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The Care of Pets Within Child Abusing Families

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The treatment of animals was surveyed in 53 families in which child abuse had occurred. Patterns of pet ownership, attitudes towards pets and quality of veterinary care did not differ greatly from comparable data from the general public. However, abuse of pets by family member had taken place in 60 percent of the families. The families in which animal abuse was indicated tended to have younger pets, lower levels of veterinary care and more conflicts over care than non-abusive families in the study. There were several parallels between the treatment of pets and the treatment of animals within child-abusing families, suggesting that animal abuse may be a potential indicator of other family problems. These findings also suggest that it may be helpful to review the role of pets in these families as part of the therapeutic process.

The belief that one's treatment of animals is closely associated with the treatment of fellow humans has a long history. Several philosophers have suggested this connection, even without accepting the concept of intrinsic rights of animals. In the thirteenth century Saint Thomas Aquinas, in *Summa Contra Gentiles*, followed his defense of exploitation of animal with the observation that:

"...if any passages of Holy Writ seem to forbid us to be cruel to dumb animals, for instance to kill a bird with its young, this is...to remove man's thoughts from being cruel to other men, and lest through being cruel to other animals one becomes cruel to human beings..." (Regan and Singer, 1976, p.59).

Immanuel Kant echoed these same sentiments 500 years later, suggesting that the only justification for kindness to animals was that it encourages humane feelings towards mankind. In his essay on "Duties to Animals and Spirits" he wrote:

"...Our duties towards animals are merely indirect duties towards humanity. Animal nature has analogies to human nature, and by doing our duties to animals in respect of manifestations of humans nature, we indirectly do our duties to humanity." (Regan and Singer, 1976, p. 122).

In "Metaphysical Principles of the Doctrine of Virtue" he came to a similar conclusion regarding cruelty to animals:

"...cruelty to animals is contrary to man's duty to himself, because it deadens in him the feeling of sympathy for their suffering, and thus a natural tendency that is very useful to morality in relation to other human beings is weakened." (Regan and Singer, 1976, p. 125).

Writers sympathetic to the notion of animal rights have also proposed an association between kindness and cruelty to animal and man. Schopenhauer, in critique of Kant, proposed that:

"Boundless compassion for all living beings is the firmest and surest guarantee of pure moral conduct, and needs no casuistry. Whoever is inspired by it will assuredly injure no one, will wrong no one, and will encroach on no one's rights...The moral incentive advanced by me as the genuine is further confirmed by the fact that the animals are also taken under its protection." (Regan and Singer, 1976, pp. 125-126).

The simplest statement of this belief is Albert Schweitzer's comment that, "the ethics of reverence for life makes no distinction between higher and lower, more precious and less precious lives" (1965, p. 47).

There have been few attempts to systematically study the relationship between the treatment of animals and humans by specific individuals. Mead (1964). Found evidence that, in a variety of cultures, torturing or killing animals by a child may precede more violent acts by that individual as an adult. Several studies have focused on the frequent association between criminal violence in adulthood and persistent enuresis, fire-setting and animal abuse during childhood (MacDonald, 1963; Hellman and Blackman, 1966; Wax and Haddox, 1974; Felthous and Bernard, 1979).

Felthous (1980) suggested that physical abuse of a child may result in the child abusing animals and exhibiting other aggressive behavior against people which may persist into adulthood. Fucini (1978) indicated that violence against pets may be an indicator of other forms of family violence. Hutton (1981) reported that 23 families in a British community known as RSPCA for reasons of animal abuse or neglect, 82 percent were known to local social service agencies and were described by these agencies as having "children at risk" or signs of neglect and physical violence.

Beck (1981, p.232) specifically suggests that: "animal abuse has been long over-looked as an indicator, monitor, and even precursor to the antisocial behaviors people inflict on each other, including child abuse and neglect, spouse beating, rape and homicide."

The present study was undertaken in an attempt to determine the extent to which pets are included in the patterns of abuse and neglect seen in abusive families. We see this as a first step in clarifying the role that pets play within the home of these families and in identifying possible ways of using information about the human/animal bond in the understanding and treatment of family violence.

Method

The sample consisted of fifty-three families involved with the New Jersey Division of Youth and Family Services for reasons of child abuses defined by New Jersey Statute 9:6-1 of the Protective Custody Law. Under this law, an abused or neglected child is defined as any child under 18 years of age: “whose parent or guardian inflicts or allows to be inflicted upon the child physical injury through other than accidental means which results, or potentially could result, in a substantial risk of death, a serious or prolonged disfigurement, or impairment of loss of function of any bodily organ;” “whose physical, mental or emotional condition has been impaired because of the failure of his or her parent or guardian to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, education, medical or surgical care;” “against who a sex act has been committed by a person responsible for his or her care or by someone else permitted to commit such an act by the person responsible for the child’s care; or “who had been willfully abandoned by his or her parent or guardian.”

