

## **Animal Maltreatment in the Ecology of Abused Children: Compelling Research and Responses for Prevention, Assessment and Intervention**

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### **Introduction**

In 2006, the United Nations Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children (Pinheiro, 2006) reported a comprehensive global assessment of "all forms of violence against children" (p. 3). The report detailed devastating consequences for children's immediate and long-term health and well-being from physical, sexual, and psychological violence, encouraging early identification and intervention to reduce the potential for damage to children. The report said that all forms of family violence have significant impact on a child's emotional health and development. It called for increased cooperation and collaboration among many partners, stating that different professions can no longer afford to address this problem while working in isolation.

The report defined families and family violence widely, noted that home is where children first model power-imbalanced relationships, and observed that the impact of children's witnessing violence among other family members is recognized as having potentially serious consequences. The report

recommended developing law and policy in which all forms of violence against children within the family are prohibited and rejected, and called for strengthened, coordinated responses that support families to provide a violence-free home. The report described a growing body of research that shows that the experience of living in a household where violence against loved ones is witnessed can be a significant adverse risk factor.

Notably absent from the extensive list of familial, societal, cultural, physical, emotional, and psychological components that comprise the ecology of violent childhoods was the inclusion of children's animal companions among "loved ones." Neither was cruelty to animals included among "all" forms of violence to which children are exposed, nor were pets included among the wider definitions of families, nor was cruelty to animals noted as one of the earliest markers to identify violence by or to a child, nor were animal protection organizations included among collaborative community response opportunities.

These omissions are not unusual. Training, public policy, and programming in the social sciences and human services traditionally have not included animals in the ecosystems of childhood (Haden & Scarpa, 2005; Taylor, 2007). It is not surprising that animals were inadvertently omitted from this as well as many other reports on child maltreatment. Child welfare and social sciences literature only infrequently mention companion animals among the "family members" whose victimization may impact children, or animal protection organizations among the service providers that can be integrated into strengthened, coordinated child protection responses. Yet it is clear that animal maltreatment is another form of family violence to which children are exposed, at rates that

are more widespread than previously believed, with damaging psychological and social effects that appear to be cumulative in nature (Flynn, 2000; Thompson & Gullone, 2006).

## **Animal Maltreatment and the Ecology of Childhood**

Several authors (Krug et al., 2002; Ascione, 1999; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1997) have utilized ecological models to help understand the multi-level, multi-faceted nature of violence. As an analytical tool, such a model recognizes that a wide and complex range of situations serve as risk factors or protective factors. The ecological model examines human development within nested contexts that extend from the personal history and characteristics of the victim or perpetrator, to his or her family, to the immediate community, and to the characteristics of the larger society. An ecological model emphasizes that a combination of factors, acting at different levels, influence whether violence will occur, recur, or cease.

The welfare of animals may be relevant to children in such an ecological framework. Companion animals may be considered as symbiotic members of many human families, and stray animals and wildlife as participants in neighborhood and community ecosystems (Ascione, 1999). Demographic data depict companion animals as being prevalent in a majority of American households, most notably in 67.7% of households with children under age 6, and 74.5% of households with children over age 6. In these homes, 97.9% of Americans consider pets to be either companions or family members (American

Veterinary Medical Association, 2007). Pets are so ubiquitous in the lives of children that a child in America is said to be more likely to have a pet than a father (Melson, 2001).

An ecological model is helpful to describe increasing research and policy attention to the links between child welfare and animal maltreatment at all levels. At the level of the individual child, the psychiatric and psychological communities consider physical cruelty to animals as symptomatic of antisocial mental disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). At the level of interpersonal relations, there is mounting evidence that animal abuse is thematic in families scarred by child maltreatment, intimate partner violence and elder abuse (Ascione & Arkow, 1999). At the community level, companion animals have been found to increase social capital and enhance cohesion, trust, civic engagement, and neighborly reciprocity in neighborhoods (Wood, Giles-Corti, Bulsara, & Bosch, 2007)

## **Addressing the Link between Child Maltreatment and Animal Maltreatment**

Children's exposure to violence, and family violence in particular, is considered a public health issue affecting millions of children each year with serious social, cognitive, emotional and developmental sequelae (Packard Foundation, 1999). One aspect of this violence which has received sufficient scholarly and programmatic attention to have emerged as a specialty interest area is what is popularly called "The Link" between animal maltreatment and child abuse and neglect (Ascione, 2008; Haden & Scarpa, 2005; American

Humane Association, 2004; Becker & French, 2004; Arkow, 2003; National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 2003; Ascione & Arkow, 1999; Arkow, 1996).

