

A Link Across the Lifespan:
Animal Abuse as a Marker for
Traumatic Experiences in
Child Abuse, Domestic Violence
and Elder Abuse



ADVANCING HEALTH EDUCATION & RESEARCH



ACADEMY ON VIOLENCE & ABUSE (AVA)

MISSION

The mission of the AVA is to advance health education and research on the prevention, recognition, and treatment of those affected by violence and abuse across the lifespan.

VISION

The vision of the AVA is that the prevention of violence and abuse, as well as its identification and care, is fully integrated into healthcare and society so that people of all ages are safer and healthier.

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A LINK ACROSS THE LIFESPAN: ANIMAL ABUSE AS A MARKER FOR TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES IN CHILD ABUSE, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND ELDER ABUSE

INTRODUCTION

Until relatively recently, health and social services professionals, researchers, policymakers, and the general public considered animal cruelty as a stand-alone issue, important to animals' well-being but of only marginal significance to individual and community health and safety.

This marginalization, based upon cultural themes that animals are merely property, that animal abuse is a normal occurrence among children and adolescents, and that human welfare priorities supersede animals' interests, is somewhat ironic. Other themes deeply embedded in Western philosophy express concern that children who abuse animals may grow up to exhibit escalating and dangerous interpersonal violence and antisocial behaviors.

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Meanwhile, the child protection movement originated in the animal protection field: the first child abuse cases were prosecuted by societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals and many humane societies had dual roles in child and animal protection for many decades.

This paradigm is rapidly shifting today as recent programs, policy, public awareness and research resoundingly redefine animal cruelty and its various manifestations – abuse, neglect, animal hoarding, and animal fighting – as a form of family and community violence. Animal abuse is not only a crime in itself but also often serves as a bellwether, a marker and a predictor of child maltreatment, domestic violence and elder abuse.

As early as 1992, Surgeons General C. Everett Koop and Antonio C. Novello were proposing that societal violence was best approached neither as a sociological nor law enforcement matter, but rather as a health concern that could be amenable to medical and public health interventions (Koop & Lundberg, 1992; Novello, Shosky & Froehlke, 1992). More recently, the One Health movement bridging human and veterinary medicine is an approach that transcends institutional and disciplinary boundaries to expand previous collaborations in food safety, disaster medicine, zoonoses, and comparative medical research into newer arenas such as human-animal interactions, behavioral health and violence prevention (Gibbs, 2013).

Well-cared-for pets have long been seen as protective factors for human physiologic and behavioral health, serving as “social lubricants” (Messent, 1985) and emotional and social supports that can lower risk factors for cardiovascular disease (Friedmann et al., 1980, 1995, 2003; Cole, Gawlinski, Steers & Kotlerman, 2007; Campo & Uchino, 2013; Abate, Zucconi & Boxer, 2011; Levine et al., 2013). Animal-assisted therapy has a long record of improving human health and functioning, with empirical and anecdotal findings supporting the use of animals in such interventions as visitations to at-risk populations, therapeutic horseback riding, service animals to assist the disabled, and occupational, physical and speech therapy (Arkow, 2015). Newer research is exploring the neurochemistry of human-animal interactions and the potential of dog-walking as an obesity-control tactic (Cutt et al., 2008; Zeltzman & Johnson, 2011).

Because companion animals are so deeply embedded in our society and our culture, pets should be regarded as members of the family and their impact on the familial ecosystem and children’s development must be considered when exploring family dynamics, trauma and health issues.

The prevalence of pets in American families is significant and our emotional attachments to them strong:

- 67.7% and 74.6% of U.S. households with children under or over age 6, respectively, are believed to have pets (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2007).
- 99% of pet owners consider their animals to be either members of the family or close companions (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2012).
- Women are primary caregivers of pets in 80.7% of pet-owning households (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2012).
- There are suggestions that a child in the U.S. today may be more likely to grow up with a pet than with a live-at-home father (Melson, 2001).