TABLE 1

% Owning	This Survey	Franti <i>et al.</i> (1980)	Kellert (1980)	Griffiths & Brenner (1977)
DOG	69	77	69	73
CAT	53	53	27*	42
BOTH	28	33	NR	75
EITHER	94	97	96	NR
OTHER	6	3	4	NR

NR = not reported

* Kellert (1980) reported on only one pet/household (thus totals = 100%), so cat owners who also own dogs are not reported

The sample was chosen from a pool of 200 such families on the basis of pet ownership and availability for the study. A comprehensive interview schedule containing 55 questions was developed in consultation with several humane societies and experts on animal care. Questions dealt with demographic variables, pet care and attitudes towards pets, as well as general information on pets owned by the family over the last 10 years. A staff member of the Family Enrichment Program interviewed one adult or teenager in each household. The interviews took place in the family’s homes. In each case they were conducted by a staff member currently working with the family who had observed interactions with pets at first hand. This approach allowed us to detect discrepancies between how the families stated they treated their pets and the actual treatment observed.

Description of the Sample

The average age of adult respondents to the interview was 33.25 years. Three respondents were between 12 and 14. The families in this sample had an average of 2.7 children under the age of 18, with a mean age of 8.2 years.

The pattern of pet ownership in this sample was similar to that described in a variety of surveys of pet-owners (Table 1). The number of dogs owned by dog-owners was somewhat higher than in other studies (Table 2), but was within the typical range.

The majority of interviewees reported a positive attitude toward their pets. Sixty-seven percent said that the main purpose was protection. Eighty-one percent indicated that they would feel sad or hurt if they lost or had to give up their pets. Three people specifically stated that they would feel like they had lost a child if anything happened to their pets and two mentioned that they would kill anyone who would try to harm their animals. The remaining 19 percent said they would be unconcerned or even happy if anything happened to their pets.

Most people spoke favorably of their pet’s personality and behavior, using such descriptions as “happy”, “loving”, “friendly” and “playful”. Only 9 percent used adjectives such as “nasty” or “nervous”. One client, who admitted to brutally beating his cat regularly, described the animal as “very affectionate and cute and very playful”. In 36 percent of the families the children were

TABLE 2

Study	# Dogs/Dog-owning Household	# Cats/Cat-owning Household
This Survey	1.84	1.89
Franti <i>et al.</i> (1980)	1.2 – 1.5*	1.4 – 2.1*
Griffiths & Brenner (1977)	1.24	1.95
Lockwood (1979)	1.96	2.11
Schneider & Vaida (1975)	1.2	1.4
Franti & Kraus (1974)	1.5	1.5

* Range across different communities surveyed

described as having a “good”, “loving” or “playful” relationship with pets in the family. In 26 percent of the families the children were reported to hit, kick, pester or annoy a pet. Six percent of the interviewees indicated that the children ignored or neglected the pets.

Care of Pets

Responses to questions on feeding, exercise and basic care did not differ noticeably from acceptable standards, but the socially acceptable replies were generally obvious. These questions yielded contradictions between the client’s replies and the case workers’ observations in 17 percent of the sample. For example:

“Mrs. C. said she gave the two dogs water three to four times daily. However, the animals never had food or water available to the [during the interviewer’s visits] even on the hottest summer days.”

Most people reported that they fed their animals commercial food one or two times a day and 90 percent indicated that water was given at least daily. There were a few unusual responses such as “he does not take water often—once a month” and “I give him water whenever he pants.”

Table 3 gives the proportion of pet-owners who reportedly made use of veterinarians in our sample and in stratified samples in a variety of U.S. communities. The use of veterinary services among dog owners fell below the lowest rate reported for the general population. Use of such services among cat owners did not differ noticeably from that reported elsewhere. Use of veterinary services is closely associated with occupation and family income (Dorn, 1970; Franti *et al.*, 1980). Within the population from which our sample was drawn, 21 percent are non-working, 37 percent are laborers and 14 percent service workers. Thus lower use of veterinary services may be explained by the tendency toward lower socio-economic status in our study group and among families with child abuse in general.