Lockwood (2007) identified six adverse results of children's exposure to cruelty to animals:

1. Promotes desensitization and damages the child's capacity for empathy.
2. Creates the idea that children, like their pets, are expendable.
3. Damages the sense of safety and confidence in the ability of adults to protect them from harm.
4. Leads to acceptance of physical harm in allegedly loving relationships.
5. Fosters children's seeking empowerment by inflicting pain and suffering.
6. Leads to imitation of abusive behaviors.

Statistics on the incidence of animal abuse are clouded by reliance on small samples, ambiguity about the definition of abuse, and under-reporting in self-reports of animal cruelty. Estimates of acts of cruelty perpetrated or witnessed by children vary widely depending on whether they are based on observations of parents, teachers or self-reports (Herzog, 2007).

There is disagreement about the meaning and frequency of cruelty toward animals in children, with some researchers arguing that childhood animal abuse is closely linked to later pathology (Merz-Perez & Heide, 2004) with others describing it as a rite of passage often seen in essentially normal individuals (Arluke, 2002). Nevertheless, it seems quite clear that animal cruelty is more

common in children with antisocial personality traits and occurs more frequently in boys rather than girls (Gleyzer, Felthous, & Holzer, 2002).

The links between child and animal maltreatment are deeply rooted in the common heritage of the child welfare and animal protection movements (Ascione, 2005; Zawistowski, 1992; Costin, 1991). Child welfare officials are well aware that the presence of animal protection laws gave rise to the child protection movement in the latter quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and that hundreds of humane organizations served dual roles in both child and animal protection until the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This rich legacy of collaboration between those concerned with the welfare of children and of animals led to the founding and continuing focus of American Humane.

Professionals working with families can add depth to their coverage of at-risk children by paying greater attention to the animals in those families' ecologies (Vachss, 2005). Risley-Curtiss (2007b) has proposed that integrating children's exposure to cruelty to animals into safety, risk, and ongoing assessments constitutes a best practice for the field. This presents a challenge to social services workers whose training traditionally has not recognized that families are populated by non-human animals and that humans and their companion animals cooperatively create an interspecies culture with potentially significant social and emotional relationships (Hobson-West, 2007). Animals have remained largely invisible in social work training.

## **Manifestations of Animal Maltreatment in the Lives of Children**

A child's witnessing animal maltreatment may be a potential indicator of child victimization. Child protection officials may encounter children whose lives are intertwined with maltreated animals in several contexts:

**1. Children as Witnesses to Animal Fighting:** Cleveland (2006) reported that 31% of youths in inner-city neighborhoods in Chicago have witnessed dog fights. This activity, illegal in its own right, also exposes vulnerable youths to a climate of violence and other illegal activities including drugs, guns, gangs, and gambling. Chicago Police Superintendent Philip Cline has stated that an important part of that city's anti-violence strategy includes enforcement of dog fighting statutes: 35% of search warrants executed in animal abuse or dog fighting investigations resulted in the seizure of narcotics or guns. From May to July 2002, Chicago Animal Abuse Control Team members arrested 22 offenders, of whom 18 had prior battery, weapons or drug arrests. Of six juvenile offenders, five had subsequent arrests for felony offenses (Chicago Crime Commission, 2004).

As further examples, 10 children and crack cocaine were found at a cock fighting raid in Mecklenburg County, VA that resulted in the arrests of 122 people, 22 of whom were illegal aliens and members of such gangs as the Mexican Mafia and MS-13 (Nuckols, 2007). In Logansport, LA, State Police raided the Sunrise Game Club in a crackdown on illegal cock fighting. The club's owner and five men were cited on charges of illegal gambling, racketeering, money laundering, and contributing to the delinquency of juveniles (Welborn, 2007).

