



WHY PETS MEAN SO MUCH: THE HUMAN-ANIMAL BOND IN THE CONTEXT OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE GUIDANCE

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“I left once without my pet, but I had to go back because I worried so much about her and missed her. Then I found a way to take my pet with me and I left for good.”

According to the 2013-2014 National Pet Owners Survey, 68% of U.S. households, or 82.5 million homes, include a companion animal. In most cases, these companion animals are cherished members of the family. However, up to 70% of domestic violence victims report having a pet, and when a batterer causes violence in the home, it can be inflicted on pets as well (Ascione, 1997; Loring & Bolden-Hines, 2004).

Experts estimate that between 48-71% of battered women have pets that also have been abused or killed (Ascione, et al, 2007). Moreover, pet abuse is one of the forms of intimidation listed in the power and control wheel used by domestic violence victim advocates (<http://www.theduluthmodel.org/pdf/PowerandControl.pdf>). Abusers threaten, injure, and at times kill pets in order to control their victims and to create an environment of fear within the home.

The close relationship that battered women and their children feel toward their companion animals complicates their willingness to leave a violent situation, potentially putting their pets at risk of violence or death. From various studies we know that approximately 20 -48% of women have refused to leave a dangerous situation for fear of their pets’ safety (Carlisle-Frank, Frank & Nielsen, 2004; Ascione, 2007).

Some survivors have reported living in their cars with their pets rather than leaving them behind. Staff at domestic violence shelters has also found that children may experience additional trauma when separated from beloved pets (Flynn, 2000).

The human animal bond as a resource for healing

The human-animal bond can facilitate healing, aid attachment, and provide a source of comfort to survivors and their children (Sprinkle, 2008). We can see the significance of pets in our lives very early on. When asked to identify the 10 most important individuals in their lives, 7- and 10-year old children in one study included two pets on their lists. In another study, 42% of 5-year-olds spontaneously mentioned their pets when asked, “Whom do you turn to when you are feeling sad, angry, happy, or wanting to share a secret?” (Foer, 2006).

These children intrinsically knew that animals play an important role in the lives of humans before researchers came to the conclusion. Pets and other animals influence a child’s cognitive, social, and emotional development. Relationships with pets can promote empathy and pro-social behavior. They nurture the development of perspective-taking skills, i.e., the ability to take another person’s point of view, a critical base for empathy. Relationships with pets develop the ability to form and express attachments and to respond to grief and loss (Randour & Davidson, 2008).

“Protecting our family pet was a priority for me and my children. We found a way to do that and now we are healing together.”

The potentially positive influence of pets and animals does not end in childhood. The presence of a pet can lower blood pressure, assist in healing after surgery, promote positive interaction in a group, and ease the loneliness that sometimes accompanies aging. The effectiveness of animal-assisted therapies, which as their basis use the human-animal bond, is being documented (<http://www.apa-hai.org>). Veterans with post-traumatic stress syndrome are benefiting, as are children with developmental disabilities and youth at-risk for engaging in antisocial behavior.

There are now “Court House Dogs” (<http://www.safehumanechicago.org/>), many of whom have been rescued themselves and who now assist children and adult witnesses involved in the court system so that their stress is reduced and they can feel more comfortable. Often animal-assisted therapy utilizes dogs, but many other species also are involved (e.g., horses, birds, and goats).

The benefits of having a pet don’t have to end at the shelter door. Regardless of whether or not they had companion animals before entering the shelter, children—and adults—can benefit tremendously from interacting with animals at a time when their lives are under stress. Domestic violence program staff may want to contact their local humane society about instituting a “visiting” program between the animals in shelter with the children of the domestic violence survivors.

What Can Be Done to Assist Domestic Violence Victims with Pets?

1. Ask about pets during hotline calls, and again during intake.

As noted above, many domestic violence victims report that they delayed leaving because they didn't know how to find safety for their companion animals. When they contact a shelter or other agency, they may not voluntarily ask for help with their pets if they assume that no organized assistance exists. Thus, asking them the following questions, "Do you have a pet?" "Do you need help in finding a place to house your pet?" could be critical for guiding a survivor and their family to safety.

Safety planning for pets

In order to ensure a safe transition, it is essential to do safety planning for pets, just as it is for the rest of the family. The following steps should be included in such a safety plan.

If you are planning to stay...

- Keep emergency provisions for your pet in case your abuser withholds money.
- Keep the phone number of the nearest 24-hour emergency veterinary clinic.
- Establish ownership of your pet by creating a paper trail (e.g. obtain a license, have veterinarian records put in your name).

If you are planning to leave...

- Obtain safe emergency shelter for your pet, somewhere that won't be disclosed to your abuser (e.g. veterinarian, friend, family, or through a safe haven for pets program).
- Pack a bag for your pet that includes:
 - Food
 - Medicine
 - Documents of ownership (receipts from adoption or purchase of pet, license to establish ownership, receipts for animal purchases)
 - Health documents (veterinary or vaccination records)
 - Leash
 - ID and rabies tag, if a dog or cat (these will also help establish ownership)
 - Carrier
 - Toys
 - Bedding

If you must leave without your pet, remember to leave enough food, fresh bedding, litter, etc. for your pet.