Fifty percent of the dog owners in our sample reported that their animals had been vaccinated. This is not inconsistent with the report that 60 percent had seen a veterinarian. However, 81

TABLE 3 Proportion of Pet-Owners Utilizing Veterinary Services

	Dog-Owners	Cat-Owners
This Survey	60%	66%
Franti <i>et al.</i> (1980)	74-91%	40-63%
Dorn (1970)	61-91%	65-78%

percent of the cat owners reported that their animals had been vaccinated, despite the fact that only two-thirds had reportedly been to veterinarians. This difference may be explained by the fact that several owners reportedly made use of free vaccination programs in some areas.

The reported incidence of spayed female dogs in our sample (27 percent) is slightly lower than the 32-36 percent rates reported in three separate demographic studies (Griffiths and Brenner, 1977; Heussner *et al.*, 1978; Franti *et al.*, 1980). The proportion of neutered cats owned by people in our sample (16 percent) was half the 33-34 percent value reported in those surveys.

Incidence of Animal Abuse

We defined animal abuse according to criteria stated by Leavitt (1978). Meeting one of these was sufficient for classifying a family as exhibiting animal abuse. The criteria were:

1. Observable or reported pain or suffering due to inflicted pain beyond forms of discipline commonly accepted in our society.
2. Causing the death of an animal in an inhumane matter.
3. Abandoning an animal in an environment which is not natural to it or in which it is incapable of surviving.
4. Failing to provide care as indicated by poor sanitary conditions, lack of proper nutrition, lack of shelter or inhumane confinement.

Twenty-five percent of the interviewees affirmed that they or a member of their household had injured their pets at some time. In an additional 38 percent of the families the case worker had observed animal abuse or neglect first hand which was either underreported or not reported in the interview.

Thirty-four percent of the interviewees gave indications that some of the pets they had previously owned had been either abused or neglected. This was inferred from reports of the manner in which pets had died, were lost, or disposed of. For example:

“Cat was shot by husband.”

“Husband dropped off dog in the woods.”

“Dog was let loose on the highway.”

Kicking or punching small animals was the mildest treatment to be considered abuse in this survey. Other abusive actions included hitting the pet with a hard object [excluding sticks or newspaper], throwing hard objects at the pet or other acts that clearly endangered the animal's life.

In all, 60 percent of the families (N = 32) were identified as having had at least one family member who had met at least one of the criteria for abuse to a family pet. Thirty-six percent met the first criterion (pain and suffering), 6 percent met the second (inhumane death), 13 percent met the third (abandoning), and 25 percent met the fourth (neglect). Twenty percent of the families met two or more of the criteria. In the majority of cases falling into categories 1 and 2, one or both parents were the major source of abuse to the animals. In only 14 percent of these cases were the children the sole abusers of animals. Of 31 cases in which the identity of the abused animal was clear, 18 (58 percent) involved dogs, 10 (32 percent) involved cats, 1 (13 percent) involved both dogs and cats and 2 (6 percent) involved birds.

The interviewers commented favorably on the treatment and care of pets in only 5 of the 53 families (9 percent). Specific comments included:

“Takes obvious pride in her horse, she is a responsible owner.”

“Pets are compassionately cared for.”

“(The cat) is a very loved pet of this household. He gets more than adequate care and is the source of great amusement to the family.”

Comparison of Pet-Abusers With Non-Abusers

Interview responses and field reports for the 32 families in which animal abuse had been reported were compared with those of the remaining 21 families in which no animal abuse had been indicated. There were no significant differences between these groups with respect to pet ownership and reasons given for owning pets. There were no differences in the use of positive adjectives in descriptions of the pets' personality.

The abusive and non-abusive groups showed differences with respect to their pets (Table 4). In general the abusive group had more younger pets and fewer pets over 2 years of age than their

non-abusive counterparts or the general population. However, due to the small sample size these differences were not statistically significant. A high proportion of young animals in a population usually indicates high mortality and rapid turnover. This suggests that the abusive group did not have their pets for as long as the non-abusive group. The number of families that reported having pets that were lost, hit by a car, or ran away was not significantly different for the abusive and non-abusive groups.

We hypothesized that conflict over the care of a pet might be related to the incidence of animal abuse. There was evidence of disagreement over the feeding of pets. Forty-four percent of the abusive group and only 16 percent of the non-abusive group reported that the person who was supposed to feed the animal and the person who actually fed the pet were different ($\chi^2 = 4.19$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$). Viewed another way, 82 percent of those cases in which there was conflict over the feeding of the pet involved families in which animal abuse was reported.

Among dog and cat owners in the abusive group, 45 percent reported that they had never taken the animal to a veterinarian, compared to 29 percent in the non-abusive group. This difference was in the expected direction but was not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 1.14$, $df = 1$, $p < .2$). In the non-abusive group, 88 percent reported that their dog or cat had received vaccinations compared to only 62 percent in the abusive group. As indicated earlier, these figures may represent exaggerations in a socially acceptable direction but the difference is significant ($\chi^2 = 3.86$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$). The two groups did not differ with respect to the proportion of dogs or cats that were spayed (all $p > .5$).

