

Children who abuse animals: when should you be concerned about child abuse? A review of the literature

Richard Lee-Kelland, Fiona Finlay

► Additional material is published online only. To view please visit the journal online (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/archdischild-2018-314751>).

Community Paediatrics
Department, St Martins Hospital,
Bath, UK

Correspondence to

Dr Fiona Finlay, St Martins
Hospital, Bath, BA2 5RP, UK;
Fiona.Finlay@virginicare.co.uk

Received 4 January 2018

Revised 10 May 2018

Accepted 17 May 2018

ABSTRACT

Animal abuse by children is common, with 3–44% of children being reported to abuse animals at some point during their childhood. Much of this behaviour may be regarded as an extension of exploratory behaviour in a younger child; however, the apparent link between child and animal abuse is an area of increasing interest; with children who abuse animals being 2–3 times more likely to be directly abused themselves. How concerned should a health professional be that a child who abuses animals could themselves be the victim of abuse? We reviewed the literature on the subject, finding that abuse to an animal that is perpetrated by an older child (>10 years) is more likely to be associated with child abuse. Animal abuse is less common in girls compared with boys and there is some suggestion that child abuse may be more likely in these cases. Some papers have reported a higher prevalence of animal abuse in children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, developmental delay and conduct disorder, but the relationship with child abuse in these cases is unknown. Information on both child and animal abuse needs to be shared between the veterinary, medical and social care teams in order to protect both children and animals who are vulnerable.

INTRODUCTION

Animal abuse has been defined by Ascione¹ as socially unacceptable behaviour that intentionally causes unnecessary pain, suffering or distress to and/or death of an animal. Adults who discover that a child has been abusing animals are often appalled; the behaviour is often deemed to be highly abnormal.

However, it seems that animal abuse perpetrated by children is not uncommon. This paper aims to help health professionals evaluate whether a child's abuse of an animal is a sign of a wider safeguarding concern by identifying relevant factors in the presentation that may make child abuse more likely.

METHOD

A search of published articles on the subject was conducted on PubMed/Medline in October 2017 and repeated in April 2018. Full search strategy is given in online supplementary file 1. Articles which were felt relevant to the study question had their reference lists checked to identify other relevant studies.

What is already known?

- It is difficult to ascertain the prevalence of animal abuse.
- Animal abuse by children encompasses a range of behaviours and underlying motivations.
- Animal abuse is associated with maltreatment of the child and the wider family.

What this study adds?

- A health professional presented with animal abuse in an older child (>10 years) should have increased concerns about abuse in the family.
- Animal abuse is less common in girls compared with boys. There is some suggestion that child abuse may be more likely in these cases, but more research is required.
- Some studies have reported a higher prevalence in children with developmental delay, conduct disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, but the relationship with child abuse in these children is unclear.

RESULTS

A recent review of the literature² identified 15 studies which reported on the prevalence of children abusing animals. The authors found a variation of between 3% and 44.4%.^{3–17} These studies are limited by being generally based on parental or child recall as an older child or adult. The true figure for prevalence is likely to be under-reported with parents or children either being unaware or unwilling to report animal abuse.

Childhood cruelty to animals has been linked to child abuse.¹⁸ Studies that examined this issue found that children who abuse animals are between 2 and 3 times more likely to be directly abused themselves^{7 8 19–22} or to be exposed to domestic violence.^{8 18 20 23} Similar findings have been recorded in children diagnosed with conduct disorder, with physical and sexual abuse being reported 1.5 times as often in those who were cruel to animals compared with those who were not.²⁴ Similarly, children noted to be cruel to animals during psychiatric intake assessments were found to have a history of sexual abuse 2.3 times as often as other children from a matched control sample.²⁵ Again, a major limitation in these studies is the



To cite: Lee-Kelland R, Finlay F. *Arch Dis Child* Epub ahead of print: [please include Day Month Year]. doi:10.1136/archdischild-2018-314751

Non pathological abuse

- **Curiosity or exploration** (i.e. the animal is injured or killed in the process of being examined, usually by a young or developmentally delayed child)
- **Peer pressure** (i.e. a child being pressurised to participate in animal abuse by peers)
- **Mood enhancement** (e.g. animal abuse is used to relieve boredom)
- **Animal phobias** (which cause a pre-emptive attack on a feared animal)

