to fighting, e.g., being a spectator is a misdemeanor, organizing is a felony)
Psychological Evaluation or Counseling

- About half of US states mandate or permit psychological evaluation and 32 mandate or permit counseling of cruelty offenders
- In Michigan, both evaluation and counseling are discretionary (MCL 750.50 and 50b)

Pets in Protection Orders in Michigan

- House Bill 4478 passed the House and Senate and was approved by the Governor on May 3, 2016.
- Law allows victims of domestic violence to include their animals in personal protection orders (PPOs).

Cross Reporting: Not in MI Yet

Minority of US states have cross reporting provisions for animal protection workers, vets, child protection workers, domestic violence service providers, and/or adult protection workers. Provisions may include:

- Animal Care/Control must report child abuse
- Child Protective Services may/must report animal abuse
- Veterinarians must report child abuse
Cross-reporting in California

From AVMA.org:
Provides that any employee of a county child or adult protective services agency, while acting in his or her professional capacity or within the scope of his or her employment, who has knowledge of or observes an animal whom he or she knows or reasonably suspects has been the victim of cruelty, abuse, or neglect, may report...to the entity or entities that investigate reports of cruelty, abuse, and neglect in that county.

Cross-reporting in California (cont.)

Also provides that a mandated reporter (including a veterinarian, animal control officer or humane society officer) shall make a report to an agency whenever the mandated reporter...has knowledge of or observes a child whom the mandated reporter knows or reasonably suspects has been the victim of abuse or neglect.

What’s Going on at the Federal Level: Pets and Women Safety (PAWS) Act

Federal legislation introduced in 2014, reintroduced in 2017
Protects women and pets in two ways:
1. Including pets in federal law pertaining to interstate stalking, protection order violations, and restitution, and urges states to allow pets to be included under protection orders (as 29 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico have already done)
Pets and Women Safety (PAWS) Act (cont.)

2. Establishing a federal grant program to provide shelter and housing assistance for the companion animals of domestic violence victims

"Programs like this one empower abused women. When a woman who has been victimized makes a decision to protect a beloved pet, she's not a victim, and that's important."
- Jennifer Hardesty, University of Illinois associate professor of human development and family studies

Tracking Animal Abuse at the Federal Level

- Research on the relationship between animal abuse and other violence has resulted in law enforcement recognizing animal abuse as a "crime against society."
- Starting in 2016, the FBI National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) began collecting information on reports of animal abuse as well as arrests and convictions.
- NIBRS: Detailed crime statistics that law enforcement agencies nationwide provide to the FBI. The information is critical to informing law enforcement policy and practice.

But despite all this, the reality is...

- Most animal abuse charges are misdemeanors.
- Most people who have abused/neglected animals receive nothing more than a small fine.
- There are few alternatives to hold perpetrators accountable and reduce the likelihood that they will repeat the behavior.
So where does that leave us?

There’s Good News!

• Identifying animal abuse provides an opportunity to intervene—particularly with children.
• Identification requires assessment: You can make a difference by observing and asking questions.
• Primary, secondary, and tertiary intervention programs are available.

What We All Can Do: R.O.A.R.

Recognize
Observe
Ask
Refer
Recognize

• Recognize the possibility of a relationship between animal abuse and exposure to other types of violence and traumatic events.

• BUT don’t assume and jump to conclusions!

Observe

• Condition of animals

• Interaction between children and animals

• Interaction between adults and animals

Ask About Relationships with Animals

• Have you or your family ever had pets?

• What happened to them?

• Do you have pets now? How many?

• Have you ever felt worried about bad things happening to your pet?

• Have you ever seen someone hurt an animal or pet?

• Have you ever hurt an animal or pet?

Source: Animal-Related Experiences Inventory by Barbara Boat, Ph.D.
Why Ask?

1. We can’t assume clients will bring up the subject on their own.
2. You might be the first one to ask.
3. It’s an amazing icebreaker.
4. It provides richer information about the context of violence and vital information for safety planning.
5. People—esp. kids—will often tell you about what’s happened to their animals more readily than they’ll tell you what’s happened to them.

Poll

• Do you routinely ask questions about relationships with animals?