If you are in hiding...

- Keep pets indoors (if possible).
- Don't let the pet outside alone.
- Pick a safe route and time to walk your pet.
- Don't exercise/walk pet alone.
- Change your veterinarian.

- If your pet has a GPS tracking device that is part of the collar, remove it before leaving and do not take it with you.

Some pet owners confuse the GPS tracking device with the pet identification microchip, which is implanted underneath the pet's skin. To positively identify a pet and locate the owner, the microchip must be scanned with a scanner machine made for that purpose. Once the microchip's number is retrieved, the company that made the chip may be contacted to find the owner.

Non-traditional companion animals

"It wasn't just the cats and dogs, it was the sheep and chickens. I was terrified for their welfare. I knew if I were to leave, he wouldn't hesitate to kill them. He had done it before."

Pets, like families, come in many varieties. Besides cats and dogs, you may have clients with gerbils, hamsters, ferrets, mice, birds, and fish, even snakes. Some of these smaller animals may represent no greater issue than dogs and cats. However, what if a survivor needs to find safekeeping for a horse or a pig? Particularly in rural areas, these are more likely to be the animals in question, and the bonds between them and their owners will be as strong as they are for the more traditional companion animal; placing them, though, will be more of a challenge.

In rural areas, community members and veterinarians are likely to have more space and be more accustomed to these animals. Whether you are in a rural, suburban, or urban area, or something in between, if you are asked to help place a large animal and you don't have the proper facilities yourself, or simply have never faced this kind of request before, contact your local humane society or animal control as your first stop for guidance since they are the most likely to have faced this kind of problem in the past.

2. Familiarize yourself with pet protection orders

Twenty-seven states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico have laws allowing victims of domestic violence to include their pets in restraining orders. The 27 states are: AZ, AK, CA, CO, CT, HI, IL, IA, LA, ME, MD, MA, MN, NV, NH, NJ, NY, NC, OK, OR, SC, TN, TX, VA, VT, WA, and WV, as well as DC and PR.

It is important to remember, however, that more states are passing legislation to include pets in protection orders (IA, NH, SC, and VA all did so just this year) and this list will continue to grow (for updates visit: <http://www.animallaw.info/articles/ovusdomesticviolencelaws.htm>). To learn more about these efforts in your state, or to become involved, please contact your state DV/SA Coalition (<http://vawnet.org/links/state-coalitions.php>) or the Animal Welfare Institute (AWI) (www.awionline.org).

Even if your state does not have a specific provision, most state protection or temporary restraining order (TRO) statutes contain language giving courts discretion to permit additional orders. For example, a court can order that pets be included in a TRO as they do for the temporary care of children or possession of property. Conditions bonds also can include pets, and a TRO can authorize law enforcement to assist with the removal of a pet from the home.

3. Utilize the Safe Havens for Pets of Domestic Violence Mapping Project.

The Animal Welfare Institute (<https://awionline.org/>) developed the Safe Havens Mapping Project (<https://awionline.org/content/animals-family-violence>) so there would be one integrated and comprehensive state-by-state listing of sheltering services for the animals of domestic violence victims. The database is searchable by state or more narrowly by zip code. To access the Safe Havens listing, simply go to <https://awionline.org/safe-havens>.

The term “safe havens for pets” refers to sheltering services available in an area that assist survivors of domestic violence with placing their companion animals out of harm’s way so that they may seek safety and support for themselves. Safe havens operate differently from community to community. Some rely on networks of foster care homes or are allowed to use the additional kennel space of a local humane society or veterinarian. Ask if help is needed getting the pet into safekeeping; sometimes transportation is available to move the pet. In some cases domestic violence shelters house survivors and pets together.

Depending on the local arrangement, family members may be able to visit their pets while they are in safekeeping. How long a pet may stay in a safe haven again will depend on the local arrangement—some stays are much shorter than others. The pet’s location is kept highly confidential in order to protect the family members and the pet.

Deciding whether to offer safe haven services

If your facility does not already offer safe haven services—whether it is housing survivors and their companion animals together, or assisting survivors with finding safe placement off-site for their pets—this might be a good time to initiate a discussion with your board, staff, clients, and others about taking that step. Helping to find off-site placement for pets could involve enlisting volunteers willing to foster pets for a while, or approaching veterinarians or animal shelters about donating unused kennel space for this purpose. A valuable resource on how to develop a safe haven for pets service can be found in Ascione, F.R. (2000): *Safe havens for pets: Guidelines for programs sheltering pets for women who are battered*, located at http://www.vachss.com/guest_dispatches/safe_havens.html.

