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Animal abuse and child maltreatment:

A review of the literature and findings from a UK study

Executive Summary

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Simon Hackett, School of Applied Social Sciences, Durham University
Emma Uprichard, Department of Sociology, University of York

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Cruelty to children must stop. FULL STOP.

Executive summary

Introduction

The possible connection between child maltreatment and animal cruelty in various dimensions of family life has been the subject of growing interest in the UK (Becker and French, 2004). In 2001, the NSPCC and the RSPCA co-sponsored conferences which brought together professionals from across the child and animal welfare systems to discuss a range of issues associated with both child maltreatment and animal abuse. Since 2002, the NSPCC has convened the Links Group, a multi-agency organisation which has involved representatives from key child protection and animal welfare organisations in an ongoing process of dialogue and work. One of the major propositions being made within the research and professional community has been that child and animal maltreatment do not merely co-exist, but are "linked". It has been suggested that the existence of animal cruelty in a family may be an indicator that children in that family are similarly at risk.

This report aims to move forward the debate about child and animal maltreatment in the UK. To date, most empirical research examining the co-existence and possible interconnections between child and animal maltreatment has been conducted in North America. Little UK research has been undertaken. The empirical approach to testing the links hypotheses has been relatively weak, and much writing on the subject is anecdotal and speculative. This report critically reviews the body of existing international research literature on the co-existence of animal and child abuse, and presents the findings from new research into patterns of animal ownership and treatment of animals in different groups of British families.

Critical review of the literature into child welfare / animal maltreatment

A range of major bibliographic databases (AssiaNet, PsychInfo, ArticleFirst, FirstSearch, Web of Science) was searched using multiple keyword searches. The findings of this search suggest that research efforts have intensified over the last three decades, and that the majority of landmark studies have been undertaken in North America.

However, evaluating these studies and drawing firm conclusions about the nature of connections that might exist between child and animal abuse is a far from straightforward process, due to a number of factors: "Animals" sometimes include all animals, even insects, or just pets and animal companions. The definitions of animal abuse and child maltreatment vary across studies and indeed cross-culturally, hampering any international comparisons. Researchers have sometimes failed to distinguish between different forms of animal cruelty. In some studies, animal cruelty is presented as one unified phenomenon, rather than (as in the case of child abuse) an umbrella term for a range of very discrete behaviours with different motivations and outcomes. Much writing in this area is descriptive, and relatively few studies report the findings of empirical investigation. Where empirical studies do exist, they are often based on small sample sizes with a lack of comparison groups. Hence, the evidence base relating to the possible co-existence of animal and child welfare concerns is, at present in need of further development.

The authors of this report reviewed the international literature with reference to three key questions:

- Is childhood cruelty towards animals predictive of future violent behaviour and psychopathology (the "violence graduation" thesis)?
- Do domestic violence perpetrators frequently maltreat animals to threaten, coerce, silence or intimidate their human victims? and

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- Do adults who maltreat animals present a risk of abuse to children, or conversely, do adults who abuse children pose a risk to animals?

Cruelty to children and animals – the violence graduation thesis

Do children who abuse animals 'graduate' to become violent adults? An early study (DeViney and colleagues, 1983) explored the link between child abuse and animal abuse within family environments. They found pet abuse to be a feature in 88 per cent of 53 families where various forms of child abuse had taken place. In two-thirds of these families the animal abuser was the father figure; in one third it was a child. The researchers suggested that, in such cases, pet abuse by children was often a manifestation of children's responses to their own victimisation, a re-enactment of the dynamics of their own abuse on powerless creatures.

A later study by Miller and Knutson (1997) compared childhood environments and animal cruelty experiences of a group of 314 young offenders who had been incarcerated in the US state of Iowa with those of a group of 308 university psychology students. The researchers found significant correlations in both the young offender and the student groups between aversive childhood experiences and animal cruelty. Interestingly, the incidence of animal abuse among men in the two samples was very similar, but for females was much higher in the offender group. The findings of this study do not rule out the existence of a link between animal-related behaviour, child abuse and anti-social behaviour, but they suggest that the link is neither straightforward nor simple (Miller and Knutson, 1997, p. 80).