Refer for Assessment and Possible Intervention

• If animal abuse has occurred, conduct an assessment
• Gather information from multiple sources
• Consider a variety of factors (severity, culpability, motivation, attitudes/beliefs, emotional intelligence, family history, mitigating circumstances)
Refer for Assessment and Possible Intervention (cont.)

Factors to consider when a client has witnessed animal abuse:

• Relationship of witness to abuser
• Role in witnessing
• Psychological symptoms
• Shame, guilt, remorse, detachment
• Abuse reported and response?

Refer for Assessment and Possible Intervention: Factors to Consider

• Severity – degree of injury, frequency, duration, number of species
• Culpability – degree of planning, alone vs group, obstacles overcome
• Motivation – curiosity, fear of animal, peer pressure, pleasure from inflicting pain, sexual arousal

Factors to Consider (cont.)

• Attitudes/Beliefs – unaware of needs of animals, cultural practices, way to discipline animals
• Emotional Intelligence – level of empathy, ability to express feelings, ability to form relationships
• Family History – physical/sexual abuse, dv, neglect, animal abuse
• Mitigating Circumstances – accepts responsibility, feelings of remorse, able to form bonds with animals
**What Interventions/Resources are Available?**

For families escaping DV:
- “Safe havens” and on-site animal housing

Interventions for children who have abused animals:
- AniCare Child: Psychological intervention
- Brand new diversion/intervention programs developed by ASI and provided in a group setting
- Psycho-education program for children: CAT
- Experiential education programs for at-risk youth: Lifetime Bonds

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**What Child Welfare Professionals Can Do**

“Operating from a strengths-based, ecological-, and/or family-centered perspective suggests that the presence of companion animals, and their meaning for relevant family members, should be taken into consideration in doing professional CPS work.”

--Christina Risley-Curtiss, Ph.D.

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**No matter your profession, you can make a difference...**

- **Embrace Different Perspectives**
- **Celebrate Opportunities to Make a Difference for Animals & People**
- **Acknowledge Different Areas of Focus**
- **Commit to Thinking Holistically**
- **Be Willing to Ask Weird Questions**
- **Commit to Thinking Holistically**
- **Acknowledge Different Areas of Focus**
- **Commit to Thinking Holistically**
- **Embrace Different Perspectives**
What Child Welfare Professionals Can Do
• Ask about pets during intake, assessments and forensic interviews
• Report animal abuse and neglect when suspected
• Partner with animal care and control agencies
• Understand children’s bonds with pets and, where appropriate, make efforts to keep kids and pets together
• Seek help for children who have witnessed or perpetrated animal abuse

What DV Advocates Can Do
• Ask about animals
• Incorporate animals in safety planning/logistics
• Help client document animal cruelty
• Help client locate veterinary & ownership records
• Include animals in protection orders
• Develop an animal housing program
• Assist with transportation of animals to safety, veterinary care
• Include animals in planning for transitional housing

What the Justice System Can Do
• Consider animal cruelty charges in DV cases
  ▪ At least make sure your DV investigators/prosecutors talk to your animal investigators/prosecutors
  ▪ Consider calling an expert to testify
• Be sensitive to how concern for animals’ safety may affect victim behavior
• Consider innovative programs that incorporate the human-animal bond into trauma-informed care and trauma-responsive courtrooms
What Law Enforcement Can Do

• ASK about pets
• Know animal cruelty laws & ordinances
• Help document animal cruelty
• Develop working relationship with Animal Control/other agencies around this area
• Help transport pets if possible
• Assist with enforcing provisions re: pets in PPOs

What Mental Health Providers Can Do

• Ask about animals in all cases, even those where animal abuse isn’t the referral issue
• Develop contacts with clinicians who do evaluations of and/or treat people who have abused animals
• Consider learning more about the AniCare approach and accepting cases yourself

What “Animal People” Can Do

• ASK about human victims – it’s not as scary as it seems
• Provide resources/information, e.g. posters in your office
• Document animal cruelty
• Build bridges with human services
• Offer space, services
• Understand dynamics that may impede clients
• Participate on DV task forces and fatality reviews
What We All Can Do

Recognize that our clients—particularly children—are better off when we work together and acknowledge the potentially powerful role relationships with animals play in their lives.

Questions?