Because companion animals are so deeply embedded in our society and our culture, pets should be regarded as members of the family and their impact on the familial ecosystem and children's development must be considered when exploring family dynamics, trauma and health issues. Animal maltreatment should be seen as adversely impacting human health as well as animal welfare.

ANIMAL ABUSE AS AN ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE

Barbara Boat (2014) has argued compellingly that childhood exposure to animal abuse should be considered a toxic stressor and an Adverse Childhood Experience that can impact long-term health and well-being. A growing corpus of literature now describes animal abuse as a frequent indicator and predictor of polyvictimization, and one of the earliest symptoms of conduct disorder, often manifesting as young as 6.5 years of age (Frick et al., 1993). Animal abuse is seen as part of the intergenerational cycle of violence when children and youth perpetrate animal cruelty, or observe it (often at the hands of a child abuser or domestic violence batterer): the child is trapped in the traumatic environment, comes to believe violence is normative, and grows up to repeat the cycle with violence against his or her own children, partners and pets (Boat, 2014).

Other health traumas ensue from abused pets. One recent study reported that 21.1% of 256 human dog-bite fatalities in the U.S. from 2000-2009 involved animals that had been abused (Patronek et al., 2013). An Ohio study reported that owners of "high-risk" dogs (those that had been cited as vicious) were 3 times more likely to have criminal convictions for domestic violence and 9.1 times more likely to have criminal convictions for crimes involving children than owners of licensed, "low risk" dogs (Barnes, Boat, Putnam, Dates, & Mahlman, 2006).

Animal abuse was reported in 60% and 88% of New Jersey homes in which there was child abuse and physical child abuse, respectively, with 14% of animal abuse perpetrated by the children themselves; the incidence of dog bites among these children was 11 times greater than in the non-abused population (DeViney, Dickert & Lockwood, 1983). Animal abuse has been strongly correlated with bullying behaviors – both among bullies and by children victimized by bullies (Baldry, 2005; Gullone & Robertson, 2008; Henry & Sanders, 2007; Vaughn et al., 2011).

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ANIMAL ABUSE AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Increased awareness of the adverse impacts of domestic violence upon children spawned similar inquiries as to the incidence and implications of animal abuse in households marked by intimate partner violence. More than a dozen studies have reported that between 18% - 48% of domestic violence survivors – and their children – are kept hostage in abusive homes by batterers who threaten, hurt and/or kill family pets and livestock as a form of emotional blackmail that manipulates, intimidates, and retaliates (Arkow, 2014). A history of pet abuse was found to be one of the four most significant risk factors of one's becoming a domestic violence batterer (Walton-Moss, 2005). Children who have been exposed to domestic violence were reported to be 3 times more likely to be cruel to animals (Currie, 2006).

ANIMAL ABUSE AND ELDER ABUSE

Although much animal-assisted therapy work is concentrated on interactions with institutionalized elderly, seniors living in their homes, who have the lowest rates of pet ownership of any age cohort (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2007), are affected by human-animal interactions. Six primary health and welfare issues have been identified vis-à-vis vulnerable elders and companion animals:

- More than 92% of Adult Protective Services respondents to a national survey reported that they encountered animal neglect coexisting with a client's inability to care for himself/herself, indicating that reports of animal neglect may be an important warning sign for self-neglect by vulnerable adults (Lockwood, 2002). Animals may be neglected by frail elders who lack financial resources, transportation, or physical or mental capacity to care for them adequately (Peak, Ascione & Doney, 2012).
- Frail elders may neglect their own needs by spending limited financial resources on their animals' food and medications. Some may refuse to go into hospitals, assisted living or long-term healthcare facilities unless provisions are made for their pets (Boat & Knight, 2000).
- In more than two-thirds of domestic elder abuse cases, the perpetrators are family members who may neglect or abuse the elder's pet as a form of control or retaliation, out of frustration over their care-taking responsibilities, or as a way to extract financial assets from the victim (Humane Society of the U.S., 2005)

