

Child abuse, domestic violence and animal abuse

Considering the links

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It is well documented that child abuse often occurs within a web of violence in the home which may include domestic violence. However, it is also becoming increasingly apparent that there are clear links between other forms of violence in the home and the abuse of companion or pet animals. Despite this evidence, until recently there has been a great deal of resistance from all sides to accepting the idea that when addressing family violence there is a need to consider violence which is directed towards the family's companion animal.

Research has found that companion animals may be used in a number of ways in the context of family violence. Cruelty to companion animals may be used to ensure the silence of the victim, to maintain power over the victim, to coerce the victim to do something against her will and/or to punish the victim (Adams 1994; Ascione 1998; Ascione Weber and Wood 1997). Studies report many different types of violence being directed towards the animals of those living in violent family situations: from cats being smacked and kicked; to dogs being thrown off porches; to burying pet dogs alive; and even the sexual abuse of companion animals (Flynn 2000).

Furthermore, it has been shown that companion animals provide emotional comfort to both women and children during psychologically traumatic times and that women will often remain in violent and dangerous situations rather than leave their pet behind with their abuser. One woman explained how she would rather stay in a violent relationship than risk her pet's welfare or hurt her children any further:

"I was a victim of domestic violence for seven and a half years as were my children. We have always had pets and lots of them – they were and still are part of our family. In my case, staying at home and suffering beatings on a daily basis became more acceptable to me than leaving with the children without their pets, for doing that would have broken their hearts, and I would have felt it was my decision to hurt them." (Paws for Kids, unpublished)

Children are often caught up in this conundrum, with threats to their pets being used to maintain their silence. In a 1999 study in the United Kingdom, 50 women entering a refuge (after experiencing violence) were asked about their experiences of harm to their companion animals (*Paws for Kids*, unpublished). Of the 50 women, 66 per cent indicated that their partners had threatened to harm their pets, and 38 per cent indicated that their partners had actually harmed their pets. Further, 74 per cent of the respondents had children and 40 per cent of the children had witnessed threats to, or actual harm to, their pets. In addition, 88 per cent of the women said they had problems sorting out their pet(s) when they were going into a refuge; 58 per cent of the women said that they had had to give up a pet in the past when entering a refuge; and 40 per cent of the women said that they had stayed in a violent relationship because they did not want to leave their pet.

One woman in the the study explained how this affected both her and her children: "On previous occasions I have had to leave my pets behind, which has broke both mine and my children's hearts."



These UK findings mirror those in the United States. For example, Ascione and Weber (1998) surveyed 38 women entering a refuge to escape violence and found that of the 28 who had pets, 71 per cent had experienced their partner either threatening to harm or actually harming their pet. Flynn (2000) found that approximately one-fifth of women significantly delayed leaving their relationship and seeking a place in a shelter because of concern for their companion animal's health and welfare.

In Australia, studies show similar patterns. Twenty-eight women entering a refuge in the outskirts of Melbourne were surveyed, with 44 per cent of them indicating that their abuser had harmed and/or threatened to harm their pet, and 48 per cent said that worry over the fate of their pet was a significant factor in delaying them taking up a refuge place (Fawcett, Gullone and Johnson 2002).

Children who are exposed to violence in the home may also begin to abuse companion animals. The abuse of animals by a child can be a significant indicator that a child has been a victim of abuse themselves (Adams and Donovan 1996). There is also evidence that children who exhibit cruel behaviour toward an animal may go on to abuse humans in adulthood (Flynn 2000). Research has also found that juveniles who admit to having sexually abused animals report more sex offences against humans than other sex offenders their same age and race (Fleming, Jory and Burton 2002).

What are the implications for practice?

The findings outlined above have significant implications for those who work in the field of animal, family and child welfare.

Internationally there has been recognition of the need to assist women and children entering domestic violence refuges to have their pets fostered until they are able to care for them again. There are a number of innovative projects currently dealing with this issue such as *Paws for Kids* in the United Kingdom and *Feminists for Animal Rights* in the United States. Such programs are important for women and children who can make the decision to leave a violent relationship with the knowledge that their pets will also be safe from violence.

If the links between animal abuse, domestic violence and child abuse are recognised, work can be done towards the development of a collaborative framework where animal protection officers, including veterinarians, report suspicions of child abuse, and where child abuse investigators report suspicions of animal abuse. In California, there are a number of cross-training and cross-referral programs in operation and animal control officers are forced by law to report any suspicions of child abuse (Arkow 1996).

If Australia introduced a cooperative and multi-agency response to family violence and animal abuse, this may go some way towards early detection and intervention in the cycle of family violence, and the prevention of further violence to the family and the family's companion animals.

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Paws for Kids (unpublished) <http://www.pawsforkids.org.uk/>

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