Flynn (1999) explored the link between physical punishment inflicted by parents and children's perpetration of animal abuse in a sample of 267 undergraduates. Forty five percent of this student sample had witnessed other people in the process of abusing animals, less than one-fifth had perpetrated abuse themselves; most of those who did had also witnessed it. Of those perpetrating animal abuse, nearly half (48 per cent) were in their teens when they first abused animals (although 40% were aged 6 to 12 years). Most of those who killed a wild animal were also teens while children who hurt or tortured pets were more likely to be pre-teens. As in the Miller and Knutson (1997) study, gender

differences were noticeable, with females significantly less likely to abuse animals. Being hit as a teenager, including 'smacking', emerged as the strongest predictor of animal abuse: More than half of the male teenagers in the sample who were hit by their fathers were abusive towards animals.

In one UK pilot study, Piper et al (2001) investigated children's experiences of harming animals in a sample of over 800 young people, using a questionnaire sent to 25 schools in England. A total of 450 young respondents admitted knowing of an adult who had harmed an animal, and 382 knew of a child who had harmed an animal. Piper and colleagues concluded that their research neither confirmed nor refuted the idea that children harm animals because they have been harmed themselves, and that this leads to them harming other people. The researchers found that many apparently well-adjusted children admitted having harmed animals at some time in their lives.

In another UK study by Duffield et al (1998), the researchers retrospectively reviewed 171 cases of young people who had been referred to a specialist service for adolescents with abusive sexual behaviours. They identified seven young men with a history of sexual contact with animals (predominantly their pets), and a further seven cases of young people who had perpetrated non-sexual cruelty towards animals; the overwhelming majority had not harmed animals, either sexually or non-sexually. In the few cases where both children and animals had been sexually victimised, the authors present a picture of young people with extensive abusive relationships and poor parental attachments, peer isolation, high levels of aggression and frequently developmental delay; no clear evidence is presented to confirm that sexual abuse of animals was in fact a developmental precursor to abuse of children at a later stage. Rather, the presence of animal sexual abuse was a marker of a high level of developmental adversity and an overall pattern of severe disturbance in young people with other psychiatric disorders. The nature of the specific population being studied by Duffield and colleagues and the lack of a comparison group means that it is not possible to draw any firm conclusions about the frequency of animal-related sexual behaviours in the general adolescent population. However, as sexually abusive behaviour towards animals appears to be relatively uncommon behaviour within a population of adolescents who have sexually abused children, it seems reasonable to speculate that it is equally or less common in non-clinical groups. For a minority of young people, however, who present with abusive sexual behaviours towards

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children as well as animals, this appears to be an indicator of a high level of distress and chronic experience of developmental adversity and abuse.

The deviance generalisation hypothesis

Arluke at al (1999) proposed an alternative link in their deviance generalisation hypothesis, suggesting that animal abuse is one of many manifestations of anti-social behaviour that can develop from childhood onwards, which have the same underlying causes and can occur in no particular time order. They tested this hypothesis by examining the official criminal records of a group of people known to a U.S. animal welfare organisation as animal abusers. Over an 11-year-period, 153 people (146 male and seven female) had been prosecuted for at least one form of intentional physical harm to an animal. Fifty eight percent of the sample were younger than 21 at the time they committed the abuse. Animal abusers were significantly more likely than their control group participants to be involved in some form of criminal behaviour, including violent offences: 70 per cent of those who abused animals also committed at least one other offence, compared to only 22 per cent of the comparison group. They were also four times more likely to be arrested for property offences and three and a half times more likely to be arrested for drug-related offences or disorderly behaviours. However, animal abuse was as likely to precede as follow criminal offending, refuting the idea of violence graduation.