**2. The Interplay of Animal Abuse and Domestic Violence:** Children exposed to domestic violence are three times more likely to be cruel to animals

than children not exposed to domestic violence (Currie, 2006). Children in households marked by domestic violence frequently witness acts of animal abuse that serve to coerce or intimidate their mothers. This causes children significant distress and leads to a greater likelihood of their displaying behavior problems (Ascione et al., 2007; Baldry, 2003). Concern for the welfare of family pets is frequently cited as a barrier that prevents battered women from seeking safety for themselves and their children, thereby exposing children to further family violence (Ascione, 2007; Quinlisk, 1999; Ascione, 1998; Ascione, Weber, & Wood, 1997). Batterers who abuse family pets are more dangerous and use more forms of violence than men who do not, including sexual violence, marital rape, emotional violence and stalking among the controlling behaviors to which children in the household may be exposed (Simmons & Lehmann, 2007).

**3. The Interplay of Animal Abuse and Child Sexual Abuse:** Children's pets may be killed, harmed or threatened by adults to coerce the child into submitting to, and being silent about, sexual abuse. Children in this situation may be especially devastated by such actions and the loss of emotional support from their pets (Loar, 1999; Raphael, Colman, & Loar, 1999; Ascione et al., 2007). In one study of 271 cases of sexual abuse substantiated by child protection agencies, parental reports of children being cruel to animals were seven times greater for sexually abused boys and eight times greater for sexually abused girls than for non-abused children, and 34.8% of sexually abused boys and 27.5% of sexually abused girls were reported to be cruel to animals (Ascione, 2005).

**4. The Interplay of Animal Abuse and Child Physical Abuse and Neglect:** Animal maltreatment co-occurs with child abuse and neglect with such

frequency that children exposed to these multiple forms of violence may come to experience violence as familial norms. Animal abuse has been reported to co-occur in 88% of homes with physical child abuse; in 26% of these homes victimized children became victimizers by being abusive toward their pets. Further risks to children come from abused animals that retaliate: pets had injured a family member in 69% of animal abusive households as compared with 6% in non-abusive homes (DeViney, Dickert, & Lockwood, 1983).

For example, in Mill Valley, CA, a couple was charged with child endangerment and animal cruelty after investigators found a “chamber of horrors” in their apartment including piles of dog and cat feces and garbage, flea-infested animals with open sores, and two small children exposed to filth, disease and household chemicals. A 5-year-old girl and a 2-year-old boy were found half-clothed and walking barefoot on carpets soaked in urine. The girl’s hair was so matted police thought she was wearing a wig, and she was wearing a diaper because she was afraid of using the toilet. The mother, who was arraigned on eight felony counts and two misdemeanors, was described as a habitual hoarder and animal neglecter with a history of run-ins with the Marin Humane Society dating back to 1985. She had been convicted of cruelty to animals in 1991. Authorities had begun their investigation after neighbors reported an overpowering smell of urine coming from the apartment (Klien, 2007).

Because maltreated animals are often exposed outdoors where concerned neighbors may report their welfare to authorities, animal care and control officers are often first responders and positioned to make referrals of

suspected child maltreatment to child protection agencies. Such a case occurred in January, 1999 in Upper Dublin Township, PA when neighbors alerted police to a starving dog in an outdoor pen; responding officers found the body of a four-year-old boy who had been beaten to death with a carpenter's level (Panaritis, Barnard, & Shafer, 1999). The perpetrator, who was subsequently sentenced to 22 years incarceration for third-degree murder, had been convicted of cruelty to animals in 1991 and of domestic violence in 1995.

**5. Animal Abuse as a Marker for Other Crimes to which Children May Be Exposed:** Adults who abuse animals (Arluke, Levin, Luke, & Ascione, 1999) or who keep vicious dogs (Barnes et al., 2006) are more likely to have been arrested for violent crimes and property- and drug-related offenses, thereby exposing children to additional risks and unwholesome environments. Clarke (2002) reported that of 200 convicted animal abuse offenders, 61.5% had also committed an assault, 17% had committed sexual abuse, and 8% had arson convictions. He noted that a history of animal abuse was a better predictor of sexual assault than were previous convictions for homicide, arson, or firearms offenses.