Pathological abuse

- **Sexual** (e.g. sexual activity with an animal that has been “set up” by an abuser)
- **Forced abuse** (i.e. the child is coerced into animal abuse by a more powerful individual)
- **Identification with the child’s abuser** (e.g. a victimised child may try to regain a sense of power by victimising a more vulnerable animal)
- **Post-traumatic play** (i.e. re-enacting violent episodes with an animal victim)
- **Imitation** (i.e. copying a parent’s or other adult’s abusive “discipline” of animals or people)
- **Self-injury** (i.e. provoking an animal to inflict injuries on the child’s own body)
- **Rehearsal for interpersonal violence** (i.e. “practising” violence on stray animals or pets before engaging in violent acts against other people)
- **Vehicle for emotional abuse** (e.g. injuring a sibling’s pet to frighten the sibling).

Figure 1 Motivations for animal abuse (adapted from Ascione [26]).

reliance on child or parental recall in reporting abuse, which often goes undiagnosed in childhood.

The picture is complicated, as the term ‘animal abuse’ encompasses a wide variety of different behaviours and motivations. Differences of opinion exist on what constitutes abuse to an animal, and which animals should be included inside the definition.²⁶ For example, should it be restricted to just large vertebrate companion animals such as dogs and cats or include smaller animals such as rodents or birds or even insects?

Previous qualitative studies such as those done by Ascione²⁷ using case reports and structured interviews suggest several developmentally related motivations for animal abuse in children (see figure 1). Ascione makes a major distinction between animal abuse for curiosity or exploration, which is consistent with general exploratory behaviour at a young age,²³ and pathological abuse which is associated with abuse to the child.

Although being able to divide abuse into pathological and non-pathological may help health professionals ascertain the risk to the child, knowing the motivation for the abuse may be difficult to establish. The literature review identified two studies which identified specific risk factors in the presentation of children who abuse animals. Risk factors identified included (1) age of the child and (2) female sex.

Age of the child

A UK prospective study²² assessed children via maternal report on animal cruelty when the children were 5, 7, 10 and 12 years

of age. Participants were members of the Environmental Risk (E-Risk) Longitudinal Twin Study, which tracks the development of a nationally representative birth cohort of 2232 British children. Animal cruelty was assessed by questionnaire using the item Cruel to Animals in the Child Behaviour Checklist.²⁸ Mothers were given the instrument as part of a face-to-face interview which included an assessment for physical maltreatment and sexual abuse by using a clinical interview protocol. The reporting period was 6 months prior to the interview.

The study found that 195/2074 (9.4%) of parents admitted to their child being cruel to animals. Acts of abuse were much more common in young children (131/2229 (5.9%)), with a sharp decline at 10 years of age (32/2138 (1.5%)). More boys than girls were cruel to animals at each age (ratio of 3:1). They found that children who abused animals were more likely to have been maltreated themselves OR=3.32, 95% CIs (2.36 to 4.68), $p<0.001$. The authors point out that the association between cruelty to animals and physical maltreatment was not symmetrical, with only one in five children who were maltreated being cruel to animals, whereas nearly half of those who were cruel to animals had been maltreated. The OR of animal abuse as a marker for mistreatment increased with age (OR 2.93 (95% CI 1.94 to 4.44)) at 5 years and increasing to (OR 4.79 (95% CI 2.23 to 10.26)) at 12 years.

This study adds weight to the earlier argument made by Ascione that abuse of animals by children is more likely to be consistent with general exploratory behaviour (not abuse) when

committed at a younger age. The study is limited by relying on parental recall and it is impossible to be sure that the reduction in the incidence of animal abuse with age is true, it may be that children become more adept at hiding animal abuse from their parents.

Female sex

Several studies have found that animal abuse is reported more frequently in boys than girls.^{11 16 22 29} It could therefore be possible that when animal abuse is reported in a girl it is more likely to be a marker for wider abuse towards the child.

An observational study⁷ of 268 girls and 264 boys aged 9–12 recruited from five different elementary and middle schools in Rome looked at this question. Animal abuse was measured with the Physical and Emotional Tormenting Against Animals Scale (P.E.T.) Scale.³⁰ This scale is for preadolescents and consists of nine items; five measure direct animal abuse (harming, tormenting, bothering, hitting and being cruel to them), and the other four measure exposure to animal abuse (by mother, father, peers or other adults).