The research studies generally provide relatively clear evidence that a significant proportion of children and young people either witness or perpetrate animal cruelty. It is clear that for some highly deviant individuals abusing animals is a developmentally significant experience which may contribute to the development of empathy deficits (desensitising them to pain inflicted on others), which may then project them towards violence later in adolescence and adulthood. It is however not easy to predict whether an individual young person will persist with or desist from abusive behaviour as an adult, though it seems reasonable to assume that most young people who witness animal cruelty do not go on to become abusers, and those who perpetrate animal cruelty eventually grow out of it. The inter-linking nature of multiple risk factors (such as animal cruelty coupled with fire-setting behaviours and enuresis) is likely to be key in determining this (Rutter,

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1999). The idea of animal abuse in childhood being predictive of violence in adulthood narrows down the possible nature of the links too much: aggressive individuals might begin with violence towards humans and later move on to animals, or might restrict their violence to human victims.

Animal abuse by children – the motivations

A diverse set of motivations is likely to explain animal abuse by children and young people. Ascione (2001, p. 6) lists the following:

- 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 (e.g. peers may encourage animal abuse or require it as part of an initiation rite)
- Mood enhancement (e.g. animal abuse is used to relieve boredom or depression)
- Sexual gratification (i.e. zoophilia)
- Forced abuse (i.e. the child is coerced into animal abuse by a more powerful individual)
- Attachment to an animal (e.g. the child kills an animal to prevent its torture by another individual)
- Animal phobias (which cause a pre-emptive attack on a feared animal)
- 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
- 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).

Practice responses need to take into account these different motivations and be commensurate with the level of risk and need in individual cases.

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Ascione (2001) goes on to suggest that children who are cruel to animals can be classified into two broad categories. Firstly, "exploratory/curious animal abuse" emerges in the pre-school or primary school years and reflects an underlying lack of knowledge and understanding about the appropriate physical care of animals. Low-level educative input is sufficient to stop the development of such behaviours. Secondly, "pathological animal abuse" as a symptom of underlying psychological disturbance including victimisation-related trauma, is seen generally in older children and requires more intensive clinical intervention. Currie (2006) provides some empirical support for this categorisation in finding that children with experience of family violence who abuse animals are on average significantly older than those who abuse without a history of such violence.

Domestic violence

The link between domestic violence and animal abuse has strong clinical and anecdotal support, though relatively few empirical studies have been undertaken (Ascione, 1998).

Ascione's (1998) study of 38 women in a refuge for victims of partner violence found that 74 per cent said they had owned pets in the 12-month period leading up to their move into the domestic violence refuge. Seventy-one per cent of these pet-owning women indicated that their partner had either threatened to harm, or had actually harmed, one or more of their pets. Actual harm or killing of animals was reported by 57 per cent. Most often, these acts were violent to a considerable degree. Of the 22 women with children, seven (one-third) said that one of their children had harmed animals.

Quinlisk (1999) also investigates this link in a sample of women in domestic violence refuges. Eighty-six per cent had owned pets and the overwhelming majority of domestic violence perpetrators (80 per cent) had also been violent to animals.

In the first systematic empirical attempt to investigate the links between animal abuse and family violence in Australia, Gullone and colleagues (2004) compared the experiences of 104 women who were, or had been, in a violent partner relationship, against a comparison group of women who had never been in such a relationship. Forty-six per cent of those who had experiences of domestic violence reported that their partner had threatened to

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harm their pets. In contrast, only six per cent of the women from the comparison group reported such threats. Over half (53 per cent) of the women with physically abusive partners said that their partner had actually hurt or killed a family pet, whereas none of the women in the comparison group indicated this. Of the women with domestic violence experiences, 17.3 per cent said their partners had killed pets, 33 per cent reported partners kicking pets, 15 per cent punching or hitting pets, ten per cent throwing the pet (for instance against a wall), and five per cent hitting the animal with an object. Gullone and colleagues conclude that their findings show strong support for the hypothesis that abusive behaviours towards animals and humans very likely have the same underlying causes. It is therefore important for child welfare services to be alert to the possible presence of animal abuse as a feature of a domestic violence perpetrator's abusive behaviours.