**6. Animal Abuse as a Marker for Children's Antisocial Behaviors:** Youths who commit acts of cruelty to animals have been linked to schoolyard shootings (Verlinden, Herson, & Thomas, 2000), conduct disorder (Ascione, 2005) and an extensive array of violent offenses and antisocial behavior in adulthood (Schiff, Louw, & Ascione, 1999; Ressler, Burgess, & Douglas, 1988; Tingle et al., 1986; Kellert & Felthous, 1985). Animals may be harmed or killed as part of gang initiation rites (Arkow, 2003). Adolescents may videotape their torturing of animals as a way to

fight boredom (In the Line of Duty, n.d.). This pattern appears to be so consistent in the development of criminal trajectories that Vachss (2005) has written, "Animal abuse and children – as perpetrators or as witnesses – may be the Rosetta Stone to predatory psychopathology."

Often, maltreatment of animals is a family value that is transmitted intergenerationally. In the Mill Valley, CA case cited above (Klien, 2007), the mother had been raised as a youth in conditions so squalid that the family home was eventually declared a health hazard by unanimous resolution of a town council. Thompson and Gullone (2006) reported that children who witness acts of animal cruelty perpetrated by family members are significantly more likely to model this behavior and harm animals themselves than if the cruelty was perpetrated by a friend or peer.

## **Responses**

The proposal that companion animals be considered in the overall framework of child maltreatment and abuse prevention need not place additional burdens on the already overtaxed child welfare system. One strategy with intuitive appeal, great promise, and easy implementation is the inclusion of questions regarding the presence of household animals, and patterns of care giving and violence toward those pets, in child protection intake forms, risk and safety assessments, and interviews. Child protection officials in Maine have pioneered the statewide use of questionnaires that routinely ask:

1. "Are there any pets at the home?"
2. "How does each family member treat the pet(s)?"

3. "Do you worry about something bad happening to the pet(s)?" (Jariz, 2007)

Numerous jurisdictions are legislating mandated or permissive cross-reporting protocols between child and animal protection agencies for the notification of suspected or actual child or animal maltreatment. National collaborations in Great Britain, Scotland, and New Zealand (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 2003; Child, Youth & Family, 2007), and statewide cross-reporting programs in West Virginia, Maine, Oregon, Tennessee, and California recognize that the work of organizations tasked with child and animal protection is complementary. Mechanisms for cross-reporting allow agencies to recognize and respond more quickly to any risks to children and animals.

Several psychological assessment tools have been developed to assist therapists working with children who perpetrate, witness, or are at risk of acts of violence against animals (Boat, Loar, & Phillips, 2008; Randour & Davidson, 2008). These assessments include:

1. AniCare and AniCareChild: An Assessment and Treatment Approach for Childhood Animal Abuse (Shapiro, 2004)
2. Animal Abusers Interview and Risk Assessment Tool (AARAT) (Tedeschi, n.d.)
3. Boat Inventory on Animal-Related Experiences (BIARE) (Boat, 1994)
4. Children and Animals Assessment Instrument (CAAI) (Ascione, Thompson, & Black, 1997)

5. Children's Attitudes and Behaviors Toward Animals (CABTA) (Guymer, Mellor, Luk, & Pearce, 2001)
6. Children's Treatment of Animals Questionnaire (CTAQ) (Thompson & Gullone, 2003)
7. Clinical Assessment of Juvenile Animal Cruelty (Lewchanin & Zimmerman, 2000; Zimmerman & Lewchanin, 2000)
8. Cruelty to Animals Inventory (CAI) (Dadds et al., 2004)
9. P.E.T. Scale of the Measurement of Physical and Emotional Tormenting of Animals (Baldry, 2004)

The protective factors that animals can offer to children's functioning warrant animals being included therapeutically in child welfare interventions (Ascione, 2008; Risley-Curtiss, 2007b; Ascione, 2001). Child protection workers are taking advantage of children's natural affinity for animals by implementing innovative animal-assisted interventions with abused or violent children.

An extensive body of literature demonstrates that positive interactions and high levels of attachment to animals can help children cope with stress, learn to relax, play, and develop self-esteem, a sense of achievement, nurturing skills, cooperation, and socialization, all of which contribute to the building of empathy with other living creatures and with the environment (Ascione, 2005; Jalongo, 2004; Erzinger, 2004; Melson, 2001; George, 1999).