Some incidents of animal abuse may be due to an inability to control the animal. Twenty-two percent of the abusive group perceived their pets as not being well-behaved, compared to 6 percent in the non-abusive group. Although this difference was not significant ($\chi^2 = 2.3$, $df = 1$, $p > .1$), it suggests that pets that are abused tend to be or become behavior problems. It is possible that the abusive group had pets that were more aggressive or more difficult to control. This is supported by the fact that 69 percent of the families with animal abuse reported that a family pet had injured a person, compared to only 6 percent of the families in the non-abusive group ($\chi^2 = 4.4$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$).

The abusive group differed from the non-abusive group with respect to the forms of discipline they employed with the pet (which was not used as a criterion to differentiate the two groups). Physical means (spanking with stick, hands or newspaper) were reportedly used by 88 percent of the non-abusive owners ($\chi^2 = 5.33$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$).

Comparisons of Form of Pet and Child Abuse

All of the families were involved with the Division of Youth and Family Services for reason of child abuse. It was possible to determine the form of abuse in 48 of the 53 cases. In 40% ($N = 19$) the children were physically abused. In 10% ($N = 5$) there was sexual abuse and in 58% ($N = 28$) the children were in a neglectful home situation. In 4% of the cases ($N = 2$) there was a risk of abuse due to psychiatric illness. In our sample of pet-owning child-abusers, 88% of the families in which physical abuse took place also had animals that were abused. In those cases where physical abuse of children was not present, animal abuse was seen in only 34% ($\chi^2 = 12.07$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$). Neither sexual abuse of children nor neglect differentiated the animal abuse from animal non-abuse groups.

Conclusions and Implications for Further Research

The families in this survey had all shown some impairment of their capacity to provide care for children. A large proportion also showed a breakdown in their capacity to care for pets. This finding lends empirical support to the belief that a battered pet may be a sign that other types of violence are occurring in the family (Fucini, 1978). It also lends considerable weight to the warning offered by Van Leeuwen (1981, p. 182):

“It would be sad...if in analogy to child abuse there persisted a reluctance to recognize the existence of animal abuse among the so-called accidental injuries brought to the veterinarian’s attention. Greater awareness of animal abuse may lead veterinarians to initiate mental health intervention for the abusing family in addition to treating the animal.”

The relationship between animal abuse and child abuse is not a simple one. As with child abuse, most cases of mistreatment involved either long-term neglect or relatively few instances of clearly detectable harm (Cohen and Sussman, 1975). Repeated injury was not usually indicated. Abusers of animals and children alike often report deep affection for their victims, but we also found that 50 percent of the animal abusers with more than one pet tended to split them into “good” and “bad” pets, a theme that is common in cases of child abuse (Wasserman, 1967). Only 13 percent of the non-abusive group bade such a distinction.

There are several parallels between the possible origins of violence to animals and to children. Some family violence may seem in terms of “scapegoating” of an innocent and powerless victim by a recipient of violence. This could explain the involvement of children in animal abuse in 37 percent of the households in which pet abuse was reported. Another common theme in disturbed families is “triangling” in which aggression is directed against one family member indirectly through actions against a third (Minuchin, 1974). Since many family members have close bonds to pets, these animals can become the targets of abuse intended to hurt a person. This pattern has been reported by Robin *et al.* (1981) who found that a high proportion of delinquent adolescents had owned pets to which they were closely attached but which had been killed by a parent or guardian.

Child abuse may also originate, in part, from a lack of familiarity with the needs of children or unrealistic expectations about their abilities. This was clearly a factor in several of the instances of animal abuse and neglect. Additional problems with both children and animals may come from an unfamiliarity with effective ways of using reinforcement to achieve desired changes in behavior. Finally, family conflicts over responsibility for basic care of both children and animals may generate additional tensions that lead to abusive behaviors.

For reasons of confidentiality, we were unable to assess the relationship between particular patterns of child abuse and animal abuse in the families in this survey. We are currently conducting an intensive analysis of the involvement of pets in the family dynamics in a small number of families in which child abuse has occurred.

Even in families with child abuse, many members express great love and concern for animals. With clearer understanding of the role of pets within these families it should be possible to integrate the family’s feelings and actions toward their pets into the therapeutic process as a tool for understanding both the healthy and unhealthy processes that are taking place. Ultimately the objective of those who work to prevent child abuse is the same as that of those who seek to prevent mistreatment of animals—to foster an ethic which appreciates the sensitivity of all life.

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