- Isolated seniors may experience profound grief and depression upon the death of a beloved pet. Some seniors are reluctant to replace departed pets in fear that the animals will outlive them (Boat & Knight, 2000).
- Home health aides, social workers and other caregivers may be reluctant to enter seniors' dwellings if they fear the presence of aggressive animals (Boat & Knight, 2000).
- Of growing concern is the issue of animal hoarders, who live in unhealthy environments surrounded by dozens and even hundreds of animals. These animals may be living in states of neglect, starvation and suffering: collectors are even known to hoard the carcasses of dead animals. Hoarders are statistically over-represented by older women (Patronek & Nathanson, 2009). These stereotypical hoarders, often labeled as "cat ladies," have been reported as living in a self-fulfilling cycle of social isolation: they gravitate towards animals because they are uncomfortable around people, and other people do not want to associate with them because of their excess number of animals (Patronek, Loar, & Nathanson, 2006).

The following types of hoarders have been identified in the literature (Patronek, Loar & Nathanson, 2006):

- **Individuals with mental health issues:** A wide range of co-morbid conditions have been associated with hoarding; currently, attachment disorders stemming from childhood traumas are believed to be the most prevalent etiology. Individuals whose dysfunctional or abusive childhoods altered their neurobiology or led to difficulties in establishing supportive interpersonal relationships and coping with life stressors may find particular refuge in the unconditional regard of animals (Patronek & Nathanson, 2009; Steketee et al., 2011).
- **Overwhelmed caregivers:** Kindhearted people identified in the community as the person to go to when litters of puppies and kittens are born.
- **Rescuers:** Live in a state of denial and believe they are the only ones who can care for animals. They may gravitate towards specific breeds.
- **Exploiters:** Hoarders who present themselves as a nonprofit animal charity to obtain donations fraudulently.

Animal hoarding is not a harmless eccentricity but rather a particularly intractable form of animal cruelty that has been called "pathological altruism" (Nathanson & Patronek, 2011). Several studies have demonstrated traumatic life events and attachment disturbances being associated with compulsive hoarding and complicated grief reactions, in which animals serve a path, albeit a futile one, towards healing (Patronek & Nathanson, 2009).

KEY REFORMS NEEDED

In response to findings such as these, groups such as the National Link Coalition are building public awareness and providing in-service and continuing-education training to professional audiences regarding animal cruelty, abuse and neglect as traumatic human health occurrences. These groups argue that violence prevention for all vulnerable family members can be enhanced through multi-disciplinary assessment, prevention, intervention, and treatment modalities that incorporate the following concepts:

1. Recognizing animal abuse as a human health and welfare concern as well as an animal issue.
2. Including animal abuse within the continuum of family violence.
3. Describing perpetrated or witnessed animal abuse as an Adverse Childhood Experience.
4. Conducting interdisciplinary programs that incorporate humane and human welfare services agencies.

CONCLUSION

Individuals in professional disciplines preventing violence and childhood trauma are becoming increasingly aware that questions regarding patients' and clients' attachments to, involvement with, and exposure to both healthy relationships with pets and unhealthy animal abuse can uncover many underlying issues and be markers for concurrent and future problems. Animal abuse can no longer be dismissed as trivial or excusable acts of childhood and adolescence.

Rather, there is growing recognition that when animals are abused, people are at risk, and that when people are abused, animals are at risk (Arkow, 2003). Measures to prevent, prosecute and punish animal cruelty are just as beneficial to people across the lifespan as they are to our animal companions.