Exposure to domestic violence was measured with a modified version of the Conflict Tactic Scale³¹ adapted for youngsters. The scale consists of 10 items: five refer to the father's violence against the mother and five to the mother's violence against the father. In addition to reporting physical violence, the questionnaire also reported verbal abuse, exposure to violence between parents and indirect and direct bullying at school.

The study found children admitted to abusing animals in 118/258 (45.7%) and 94/262 (35.9%) of boys and girls, respectively. Physical abuse by father/mother was reported in 45.1%/45.7% of boys and 34.0%/42.3% of girls. Verbal abuse by father/mother was reported in 35.8%/36.0% of boys and 36.7%/37.3% of girls. Children reported witnessing violence perpetrated by one parent on the other in (father against mother/mother against father) 30.4%/26.6% of boys and 34.2%/30.7% of girls.

Children who witnessed violence between parents were significantly more likely to abuse animals: OR (95% CI) (father against mother/mother against father) 3.1 (1.8 to 5.5)/3.2 (1.8 to 5.7) in boys and 3.0 (1.8 to 5.2)/3.0 (1.8 to 5.3) in girls. Children who reported abuse from their parents were in general about twice as likely to admit to abusing animals themselves.

A linear multiple regression analysis was conducted, which included age, verbal/physical abuse by parents, violence between parents, direct and indirect bullying at school and exposure to others committing violence towards animals. In boys, the model accounted for 8.9% of the variance for animal abuse while it accounted for 28.7% of the variation in girls. The authors concluded that girls were more 'affected by experiences of abuse' than boys.

The study is limited by being based on child recall of events and lacks validation from other sources (ie, parents, teachers or social services). The findings from the multiple regression found that animal abuse in a child was more strongly correlated with experiences of domestic and animal abuse in girls compared with boys. However, some of the findings were inconsistent in the girls group (ie, a positive association with verbal abuse but an inverse association with physical abuse from the father).

DISCUSSION

Our review of the literature has highlighted that older children who abuse animals (particularly over the age of 10 years) are more likely to be themselves the subject of abuse. Reports of

girls abusing animals are less prevalent than boys; and there is some suggestion that girls who report that they abuse animals are more likely to be part of a wider abuse. Overall, there is a lack of specific information as to how best to evaluate these children and place the abuse in the context of the child's background, developmental age and family.

Further research is required to determine which patterns and types of animal abuse are more indicative of a wider abuse to the child and family. It has been suggested that abuse to a companion animal (ie, a family pet such as a dog or a cat) is more likely to be indicative of a wider family abuse - companion animals are often the subject of abuse as a means to establish power and control within a family.^{4 8}

Animal abuse has been more frequently reported in children with behavioural disorders such as attention deficit, hyperactivity, conduct disorders and depression.^{24 32–34} However, our review of the literature did not find any studies which explored animal abuse within these conditions as a risk factor for child abuse. More research is required to establish motivations behind animal abuse in these cases. Children who have developmental delay may be more likely to display 'explorative' animal abuse at an older age than would otherwise be expected.

Sexual abuse of an animal is thought to be an uncommon form of animal abuse. However, there is little research looking at its prevalence in children or the role that sexual abuse to the child plays in the subsequent development of bestiality. In a survey by Duffield *et al*,³⁵ 171 cases of children who had been referred to a tertiary child and adolescent psychiatry service specialising in the assessment and treatment of young abusers with abusive sexual behaviour were reviewed and a case series of seven who had a history of sexual abuse of animals were presented. The common themes of the children who sexually abused animals included developmental delay (4/7), conduct disorder (4/7) and post-traumatic stress disorder (2/7). The study points strongly towards an association with child abuse. Five of the seven children had been the victim of sexual abuse themselves and in two, sexual abuse had been alleged. Neglect was also reported in 3/7.

When evaluating a child who abuses animals, it should be common practice to ask after the welfare of animals in the house when taking a safeguarding history. However, studies have identified that this is rarely done as a matter of course.^{36 37} Health professionals should ask after the number of current and previous pets in the family, their condition and treatment, any injuries received and the mechanism of injury. We present a mnemonic below (figure 2) to summarise common questions that should be asked. If health or social care professionals have evidence or suspect that animals are being abused, it is prudent to share information with the family's vet.

