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Violent Behavior

Animal abuse at early age linked to interpersonal violence

[By Kathleen M. Quinn](#)

Jeffrey Dahmer. Son of Sam. Ted Bundy. The boys who gunned down their classmates at school. The shooter of U.S. Capitol security guards. These men and boys had something in common beyond their acts of terrifying violence: All had abused animals long before they went on to destroy the lives of other people.

Animal cruelty, which begins showing up as early as age six, is one of the earliest and most reliable predictors of later violent behavior.

The persons who commit these cruelties are almost exclusively from dysfunctional families. Their childhoods are likely to include gross parental neglect, brutality, rejection and hostility.¹ In a study of male psychiatric patients, researchers found that those who had mistreated animals had suffered from extreme parental punishment, temper outbursts, destructive behavior and truancy. In addition, they were likely to have had an alcoholic father from whom they were separated, to have set fires and to have suffered from enuresis (bed wetting) past the age of five.²

Early research pointed to these last factors --- fire setting, late childhood enuresis and animal abuse --- as a "triad" of high-risk childhood indicators predictive of future violence.³ A small study of institutionalized adolescent boys, determined to be the most aggressive youths in the institution, found that all had exhibited the triad behaviors. In addition to violent behavior, their histories included family chaos, serious drug use and sexual crimes ranging from exhibitionism and molestation of small girls to forcible rape.⁴ A follow-up study of these extremely violent boys determined that several of them had been victims of sexual abuse, and that they in turn perpetuated sadistic attacks on younger or weaker victims.⁵

Later researchers found that fire setting, enuresis and animal abuse behaviors by themselves did not necessarily predict future violence, unless the animal abuse was particularly aggressive and included some or all of the following characteristics:

- The child was directly involved with animal cruelty and not just a witness.
- He was impulsive and exhibited no remorse for his actions.
- He engaged in a variety of cruel acts and victimized different species.
- He mistreated valued animals, such as dogs (rather than rodents, for example).

Even in chaotic homes, animals play a very important role in the lives of children. Interestingly, and not surprisingly, children in violent homes often rely more on their pets for love and loyalty than do other children. Yet in violent homes, animals seldom survive past age two. They are either killed, die from neglect or run away to escape the abuse. One side effect of this constant turnover, even where overt violence does not take place, is that the young child suffers from repeated cycles of attachment and loss.⁶

Several studies have linked animal abuse to interpersonal violence. In North Carolina, for example, researchers compared police reports with animal cruelty reports and found almost equal numbers of each at the same addresses. The calls to the police were for disturbances (32 percent), domestic violence (31 percent) and assault (16 percent). In a follow-up study, the majority of police calls to the animal abusing homes were for sexual assault (62 percent), and mental health (35 percent).⁷

Animal abuse and family violence

In New Jersey, a study found that a stunning 88 percent of the families who had physically abused their children also had records for animal abuse. The study found extensive "triangling" within the families, whereby pets were mistreated as a way of hurting another family member. While two-thirds of the animal abusers in the study were children's fathers, perhaps the most disturbing finding was that the other third were the children themselves.⁸

In a Wisconsin study of battered women, four out of five victims reported that their partners had been violent toward their pets or livestock as well as to them. In most cases, the animal cruelty was carried out in the presence of the battered woman and her children. The women also reported that their partners frequently threatened to give away their pets as a way to control them.⁹ There is evidence that animal abuse in a family may be related to the lethality of domestic violence incidents. A few years ago, Nashville, Tenn., had one of the highest domestic homicide rates in the country. In response, the police department instituted a screening process for all domestic violence calls, wherein officers began collecting three pieces of information: Was the batterer brandishing or threatening his partner with a weapon? Had he threatened suicide? Had there been any abuse of family pets? Abusers with any of these characteristics were sent to special programs. Within one year of instituting this policy, Nashville's domestic homicide fatalities fell 80 percent, even though domestic calls went up 50 percent during the same period.¹⁰

Animal abuse and sexual violence

In addition to the studies already cited, research on convicted sex offenders found that 48 percent of the rapists and 30 percent of the child molesters admitted to acts of animal cruelty in their childhood or adolescence.¹¹ Other research done on incarcerated sexual homicide perpetrators found similar statistics: 36 percent had committed animal cruelty in their childhoods, and 46 percent in their adolescence.¹²

Pet mistreatment is another way sexual abusers control their young victims.¹³ For example, a teenager testifying in court related that her father had threatened to kill her dog if she refused to have sex with him.

What can be done?

1. Working with children. Children may be more willing to talk about what has happened to their pets than to describe what they themselves have experienced. Counselors can ask children about their pets: Do they have any? What are their names? Who takes care of them? Does anyone ever hurt them? Have they ever lost one, or do they worry about losing one? The information disclosed can be very telling about both the children's experiences, their emotional state and the conditions in the household.¹⁴•@The counselor can help the children explore feelings about their pets, and gently enable them to make more difficult personal disclosures.

If a child indicates that he has perpetrated animal cruelty, the program should take the issue very seriously and attempt to provide or arrange for immediate interventions.

2. Reporting animal abuse and working with animal control officers. Programs may encourage clients to report any animal cruelty to local authorities. Animal cruelty laws are on the books in most states and localities but are rarely, if ever, enforced. If interventions occur when animal abuse is first discovered, perhaps the offender can be diverted from the path of ever-increasing violence. At the very least, enforcement of such laws would establish a record that could be useful in the event of future offenses. Sexual assault programs should also consider doing cross training and referrals with the animal control authorities in their areas. Animal control officers are called to many homes where child abuse is occurring, and they could serve as an early warning and reporting system for victims.

3. Education and Prevention programs. Youngsters identify strongly with animals and may hear the messages about abuse more clearly when animal mistreatment is used to illustrate the issues. Finally, sexual assault programs may explore using animals as a way to nurture skills to children. Humane Societies have pioneered programs that use animals to help children learn both to trust and to care for smaller and more helpless creatures. These programs can help children express their needs for power and control not through violence, but through life-enhancing nurturing, while at the same time learning how to meet some of their own emotional needs that have been neglected or exploited.

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