Interventions involving animals often produce results when other methods fail. Children who are not comfortable interacting with other humans often do not feel the same inhibitions with animals (Levinson, 1969). Numerous researchers have reported that therapy animals provide a safe means for children to begin

to trust nonjudgmental beings before trusting humans. Some children find interactions with animals less stressful because animals offer unconditional love and acceptance, emotional support, opportunities to provide nurturing, and tactile stimulation that soothes anxiety and lowers blood pressure, particularly in a child welfare setting (Gonski, 1985; Robin, ten Bensele, Quigley, & Anderson, 1984; Siegel, 2004).

The growth of the animal-assisted therapy/activities field has expanded opportunities whereby animals are introduced to children with varying needs. Almost universally, the animals become catalysts for more open communications and enable skilled therapists to gain entrée into clients' histories and emotions (Arkow, 2004; Siegel, 2004). These techniques, pioneered by child psychologist Boris Levinson (1969), can be applied to abused and neglected children who often discuss their issues more readily in the presence of comforting animals.

Companion animals such as dogs, cats, rabbits, turtles, horses, and fish can offer a pleasant and trusted external focus to children experiencing adverse life events. Interaction with companion animals promotes safe feelings, provides a source of contact comfort that can decrease anxiety and sympathetic nervous system arousal, and establishes a protective window through which therapists or interviewers can address difficult issues in a way that is more accessible and tolerable for children (Justice, 2007; Becker & French, 2004; Chicago Crime Commission, 2004; Van Patten, 1999). This phenomenon can be utilized with children during the intake process, forensic interviews, medical examinations, therapy, removal to foster care, and testifying in court.

Animal greeters at Child Advocacy Centers may help children entering the forensic interview process to be calmer, more comfortable, and secure, thus increasing the accuracy of reports. The child may be more willing to provide embarrassing or difficult details in the presence of a nonjudgmental pet. The presence of a pet also helps build trust between the child and the interviewer. Centers utilizing trained and certified therapy animals include the Johnson County Children's Advocacy Center in Cleburne, TX, the "Pawz for Kids" program at the Midland Rape Crisis and Child Advocacy Center in Midland, TX, and the Mississippi Children's Advocacy Center in Jackson, MS (Justice, 2007).

Comforting therapy animals are also being utilized in courtrooms. Prosecutors in King and Snohomish Counties in Washington State have pioneered the introduction of therapy dogs with child interview specialists to encourage children who have otherwise refused to talk with caseworkers and therapists about the details of their assaults. Prosecutors' offices in Texas, Georgia, Montana, and Florida have sought information about starting similar programs (McNerthney, 2007).

Numerous other prevention, intervention, and support services have been developed which utilize animals therapeutically to respond to children exposed to animal abuse and related forms of family violence (Brooks, 2006; Boat, 2005; Duel, 2004; Kruger, Trachtenberg, & Serpell, 2004; Loar & Colman, 2004; Arkow, 2003; Yao, 2003; Beyke, 2002; DeGrave, 1999; Rathmann, 1999; Roseberry & Rovin, 1999; Ross, 1999).

## Conclusion

While the archetypal child protection history includes close collaboration between animal protection and child welfare organizations, compartmentalization of services in more recent times has resulted in agencies focusing on distinct victim groups. As we begin to recognize that the ecologies of contemporary families include both human and non-human members, it is apparent that victims may experience many forms of maltreatment that often overlap.

Ample evidence of the impact of animals in the lives of children compellingly demonstrates that to maximize our ability to help children, we must integrate children's interactions with animals into social work research, education, training, and practice (Risley-Curtiss, 2007a). Capturing information about children's witnessing animal abuse can help caseworkers:

- make a more meaningful assessment of child and family;
- detect and support findings of child abuse and neglect;
- identify other victims and problems;
- establish key supports in a child's ecosystem which may help if the child remains at home or which may be lost if the child is removed from the family; and
- suggest the inclusion of animal-assisted interventions in treatment (Risley-Curtiss, 2007b).

Although the original thrust of awareness regarding the link between animal maltreatment and child abuse and neglect came from the animal

welfare community, many human services agencies now recognize this link even if they traditionally have been somewhat resistant to accept additional responsibilities outside the specific agency mandate (Squires, 2000). The growth of statutory cross-reporting in mandated or permissive form, the gathering of animal-related data in intake and assessment forms, and the use of animal-assisted therapeutic interventions with abused children will allow child welfare agencies to do a better job of protecting children from abuse and preventing them from becoming abusers.

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