



STRATEGIZING THE LINK

A Briefing Paper from the National Link Coalition for Mental Health Professionals

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This paper discusses policy implications in the area of mental health arising from the empirically established relationships between human violence and animal abuse. In addition to mental health professionals, the paper is intended for individuals whose work allows or demands referral for the assessment and treatment of animal abuse.

BACKGROUND

Research and clinical experience show that individuals who abuse animals vary greatly in the intensiveness of appropriate treatment. At one end of the spectrum is a child of 4 years old who is curious about animals and pulls the wings off of butterflies; at the other is a dual-diagnosed adult whose chronic delusions direct him or her to torture cats. For the first individual, a brief discussion in a nonclinical setting with his or her parents might suffice, while for the more disturbed individual hospitalization followed by residential treatment may be required. The generating and maintaining environment of the animal abuse also varies with the contribution of individual

personality, family dynamics, or subculture. Consistent with the finding of the relationship between human violence and animal abuse, individuals whose animal abuse rises to the level of a behavioral disorder are diagnosed with Conduct Disorder of Childhood (the only disorder that lists animal behavior as a defining characteristic), Attention Conduct Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Considerable research is underway to increase our understanding of the etiologies, developmental trajectories, gender loadings, and predictive value of the several forms of animal abuse.

CURRENT ISSUES

Animal abuse is a symptom that appears early in the development of Childhood Conduct Disorder (Miller, 2001); also, it is known that the acting out disorders become entrenched well before the teen years. These findings reinforce the need for early identification of and intervention for at-risk populations.

Fortunately, a number of assessment instruments specifically designed to measure animal abuse are now available. These include a parent-report questionnaire developed by Guymer, Mellor, Luk, and Pearse (2001); the parent-report and child-self-report versions of the Cruelty to Animals Inventory (Dadds, et al., 2004); the self-report form of the Childhood Trust Survey on Animal-

Related Experiences (Boat, Loar, & Phillips, 2008); surveys of animal abuse developed for use with school children (P.E.T. Scale) (Baldry, 2003; Pagani, Robustelli, & Ascione, 2007); and a survey designed for use in the context of domestic violence (Ascione, et al., 2007). These measures are in various stages of validation (Ascione & Shapiro, in press). The literature suggests that parents and guardians may not always be aware of their children's behavior, especially behavior away from the home environment (Dadds, Whiting, & Hawes, 2006). Clearly, multi-source assessments are desirable.

Programs working with at-risk youth vary in duration and intensity. For example, through

Forget-Me-Not Farm, a weekly after-school program, children from families and communities in which violence is prevalent learn the responsible care of animals (Rathman, 1999). PAL (People and Animals Learning) is a three-week day camp for youth-at-risk that gives them experience in a wildlife rehabilitation center and an animal shelter (DeGrave, 1999). Project Second Chance pairs teenage offenders with shelter dogs “to foster empathy, community responsibility, kindness, and an awareness of healthy social interactions” (Harbolt & Ward, 2001, p. 179).

For children and adults who are already seriously involved in animal abuse, treatment is available at different levels of severity of the presenting disorder. In an intermediate range of intervention, *The AniCare model of treatment for animal abuse* (Jory & Randour, 1998) and *AniCare child: An assessment and treatment approach for childhood animal abuse* (Randour, Krinsk, & Wolf, 2002) are approaches for working with adults and juveniles, respectively. They are designed for out-patient populations not diagnosed with major psychotic disorders and capable of benefiting from cognitive-

behavioral interventions. Adapted from the Intimate Justice Theory (Jory, Anderson, & Greer, 1997), a model developed for clinical intervention with perpetrators of domestic violence, AniCare uses cognitive behavioral and gestalt techniques to deal with accountability, empathy, and problem-solving skills. AniCare Child uses cognitive behavioral, psychodynamic, and attachment theories to teach the child how to empathize with animals and develop more effective executive functions. It is adapted from components of the treatment of other related childhood presenting problems that have been found to be effective (Randour, Krinsk, & Wolf, 2002). A more direct formal evaluation of AniCare Child is in process.