If housing pets on-site, whether allowing them to stay with families or in a separate space, seems like the right move for your facility, excellent advice and technical assistance is available through the Sheltering Animals & Families Together (SAF-T) Program, which helps shelters develop their own programs to house pets; more details and contact information available at <http://alliephillips.com/saf-tprogram/>.

4. Getting help for children who have witnessed or engaged in animal abuse

Many survivors have pets and those pets often suffer harm, and sometimes death, at the hands of the perpetrator. These horrific types of abuse may be witnessed or participated in by the children in the home. In the best-case scenario, children exposed to violence in the home should be evaluated by a mental health professional and a treatment plan developed. Most trained mental health professionals have the necessary skills and training to do this; however, they must be aware of the need to ask questions directly about the child either witnessing or engaging in animal abuse. At times, the evaluation and/or treatment plan will include some type of animal-assisted therapy.

Given the varying landscape of services for children exposed to domestic violence, mental health therapy may not always be a realistic or feasible option for families in transition and escaping violence at home. When speaking with children, advocates are encouraged to ask them questions about their experience with pets and other animals. Knowing about their attachments and experiences with the pets in their lives can inform an intervention, making it more likely to succeed, thereby safeguarding the safety of children, pets, and their families.

Asking children about their relationship with animals:

- Have you or your family ever had any pets? What happened to them?
- Do you have a pet or pets now?
- Have you ever lost a pet you really cared about? What happened?
- Has your pet ever been hurt?
- Have you ever felt afraid for your pet or worried about bad things happening to your pet?
- Has anybody ever tried to make you do something you didn't want to do by saying they would hurt your pet? What happened?
- Have you ever seen someone hurt an animal or pet? Tell me what happened.
- Have you ever hurt an animal or pet? Tell me what happened.
- Have you ever been frightened or hurt by an animal or pet? Describe what happened.
- What happens when your family pet misbehaves?
- Have you ever been punished for something your pet did, like getting into the trash?
- Or has your pet ever been punished for something you did, like not doing the dishes when you were told to?

If Children are Exposed to Animal Abuse in the Home

One form of abuse that children too often witness is toward the pet in family violence situations (Randour & Davidson, 2008). Children who are exposed to abuse are at greater risk for becoming either victims or perpetrators of abuse. In fact, one seven-year study conducted in three metropolitan areas found that engaging in pet abuse was one of four significant factors for predicting future battering behavior (Walton-Moss, et al, 2005).

When there is knowledge or a suspicion that a child has witnessed animal cruelty, advocates can work with survivor-parents to help their children process their experiences.

The following topics and probes may be discussed to gain a sense of how exposure to pet abuse has impacted the child. Use these conversations as a platform to develop a plan with the survivor to address any significant issues that may come up.

- The relationship of the child to the animal and the type of pet
- The type and severity of the abuse and who was involved
- How many times it occurred
- The child's response; for example, ask the child, "What was the hardest thing for you about what happened?" or "What bothers you the most about what happened?"
- The child's role in witnessing animal cruelty—active or passive, encouraging or discouraging, coerced (real or perceived?)
- The child's immediate and long-term response to pet abuse; does the child exhibit:
 - Anxiety
 - Nightmares or frightening dreams
 - Difficulty sleeping or eating
 - Withdrawal
 - Problems concentrating
 - Repetitive play with themes or aspects of the trauma
 - Disorganized or agitated behavior
- Does the child feel:
 - Shame
 - Guilt
 - Remorse
- Does the child experience:
 - Numbing or feelings of detachment
 - A restricted range of affect?
- Is the child fearful of reprisal?
- Did the child speak about the abuse to anyone?
- What was the response of the person to whom the child spoke about the abuse?

To help foster these conversations, AWI has created educational children's books that teach children about responsible pet care, kindness, and humane treatment of animals. Coloring and activity sheets are also available in their online store at:

<http://awionline.org/store/catalog/animal-welfare-publications/materials-children>.

Conclusion

Companion animals play a crucial role in the lives of families, especially those in crisis where abusers use that bond against their victims, in the process causing suffering to humans and animals alike. Thus it is urgent that all advocates on behalf of domestic violence survivors be acquainted with the role of animal abuse in the cycle of family violence and with the resources that are available to help those families get themselves and their pets to safety.

Resources

A valuable resource on how to develop a safe haven for pets service can be found in Ascione, F.R. (2000): *Safe havens for pets: Guidelines for programs sheltering pets for women who are battered*, located at http://www.vachss.com/guest_dispatches/safe_havens.html.

For excellent advice and technical assistance in setting up on-site pet housing, visit the Sheltering Animals & Families (SAF-T) Program, which helps shelters develop their own programs to house pets; more details and contact information available at <http://alliephillips.com/saf-tprogram/>.

To locate local humane societies, animal control agencies, and other groups that help pet owners, visit http://www.humanesociety.org/animal_community/resources/tips/find_local_animal_shelter.html.

The NRCDV welcomes your input. If you have any comments or additional information to provide, please contact our Technical Assistance Team at <http://www.nrcdv.org/contact-us>.

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