RESOURCES

National Link Coalition – the National Resource Center on The Link between Animal Abuse and Human Violence www.nationallinkcoalition.org

The Latham Foundation www.latham.org

Animals & Society Institute www.animalsandsociety.org

American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) www.asPCA.org

Sheltering Animals and Families Together (SAF-T) – directory and resources for building pet-friendly domestic violence shelters <http://alliephillips.com/saf-tprogram/>

Online directories of domestic violence shelters with foster care programs for pets

- **Animal Welfare Institute** <http://awionline.org/safe-havens>
- **RedRover** <http://safeplaceforpets.org/>
- **National Coalition Against Domestic Violence** <https://www.domesticshelters.org/>

SELECTED RESEARCH FINDINGS

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| <p>Animal abuse and child maltreatment</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong relationships exist between childhood animal cruelty and future interpersonal aggression (Becker & French, 2004; Merz-Perez, Heide & Silverman, 2001; Ascione, 2001, 2005; Kellert & Felthous, 1985) • Between 62-76% of animal cruelty in the home occurs in the presence of a child (Faver & Strand, 2003). • Children who have been sexually abused are 5 times more likely to abuse animals than are non-abused children (Ascione et al., 2003). • Histories of sexual abuse, exposure to domestic violence, and witnessing animal abuse are robust correlates and possible precursors of children and adolescents perpetrating animal abuse (DeGue & DeLillo, 2009). |
| <p>Animal abuse and domestic violence</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Batterers who also abuse pets are more dangerous and use more forms of controlling behaviors than domestic violence batterers who do not abuse animals (Simmons & Lehmann, 2007). • 41% of individuals arrested for domestic violence had committed at least one act of animal abuse since the age of 18 (Febres et al., 2014). • 30% of individuals arrested for dog fighting or animal cruelty had prior histories of domestic violence (Chicago Crime Commission, 2004). • As many as 71% of survivors reported their partner had killed, harmed or threatened animals to control them and keep them from leaving; 32% reported their children had hurt or killed animals as well (Ascione, 1998). |
| <p>Animal abuse and elder abuse</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 92% of Adult Protective Services caseworkers have encountered animal neglect co-occurring with clients' inability to care for themselves. (Humane Society of the U.S. and State of Wisconsin Department of Health & Family Services, 2003). • 45% have observed intentional animal abuse or neglect. (Humane Society of the U.S. and State of Wisconsin Department of Health & Family Services, 2003). • 75% reported clients' concerns for their animals' welfare impacted their decisions about accepting interventions or other services. (Humane Society of the U.S. and State of Wisconsin Department of Health & Family Services, 2003). |

RESPONSES TO THESE ISSUES

In response to Link evidence, significant policy, program and public initiatives have been introduced:

Legislative

- 28 states allow courts to include pets or farm animals in protection-from-abuse orders in domestic violence and stalking cases (**Arizona:** A.R.S. §13-3601 & §13-3602; **Arkansas:** Ark. Code §9-15-205; **California:** Sec. §6320, Family Code; **Colorado:** C.R.S. §18-6-800.3 – 803.5 and C.R.S. §13-14-101 – 103; **Connecticut:** G.S.C. §46b-15(b), § 46(b)-38(c) and §54-1(k); **Hawaii:** H.R.S. §586-4; **Illinois:** 725 ILCS §5/112A-14; **Iowa:** I.C. §236.3(1), §236.4(3A) and §236.5(1b); **Louisiana:** R.S. §46:2135(A)(7) and Children’s Code Art. §1569(A)(7); **Maine:** 19-A MRSA §4007(1), §4011(2), §4006(5-a), and §4007(1-E1); **Maryland:** Ann. Code of Md. §4—501, §4—504.1, §4—505, & §4—506; **Massachusetts:** Sec. 49. Chapter §209A of the General Laws; **Minnesota:** Minn. Stat. §518B.01 subd. 6 (14) & (15); **Nevada:** NRS §33.018 and §33.030; **New Hampshire:** R.S.A §173-B:1; **New Jersey:** P.L. 2011 c.213 C.2C:25-29; **New York:** N.Y. Fam Ct. § 842; **North Carolina:** S.L. §2009-425; **Ohio:** R.C. §2151.34, §2303.201, §2903.213, §2903.214, §2919.26, and §3113.31; **Oklahoma:** 22 O.S. §2001 60.2(E) & 22 O.S. §2001 1105(B); **Oregon:** ORS §107.718; **South Carolina:** S. C. Code §20-4-60; **Tennessee:** Tennessee Code §36-3-601(1) and §36-3-606(a); **Texas:** Sec. §85.021, Family Code; **Vermont:** 15 V.S.A. §1103; **Virginia:** Code of Virginia §16.1-253, §16.1-253.1, §16.1-253.4, §16.1-279.1, §19.2-152.8, §19.2-152.9, and §19.2-152.10; **Washington:** RCW §26.50.060 and §26.50.110 (2009); **West Virginia:** WV Code §48-27-503).
- 7 states define acts of animal abuse intended to intimidate a spouse or domestic partner as domestic violence. (**Arizona:** Ariz. Rev. Stat. §13-3601; **Colorado:** Colo. Rev. Stat. Ann. §18-6-800.3(1); **Indiana:** Ind. Code Ann. §31-9-2-29.5, and §35-46-3-12.5; **Maine:** M.R.S.A. §Title 17-A, Part 2, Chap. 9; **Nebraska:** Nebraska Revised Statutes §43-2922; **Nevada:** Nev. Rev. Stat. Ann. §33.018(1)(e)(7); **Tennessee:** Tenn. Code Ann. §36-3-601(1)).
- Federal law now makes attending an animal fight punishable by up to one year in prison, and bringing a minor to a dog fight punishable by up to three years in prison (7 USCA §2156).
- All 50 states have felony-level crimes of animal cruelty (compared to 5 states in 1990).
- Animal control officers, humane investigators, and veterinarians are specifically mandated to report suspected child abuse in 8 states (**California, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Maine, Ohio, Virginia, West Virginia,** and **District of Columbia**).
- Child protective services personnel and social workers are mandated to report suspected animal abuse in **Connecticut, Illinois** and **West Virginia**, and permitted to report suspected animal abuse in **California, Florida, Louisiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Nebraska, Oregon,** and **Tennessee**, with immunity from civil or criminal liability for superseding client confidentiality restrictions.
- Animal abuse committed in the presence of a child is a more serious crime in **Oregon**.

RESPONSES TO THESE ISSUES (cont.)

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| <p>Programmatic</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 99 women’s shelters in 37 states (plus 3 in Canada, Australia and New Zealand) are pet-friendly with capabilities to house survivors’ pets as well as their children. • 571 other shelters have community referral programs for pet safehousing. • Therapy dogs are working in Children’s Advocacy Centers to comfort sexually abused children during forensic interviews. |
| <p>Professional development</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Veterinary forensics has been developed as a specialty practice to facilitate veterinarians’ recognition and response to suspected animal abuse and to gather evidence suitable for prosecution. • Professional codes of veterinary conduct and statutory language in 20 states mandate or permit veterinarians to report suspected animal abuse, with immunity from civil and criminal liability, similar to long-standing practices for physicians (Arkow & Munro, 2008). 2 states (California and Colorado) mandate veterinarians report suspected child abuse and 1 state (Illinois) mandates they report suspected elder abuse. • The Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders now lists animal cruelty as a criterion for conduct disorder. • Veterinary Social Work is becoming a specialized discipline. |
| <p>Public awareness</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The U.S. Department of Justice has created an animal cruelty task force. • Interest in the link between animal abuse and human violence has spread to 42 nations. • Community anti-violence coalitions that include animal protection components exist in 34 U.S. cities, plus Canada, the United Kingdom, Scotland, Spain, Sweden, the Netherlands, and New Zealand. One such campaign, spotabuse.org in Milwaukee, Wis., was formed to reduce incidence of domestic violence by having the public report suspected animal cruelty to 911. |

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