

## Quick Facts:

### Why is The Link Between Animal Abuse and Family Violence important for...Social Workers?



#### **Child protection workers often see multiple forms of family violence.**

- The Link describes the intersections between animal abuse and other forms of family violence. Social workers involved in child protection or other forms of family violence will hear about incidents of animal abuse, elder abuse, and/or domestic violence.

#### **Pet owners may have strong emotional ties to their animals that make them vulnerable.**

- Only 2% of pet owners consider their animals as “property”: 51% consider their animals as “companions” and 47% consider them as “members of the family.” (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2002)
- Children, in particular, may be attached to their pets. Sometimes adults will harm, threaten, or kill their pets as a way to control children or get them to acquiesce to sexual abuse or remain silent about it.

#### **Like child abuse and neglect, animal abuse is a public health and human welfare issue.**

- In one study, 60% of families under investigation for child abuse – and 88% of those under investigation for physical child abuse – had incidents of animal abuse as well.
- The incidence of dog bites in these abusive homes was 11 times greater than in non-abusive families. (Deviney, Dickert, & Lockwood, 1983)

#### **Animal welfare organizations are often first responders.**

- Because neglected or maltreated animals may be exposed in plain view where concerned neighbors may see or hear them and make a report, humane society or SPCA agents, animal control officers, dog wardens or rabies control officers may be the first point of social services contact and intervention for a family in crisis.
- Establishing lines of communication, cross-training programs, and referral protocols between animal protection and child welfare might uncover cases that otherwise go unreported and generate more support in the community for child welfare work. (Becker & French, 2004)

#### **Clients may be more willing to talk about animal abuse or neglect than other forms of family violence.**

- Victims and witnesses of child abuse are often reluctant to discuss their situation with strangers or government officials, and often make apologies for the behavior of the perpetrator. But people are often eager to talk about their pets, which a skillful investigator or counselor can use to their advantage. This conversation may uncover patterns of violence and control which can better inform the assessment or investigation.
- Showing interest in the family’s animals builds trust and rapport. Risk and safety assessments interviews, clinical sessions, and other meetings can be started with a safe, neutral topic: ask the client, “I need to get a little information about you. Do you have any pets?”

### **Investigation can help animals in crisis.**

- Even if an investigation of suspected child abuse or neglect proves unfounded, social workers may uncover animals at risk of abuse or neglect who need to be identified to the appropriate humane society, SPCA or animal control agency.

### **Animal abuse is often an indicator that children pose a risk to themselves and to others.**

- Acts of animal abuse perpetrated by children are some of the strongest and earliest diagnostic indicators of conduct disorder, often beginning as young as 6.5 years.
- Such organizations as the National School Safety Council, the U.S. Department of Education, the American Psychological Association, the Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention, and the National Crime Prevention Council have reported that children who harm animals are at greater risk of becoming violent to others. Numerous studies of aggressive criminals and prison inmates have found many incidents of severe cruelty to animals in their childhoods, acts that were often excused as “boys will be boys” or “it was only a cat,” without realizing the diagnostic significance of these actions.
- In looking at threat assessments, FBI behavioral science profilers are surprised when animal abuse does not show up in the histories of serial rapists and murderers. Recognizing the significance of animal abuse can provide opportunities for safer and healthier communities. (Ascione, 2001)

### **Animal abuse inflicts pain and suffering on all victims.**

- In addition to the physical pain experienced by the animals, children who witness animal abuse experience psychological distress. In one survey of abused children institutionalized for delinquency and emotional disturbances, 91% of children indicated they had had a special pet, and 99% showed very positive feelings toward their pets; for a significant number their pets were their sole love objects, and abused children were more likely than regular school students to talk to their pets about their problems. However, the abused children’s pets were killed nearly three times more often than those of non-abused children. (Robin, ten Bensel, Quigley & Anderson, 1984)

### **Animal cruelty is a crime.**

- The United States has the oldest laws in the world preventing cruelty to animals (dating to the Colonial era of 1641). (Animal Welfare Institute, 1990). All U.S. jurisdictions have prohibitions against animal maltreatment, and over 42 states declare some forms of animal abuse to be felonies.

## **Resources for Social Work and Child Protection**

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## **What Can You Do?**

- Take reports of animal cruelty seriously. Animal abuse is a crime and often just one form of family violence. Animal investigations often uncover other forms of abuse and violence.
- Be familiar with anti-cruelty laws in your community.
- Invite officials from animal protection, adult protection, and domestic violence agencies to provide training to your staff on how to recognize and report various forms of family violence.
- Establish lines of communication and collaborative protocols between child welfare, animal protection, adult protection and domestic violence agencies so these groups are prepared to make reports or referrals when necessary.
- Be aware of the psychological importance of pets in the lives of families.
- Add questions about the presence and welfare of household animals to risk and safety assessments and intake forms. People often talk willingly about their pets: use this to your

advantage to initiate conversations that will help you to better describe the family history and identify others who may be at risk.

- Maintain a list of community agencies that provide services and resources for victims of child abuse, domestic violence, elder abuse and animal abuse. Make this list available to staff and clients.
- Lobby for legislation that would add animal care and control officers to those mandated to report suspected child abuse and neglect, and child protection services workers to those mandated to report suspected animal cruelty, neglect and abuse.
- Sponsor a workshop to educate your colleagues on The Link between animal abuse and family violence. American Humane has a speakers bureau to provide these presentations.

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