In veterinary circles, several organisations have been set up to promote the sharing of information between veterinary and child services. This includes the UK-based Links Group (<http://www.thelinksgroup.org.uk>) and the US-based National Link Coalition (<http://nationallinkcoalition.org/>).

Cross-reporting allows different agencies to communicate concerns in confidence, the aim being a multi-agency approach to try to stop abuse. Cross-reporting currently occurs in a sporadic and limited way, although the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals officers receive training about child protection issues. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) has written extensively on the topic and has taken several steps to promote cross-reporting (NSPCC Links Group 2017).

In conclusion, while the exact prevalence is unknown, animal abuse by children is a commonly reported behaviour. However,

- F** Food – Are animals in the house adequately fed and watered?
- I** Injury – Have family animals been injured or died? Were they taken to a vet?
- N** Number – How many pets are there currently/previously been kept in the household, is there a high turnover of animals due to death or injury?
- I** Intimidation – Is the treatment of animals ever used to intimidate or control other members of the family (for example threatening to kill an animal if a partner leaves?)
- S** Shelter – Are animals being housed adequately?
- H** How – Are injuries to animals consistent with the mechanism given?

Figure 2 Taking a safeguarding history for an animal using the FINISH mnemonic.

children who abuse animals are more likely to be the subject of abuse themselves. The risk of this being the case increases with the age of the child, and one study suggests this is more likely to be the case in girls who abuse animals when compared with boys. More research is required to understand what types of animal abuse are indicative of abuse in the child. Asking about a history of animal abuse in a safeguarding history should be commonplace and information sharing between veterinary and child services should be promoted to protect vulnerable children and animals.

Contributors Dr RL-K: drafted the manuscript, created figures and approved the final manuscript as submitted. Dr FF: reviewed the manuscript, completed revisions of the paper and approved the final manuscript as submitted.

Funding The authors have not declared a specific grant for this research from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interests None declared.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

© Article author(s) (or their employer(s) unless otherwise stated in the text of the article) 2018. All rights reserved. No commercial use is permitted unless otherwise expressly granted.