Adults maltreating animals and the risks to children

The literature base provides little insight into this issue and no firm conclusions can yet be drawn. As Raupp and colleagues (1997) note, the question is usually asked in simple terms: Do adults who abuse their children also abuse their pets? We might also ask whether parents who abuse pets also abuse (their) children? Answers to these two questions might be significantly different.

Deviney et al (1983) found higher rates of animal abuse by parental figures in confirmed cases of child abuse than in the general population. Abused animals were found in 88 per cent of 57 families where child abuse had been perpetrated; two-thirds of this abuse was perpetrated by fathers. Faller (1990) notes that some perpetrators force children to engage in sexual acts with animals as part of their sexual abuse, or make threats about harming pets as a way of silencing children who are being abused.

Boat (1995) suggests that reports by children or adults of a regular turnover of pets in the family may constitute a "red-flag" risk indicator of a chaotic family in which the wellbeing of children, as well as that of animals, may be compromised. This has been followed up by the Boat Inventory of Animal-Related Experiences to help to more systematically gather information in order to determine whether animal-related trauma or

cruelty is a feature of a child's - or indeed a parent's - history (Boat, 1999). Bell (2001) also calls for the inclusion of animal abuse by either children or adults on child abuse risk instruments.

Current systems in the UK dealing with animal and child welfare rarely address these issues. For example, screening or assessment tools for child abuse, such as the DoH *Assessment Framework for children in need and their families,* rarely take into account the treatment of animals. Bell (2001) found that most agencies dealing with children in need in the UK do not include cruelty towards animals as part of their assessments. The commonly used Milner Child Abuse Potential Inventory has 160 distinct items, but only one relates to the treatment of pets in families.

Patterns of animal ownership, attitudes towards and experiences of animals in families: a study in the north east of England

This exploratory research was designed to test some of the questions arising from the review of international literature in the UK context. Attitudes about and experiences of animal ownership and abuse were compared using the Animal-Related Experiences Questionnaire (ARE-Q) among two groups of participants recruited in the north east of England: a clinical group of 51 individuals from families in contact with social welfare intervention (17 young people and 34 parents) and a comparison group of 60 university students; a total of 111 individuals. This is one of the first ever studies to explore these issues in the UK. The authors present an adapted version of the questions used in the ARE-Q in the appendix to the research report as an assessment guide for practitioners.

Patterns of animal ownership

The authors hypothesised that individuals and families receiving social work intervention would be likely to demonstrate higher levels of pet ownership than families without social work intervention. They found that the overall percentage of current or previous ownership did not differ significantly between the clinical group (92 per cent) and comparison group (90 per cent), but that there were significant differences in the distribution of pet ownership between the groups: In the clinical group, 8 per cent had

only ever owned one pet or none at all, compared to 23 per cent of the comparison group. In addition, dog ownership was more prevalent in the clinical group, and the average number of dogs in dog-owning households twice as high.

Attitudes towards animals

The researchers explored the difference in beliefs about animals and their place in families. Although few differences were found between the groups as a whole, more of the clinical group participants agreed that animals were a source of comfort to a child in their family: Compared to the comparison group, four times as many said that animals were more important to the children than to the adults in their family. This tentatively supports the suggestion that pets can assume a particularly important role for children in situations of stress or difficulty, such as those that precipitate professional intervention in the child welfare or youth offending fields.

Experiences of animals / animal abuse in families

The research investigated whether people who received social welfare intervention were more likely to report experiences of animal harm than people in the comparison group. Three specific questions were considered:

1. **Would participants who had received social work intervention have *witnessed* animal maltreatment more frequently than participants from the comparison group?**

This hypothesis was not supported. Overall, nearly half of the total sample (44 per cent) had known or suspected that another person (nearly always an adult known to them) had maltreated an animal, but no significant differences were found between the two groups. Twelve distinct types of deliberate cruelty to animals were identified, but overall there were no significant differences in the frequency at which these behaviours were observed between the two groups. There were also no significant differences between the groups in terms of the type of animals that had been harmed. However, all instances of multiple types of cruelty observed towards an animal came from the clinical group.