At the other extreme of intensity of intervention, Green Chimneys is a residential treatment program for disturbed youths, including but not limited to those who abuse animals (Ross, 1999). Children reside in the working farm for an extended period, during which they receive individual and group-based treatment, as well as animal-assisted therapy and activities.

CHALLENGES

On the supply side, one of the challenges we face is training mental health providers in the assessment and treatment of animal abuse as the instruments and approaches become available. The Animals and Society Institute has given over 35 workshops to providers from various disciplines, offers online courses through the School of Social Work at Arizona State University, and maintains a list of certified providers. However, the longer term goal – assimilation of this problem behavior into the curriculum of the various graduate training programs – has not been systematically undertaken. The fact that several professional organizations cite animal cruelty as indicators of disturbed youth (American Psychiatric Association,

American Psychological Association, National School Safety Council, and National Crime Prevention Council) provides some leverage to this end.

On the demand side, in a society where the courts are backlogged and the prisons overcrowded, one of the challenges we face is convincing the criminal justice system to take animal abuse seriously by prosecuting more cases involving this crime. Forty-six states have felony-level statutes involving animal abuse and 27 states now recommend (several mandate) that judges require counseling for convicted animal abusers, beyond jail time.

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

In addition to the reduction in the suffering of animals, the early identification, treatment, and, when appropriate, prosecution of people who abuse animals is important because of its relationship to human violence. Recent studies indicate that in addition to perpetration, witnessing animal abuse sometimes has another deleterious consequence: individuals who witness animal abuse are more likely both to become victims of later abuse (Henry, 2004). Witnessing animal abuse is a potent experience that for some individuals rises to the level of a trauma and can result in symptoms of post-traumatic stress syndrome. In addition to this phenomenon of vicarious traumatization, the relationship of animal abuse to another high profile problem, bullying, is under investigation. Like animal abuse, it involves repeated acts of aggression directed toward a less powerful victim.

PRACTICE ISSUES

The treatment of animal abuse raises a number of practice issues. In general, they raise the question of the degree to which policies developed in response to child and other human-based abuse provide an appropriate model for practitioners working with animal abuse. For example, should rules that trump client confidentiality and require reporting of child abuse obtain in the case of animal abuse? On the one hand, some persons believe its “just an animal”; on the other, arguably a child or other person may be at risk as animal abuse co-occurs with these other forms of interpersonal violence. Policies that mandate or at least allow the therapist to report animal abuse without liability address this problem. Louisiana, Nebraska, Tennessee and West Virginia mandate child protective personnel to report suspected animal abuse to humane agencies; CPS workers in California, Florida, Maine, Massachusetts and Oregon may make such a report without violating confidentiality provisions.

Another example: is a therapist who judges an animal in immediate danger justified in assuming a

crisis mode of intervention with its greater impact on members of the client’s family and mobilization of community resources? A helpful policy here is the extension of protective orders to include companion animals, as 10 states have done. Cross-reporting and cross-training teach human services personnel how to recognize and report perpetrators and victims of animal abuse and, conversely, to teach humane services personnel to recognize child, spousal, and elder abuse. These policies enhance the involvement and awareness of relevant community resources.

The use of actual animals in the treatment of animal abusers (animal-assisted therapy) is an option that requires careful planning and on-going client assessment. The use of an actual animal vividly can evoke the target behavior, but it can threaten the client and produce further resistance. Obviously, adequate provision must be taken to safeguard the welfare of the animals. Certification of therapists in AAT and training of the animals should be required.

ABOUT THE NATIONAL LINK COALITION

The National Link Coalition is a consortium of organizations addressing animal welfare, child protection, domestic violence, and adult protection issues. We are concerned with how these forms of family violence



intersect, and how professionals working in various fields can enhance their work through interdisciplinary collaborations. For more details please visit www.nationallinkcoalition.org.

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