

Is There a Difference Between Animal Abuse and Child Abuse?

The little boy and his dog are just like any other you might see playing fetch in the yard. They are constant companions. The dog goes everywhere the boy does and the child even shares his deepest secrets with him. But the two have more in common than one might expect. They also share the physical and emotional pain of having been abused. A growing number of researchers now contend that the circumstances and causes behind child and animal abuse are strikingly similar. By combining resources, they believe both animal humane and children's protective services may be able to gain a better understanding towards preventing all forms of abuse. While this theory may seem new, the two movements were once intertwined. In fact, the original movement for the protection of cruelty to children dates to 1874 when the officers of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals were confronted with a case of child abuse. The ASPCA handled the case, setting a precedent which several protective societies followed by combining work for animals with that for children.

As the Colorado Bureau of Child and Animal Protection stated at the time, "The protection of children and the protection of animals are combined because the principle involved, i.e. their helplessness, is the same." Phil Arkow, the education and publicity director for the Humane Society of the Pikes Peak Region, is a leader in the movement to establish a national task force to investigate the correlation. "We've got a tremendous opportunity if we go back to the beginning," Arkow says. "If we recognize the fact that violence is violence and abuse is abuse, it doesn't really matter who the recipient of that abuse is. If we recognize that more than half of all American families have pets, then animal abuse is, in fact, family violence."

Researchers have had some difficulty proving the link scientifically, though. Early studies conducted by interviewing violent criminals in prisons failed to show a strong correlation. Dr. Randall Lockwood of the Humane Society of the United States, says this was due to the fact that no one addressed the question directly. The prisoners would have had to volunteer the information for it to appear in the results of the study.

Lockwood, in turn, conducted research of his own in Morristown, New Jersey in 1983. Along with Dr. Elizabeth DeViney and Dr. Jeffery Dickert, Lockwood surveyed 53 families in which child abuse had occurred. They found that 88 percent of the families had also abused their pets and concluded that animal abuse is a potential indicator of other family problems. "Intuitively, we know there's a connection but it's hard to prove scientifically," Lockwood says. "Ours was the first look at the psycho-dynamics within the family. It helped make the transition from gut-feeling to actual scientifically-based theory."

Another study is currently under way by researchers from Pacific Lutheran University and this recent compilation of data has allowed researchers to make several basic conclusions. "Virtually all animal abusers seem to be victims of child abuse themselves," explains Arkow. "Both child abusers and animal abusers view the child or animal as

property. They have a low tolerance for frustration and noise and a low tolerance of the child or animal performing below expectations. Mistakes are taken as personal affronts. It's a vicious cycle. People tend to raise children and animals like they, themselves, were raised." Based on this evidence, the proposed task force would work to bring the children's movement and the animal movement closer together. And in particular, raise the standards of the humane agencies equal to that of the children's agencies.

"The child abuse and animal abuse movements were very closely connected at the start," Arkow says. "Now children are accorded certain rights. Every state has a mandatory child abuse reporting system and every county in the country has a mandatory child abuse-investigating agency. But the animals are still back in the 1860s. We've made some progress, but nowhere near as much."

Arkow contends that both sides can improve themselves by learning from the other. "If we look at the model that the children's people used, we might be able to tack onto something they've already learned years ago," he says. "Meanwhile, the children's agencies out there are so overburdened and so swamped and so overly bureaucratized, that they're desperately looking out for any kind of new ideas. And it's possible we may have something to offer them." The animal movement already shows some parallel steps to the children's movement. Currently, many humane societies are involving themselves less in the actual animal shelters and, instead, focussing on animal-advocacy issues. The sheltering operations are being taken over by animal control and government agencies; the same step made by child abuse organizations in the 1960s.

This is a positive step towards Arkow's ultimate goal, which is for humane societies and animal control agencies to be accorded the same level of public credibility and be as integrated into the mandate of government as the child abuse agencies have achieved. "Preventing cruelty to animals is as important to preserving public health and morals as anything else the government does," he says.

Lockwood has advanced this goal, too, by working over the past several years to develop close ties in the law enforcement field. He has written several articles and conducted training seminars to help law enforcement officers recognize symptoms of animal abuse and how they relate to other forms of violence. "We have written a lot of material for law enforcement people and it's gaining more acceptance," he says. "It takes a different approach because we realize they might not take the same attitude towards cruelty like we do, but they are serious about upholding the law. I think it's become basic knowledge in law enforcement that animal cruelty is a serious predictor of potential other violence."

The movement has encountered some resistance from members of the children's protective services field. As Arkow says, "Bureaucrats in a county youth services agency don't understand how a bunch of do-gooders who rescue puppies for a living might be able to help them." Lockwood, as well, asserts that many children's protective services are hesitant to allocate time or money, preferring to focus strictly on programs with a direct impact on the children. One person in the children's protective field who fully supports the prospective programs is Lynn Loar, a former children's protective services

worker, now the education coordinator of the independent, non-profit San Francisco Child Abuse Council.

Contrary to Arkow and Lockwood, though, she reports no resistance in the child protective field to the progress of her work. "This has been the single most positive thing I've ever done in my life," she says. "Not only has nobody said 'no' but everybody I've spoken to has given me their card and said, 'Let me know how I can help.'" Loar, who conducts presentations and joint training with Ken White of San Francisco Animal Care and Control, recognizes the benefits of combined resources. "Most child welfare workers don't realize that if they get stuck on a case and don't know what to do, they can check the condition of the family pet," she says. "They don't know how much help they can get from animal welfare people and the laws they operate under."

Loar is currently working to put together a network of animal and child welfare advocates in the San Francisco Bay area to examine cases involving violence towards both victims. The connection between the two in most instances is unmistakable. "Say a guy on drugs or alcohol comes home just furious," she illustrates. "It's really just a question of bad luck or bad timing for whoever gets kicked, be it the wife, the kid or the dog."

Another common example involves incestuous fathers who are having on-going sex with a child. They often will ensure the child's silence by threatening to harm the pet if the child discloses. Or, in some cases, a child will be forced to beat the pet along with the parent or threatened with abuse for not beating the pet. "What that will do to a child's capacity to continue to care is devastating," says Loar.

The next step for proponents of a combined effort is to establish programs which teach sensitivity to children as well as adults. Lockwood says, "I'd like to see a menu of community options of outreach programs in which teaching sensitivity to animals can be integrated. This would be one way in which we could help prevent abuse through early intervention."

There might be other variables involved which reach beyond the scope of humane workers, though. "How do you expect a humane society to go into an inner-city school and talk to kids about how important it is to be kind to puppies when these kids are afraid to go to school because they're afraid they're going to get shot?" Arkow asks. Lockwood, too, questioned the propriety of such programs in the face of greater social problems. "Can we really take a kid horseback riding and teach him how to care for puppies and then throw him back in the crackhouse?" he asks.

There will undoubtedly be both social and administrative obstacles to overcome, but a greater degree of cooperation will ensure a better future for animal and child welfare. It is important to recognize the basis for abuse and to intervene at the earliest possible point. WARDS supports the efforts of those working to bring about an end to abuse in all its forms.

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