REFERENCES

- Ascione FR. Children who are cruel to animals: a review of research and implications for developmental psychopathology. *Anthrozoös* 1993;6:226–47.
- Monsalve S, Ferreira F, Garcia R. The connection between animal abuse and interpersonal violence: A review from the veterinary perspective. *Res Vet Sci* 2017;114:18–26.
- Ascione FR. Battered women's reports of their partners' and their children's cruelty to animals. *Journal of Emotional Abuse* 1997;1:119–33.
- Ascione FR, Weber CV, Thompson TM, et al. Battered pets and domestic violence: animal abuse reported by women experiencing intimate violence and by nonabused women. *Violence Against Women* 2007;13:354–73.
- Baglivio MT, Wolff KT, Delisi M, et al. Juvenile animal cruelty and firesetting behaviour. *Crim. Behav. Ment. Health* 2016.
- Baldry AC. Animal abuse and exposure to interparental violence in Italian Youth. *J Interpers Violence* 2003;18:258–81.
- Baldry AC. Animal abuse among preadolescents directly and indirectly victimized at school and at home. *Criminal Behaviour and Mental Health* 2005;15:97–110.
- Degue S, Dillillo D. Is animal cruelty a "red flag" for family violence? Investigating co-occurring violence toward children, partners, and pets. *J Interpers Violence* 2009;24:1036–56.
- Gupta M. Functional links between intimate partner violence and animal abuse: personality features and representations of aggression. *Society & Animals* 2008;16:223–42.
- Hartman CA, Hageman T, Williams JH, et al. Intimate Partner Violence and Animal Abuse in an Immigrant-Rich Sample of Mother-Child Dyads Recruited From Domestic Violence Programs. *J Interpers Violence* 2018;18:1.
- Henry B. The relationship between animal cruelty, delinquency, and attitudes toward the treatment of animals. *Society & Animals* 2004;12:185–207.
- Miller KS, Knutson JF. Reports of severe physical punishment and exposure to animal cruelty by inmates convicted of felonies and by university students. *Child Abuse Negl* 1997;21:59–82.
- Sanders CE, Henry BC. Nonhuman animal cruelty, bullying, and behavioral difficulties among women. *Society & Animals* 2015;23:68–80.
- Thompson K, Gullone E. An investigation into the association between the witnessing of animal abuse and adolescents' behavior toward animals. *Society & Animals* 2006;14:221–43.
- Volant AM, Johnson JA, Gullone E, et al. The relationship between domestic violence and animal abuse: an Australian study. *J Interpers Violence* 2008;23:1277–95.
- Walters GD. Parent and child reports of animal cruelty and their correlations with parent and child reports of child delinquency. *Psychol. Crime Law* 2016;1–10.
- Yamazaki S. A comparison of maltreated children and non-maltreated children on their experiences with animals—a Japanese study. *Anthrozoös* 2010;23:55–67.
- Becker F, French L. Making the links: child abuse, animal cruelty and domestic violence. *Child Abuse Review* 2004;13:399–414.
- Ascione FR, Friedrich WN, Heath J, et al. Cruelty to animals in normative, sexually abused, and outpatient psychiatric samples of 6- to 12-year-old children: relations to maltreatment and exposure to domestic violence. *Anthrozoös* 2003;16:194–212.
- Baldry AC. Animal abuse among preadolescents directly and indirectly victimized at school and at home. *Crim Behav Ment Health* 2005;15:97–110.
- Knight KE, Ellis C, Simmons SB. Parental predictors of children's animal abuse: findings from a national and intergenerational sample. *J Interpers Violence* 2014;29:3014–34.
- McEwen FS, Moffitt TE, Arseneault L. Is childhood cruelty to animals a marker for physical maltreatment in a prospective cohort study of children? *Child Abuse Negl* 2014;38:533–43.
- Currie CL. Animal cruelty by children exposed to domestic violence. *Child Abuse Negl* 2006;30:425–35.
- Duncan A, Thomas JC, Miller C. Significance of family risk factors in development of childhood animal cruelty in adolescent boys with conduct problems. *J Fam Violence* 2005;20:235–9.
- Boat BW, Pearl E, Barnes JE, et al. Childhood cruelty to animals: psychiatric and demographic correlates. *J Aggress Maltreat Trauma* 2011;20:812–9.
- Ascione FR. *Animal abuse and youth violence*. Washington: United States Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, 2001.
- Ascione FR, Thompson TM, Black T. Childhood cruelty to animals: assessing cruelty dimensions and motivations. *Anthrozoös* 1997;10:170–7.

- 28 Achenbach TM. *Manual for the Child Behavior Checklist/4-18 and 1991 profile*. Burlington, VT: University of Vermont, Department of Psychiatry, 1991.
- 29 Bright MA, Huq MS, Spencer T, *et al*. Animal cruelty as an indicator of family trauma: Using adverse childhood experiences to look beyond child abuse and domestic violence. *Child Abuse Negl* 2018;76:287–96.
- 30 Baldry AC. The 'P.E.T. Scale' for the assessment of physical and emotional abuse and tormenting of animals in youngsters. *Society and Animals* 12. 2004.
- 31 Straus MA. Measuring intrafamily conflict and violence: the Conflict Tactics (CT) Scales. *J Marriage Fam* 1979;41:75–88.
- 32 Becker KD, Stuewig J, Herrera VM, *et al*. A study of firesetting and animal cruelty in children: family influences and adolescent outcomes. *J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 2004;43:905–12.
- 33 Mellor D, Yeow J, Mamat NHbt, *et al*. The relationship between childhood cruelty to animals and psychological adjustment: a Malaysian study. *Anthrozoös* 2008;21:363–74.
- 34 Wong J, Mellor D, Richardson B, *et al*. Childhood cruelty to animals in China: the relationship with psychological adjustment and family functioning. *Child Care Health Dev* 2013;39:668–75.
- 35 Duffield G, Hassiotis A, Vizard E. Zoophilia in young sexual abusers. *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry* 1998;9:294–304.
- 36 Girardi A, Pozzulo JD, Girardi JDP. The significance of animal cruelty in child protection investigations. *Soc Work Res* 2012;36:53–60.
- 37 Zilney LA, Zilney M. Reunification of child and animal welfare agencies: cross-reporting of abuse in Wellington County, Ontario. *Child Welfare* 2005;84:47–66.