

Factsheet



Animal Abuse and Human Abuse: Partners in Crime

Violent acts toward animals have long been recognized as indicators of a dangerous psychopathy that does not confine itself to animals. “Anyone who has accustomed himself to regard the life of any living creature as worthless is in danger of arriving also at the idea of worthless human lives,” wrote humanitarian Dr. Albert Schweitzer. “Murderers ... very often start out by killing and torturing animals as kids,” according to Robert K. Ressler, who developed profiles of serial killers for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Studies have now convinced sociologists, lawmakers, and the courts that acts of cruelty toward animals deserve our attention. They can be the first sign of a violent pathology that includes human victims.

A Long Road of Violence

Animal abuse is not just the result of a minor personality flaw in the abuser, but rather a symptom of a deep mental disturbance. Research in psychology and criminology shows that people who commit acts of cruelty against animals don’t stop there; many of them move on to their fellow humans.

The FBI has found that a history of cruelty to animals is one of the traits that regularly appears in its computer records of serial rapists and murderers, and the standard diagnostic and treatment manual for psychiatric and emotional disorders lists cruelty to animals as a diagnostic criterion for conduct disorders.¹

Studies have shown that violent and aggressive criminals are more likely to have abused animals as children than criminals considered non-aggressive.² A survey of psychiatric patients who had repeatedly tortured dogs and cats found that all of them had high levels of aggression toward people as well, including one patient who had murdered a boy.³ To researchers, a fascination with cruelty to animals is a red flag in the lives of serial rapists and killers.⁴

Says Robert Ressler, founder of the FBI’s behavioral sciences unit, “These are the kids who never learned it’s wrong to poke out a puppy’s eyes.”⁵

Notorious Killers

History is replete with notorious examples: Patrick Sherrill, who killed 14 coworkers at a post office and then shot himself, had a history of stealing local pets and allowing his own dog to attack and mutilate them.⁶ Earl Kenneth Shriner, who raped, stabbed, and mutilated a 7-year-old boy, had been widely known in his neighborhood as the man who put firecrackers in dogs’ rectums and strung up cats.⁷ Brenda Spencer, who opened fire at a San Diego school, killing two children and injuring nine others, had

repeatedly abused cats and dogs, often by setting their tails on fire.⁸ Albert DeSalvo, the “Boston Strangler” who killed 13 women, trapped dogs and cats in orange crates and shot arrows through the boxes in his youth.⁹ Carroll Edward Cole, executed for five of the 35 murders of which he was accused, said his first act of violence as a child was to strangle a puppy.¹⁰ In 1987, three Missouri high school students were charged with the beating death of a classmate. They had histories of repeated acts of animal mutilation starting several years earlier. One confessed that he had killed so many cats that he’d lost count.¹¹ Two brothers who murdered their parents had previously told classmates that they had decapitated a cat.¹² Serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer had impaled dogs’ heads, frogs, and cats on sticks.¹³

More recently, high school killers such as 15-year-old Kip Kinkel in Springfield, Ore., and Luke Woodham, 16, in Pearl, Miss., tortured animals before embarking on shooting sprees.¹⁴ Columbine High School students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who shot and killed 12 classmates before turning their guns on themselves, bragged about mutilating animals to their friends.¹⁵

“There is a common theme to all of the shootings of recent years,” says Dr. Harold S. Koplewicz, director of the Child Study Center at New York University. “You have a child who has symptoms of aggression toward his peers, an interest in fire, cruelty to animals, social isolation, and many warning signs that the school has ignored.”¹⁶

Sadly, many of these criminals’ childhood violence went unexamined—until it was directed toward humans. As anthropologist Margaret Mead noted, “One of the most dangerous things that can happen to a child is to kill or torture an animal and get away with it.”¹⁷

Cruelty to Animals and Family Violence

Because domestic abuse is directed toward the powerless, animal abuse and child abuse often go hand in hand. Parents who neglect an animal’s need for proper care or abuse animals may also abuse or neglect their own children. Some abusive adults who know better than to abuse a child in public have no such qualms about abusing an animal publicly.

In 88 percent of 57 New Jersey families being treated for child abuse, animals in the home had been abused.¹⁸ Of 23 British families with a history of animal neglect, 83 percent had been identified by experts as having children at risk of abuse or neglect.¹⁹ In one study of battered women, 57 percent of those with pets said their partners had harmed or killed the animals.

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One in four said that she stayed with the batterer because she feared leaving the pet behind.²⁰

While animal abuse is an important sign of child abuse, the parent isn't always the one harming the animal. Children who abuse animals may be repeating a lesson learned at home; like their parents, they are reacting to anger or frustration with violence. Their violence is directed at the only individual in the family more vulnerable than themselves: an animal. One expert says, "Children in violent homes are characterized by ... frequently participating in pecking-order battering," in which they may maim or kill an animal. Indeed, domestic violence is the most common background for childhood cruelty to animals.²¹

Stopping the Cycle of Abuse

There is "a consensus of belief among psychologists ... that cruelty to animals is one of the best examples of the continuity of psychological disturbances from childhood to adulthood. In short, a case for the prognostic value of childhood animal cruelty has been well documented," according to the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine.²²

Schools, parents, communities, and courts who shrug off animal abuse as a "minor" crime are ignoring a time bomb. Instead, communities should be aggressively penalizing animal abusers, examining families for other signs of violence, and requiring intensive counseling for perpetrators. Communities must recognize that abuse to ANY living individual is unacceptable and endangers everyone.

In 1993, California became the first state to pass a law requiring animal control officers to report child abuse. Voluntary abuse-reporting measures are also on the books in Ohio, Connecticut, and Washington, D.C. Similar legislation has been introduced in Florida. "Pet abuse is a warning sign of abuse to the two-legged members of the family," says the bill's sponsor, Rep. Steve Effman. "We can't afford to ignore the connection any longer."²³

Additionally, children should be taught to care for and respect animals in their own right. After extensive study of the links between animal abuse and human abuse, two experts concluded, "The evolution of a more gentle and benign relationship in human society might, thus, be enhanced by our promotion of a more positive and nurturing ethic between children and animals."²⁴

What You Can Do

- Urge your local school and judicial systems to take cruelty to animals seriously. Laws must send a strong message that violence against any feeling creature—human or nonhuman—is unacceptable.
- Be aware of signs of neglect or abuse in children and animals. Take children seriously if they report animals' being neglected or mistreated. Some children won't talk about their own suffering but will talk about an animal's.
- Don't ignore even minor acts of cruelty to animals by children. Talk to the child and the child's parents. If necessary, call a social worker.

References

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