2. Would participants who had received social work intervention have *harmed* animals more frequently than participants from the comparison group?

It was expected that participants from the clinical group would be more likely to have harmed animals than participants from the comparison group. Again, no significant differences were found between the groups; the proportion of respondents in each group admitting to harming animals was remarkably similar. However the few extreme animal maltreatment behaviours reported were all located within the clinical group. Although some previous research has indicated that the experience of animal abuse in childhood appears to be highly differentiated by gender, with boys much more likely to perpetrate animal cruelty than girls, the results of the current study did not bear this out.

3. Would participants who had received social work intervention report *threats* to animals more frequently than participants from the comparison group?

It was expected that clinical group participants reporting threats to animals would outnumber those in the comparison group. This hypothesis appears to have been supported. Members of the clinical group were over three times as likely to have experienced someone threatening to hurt an animal as a means of controlling another person. This finding may reflect the increased likelihood that members of the clinical group, particularly mothers within the sample, were subjected to domestic violence, although this is speculative.

In contrast to other studies discussed here, animal cruelty was not found to be widespread in young people in either the clinical or community sample.

Conclusions and recommendations

Given its small sample size and exploratory nature, the findings from the study should only be seen as indicative and tentative. Further research is clearly needed in order to build an evidence base upon which effective and sensitive policy and practice responses can be built.

Hackett and Uprichard suggest, however, that all professionals working in the child welfare field should be alert to the possibility of animal cruelty in the backgrounds of both child and adult service users and should explore the significance of attachment to animals as part of assessments of family dynamics and relationships. In a minority of cases where more extreme acts of animal cruelty have been observed or perpetrated, these can represent an unresolved trauma for the individual concerned. Sensitive and careful approaches are required.

For the majority of people engaging in lower-level animal cruelty acts, these behaviours are unlikely to be predictive of any future psychosocial risk, impaired parenting or interpersonal violence. However, it is likely that for a small number of individuals, the correlation between animal harm and other forms of psychosocial distress and/or problematic behaviour is strong. Such individuals are likely to experience a range of other difficulties in their lives, in addition to animal cruelty. The emphasis for practitioners should, therefore, be on animal cruelty in the presence of other significant psychosocial risk factors. Additionally, the findings suggest that when children and young people are identified for abuse of animals, a balanced approach is needed which targets not only their own behaviours but seeks to meet their broader developmental needs.

There is a range of motivations which might underpin a person's abuse of animals. Careful assessment of individual cases is needed to explore the meaning and significance of behaviours on a case-by-case basis. Similar acts may have very different meanings for the individual engaged in them. Assessment should focus on:

- The nature of the animal concerned (its social status generally and the specific relationship to the person engaging in the behaviour)
- The specific nature of the act of cruelty (the presence of violence or aggression which is beyond what might be understandable in the context of the presenting situation – e.g. disciplining a pet or protecting a child from insect bites)
- The meaning of, and the motivation for, a specific behaviour.

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Where assessments indicate that behaviours of concern exist, varying levels of support and intervention are likely to be needed. These are likely to range from low-level educative work to more intensive programmes which seek to address the multiplicity of unresolved issues faced by individuals, including, where appropriate, their own experiences of trauma and victimisation. As with other forms of offending behaviour, it may be that a cognitive behavioural framework is most appropriate for this work.

Animal abuse appears to be a common feature of domestic violence towards women in families, perpetrated by men. The findings of the current study lend some empirical support to other studies which suggest that animals are used as a way of threatening or maintaining power over women and children. Workers in the child welfare field should therefore routinely include discussion regarding concerns about pets with women or children facing domestic violence. Indeed, gathering such information about a partner's or parent's treatment of animals might help to inform professionals about the dynamics of the domestic abuse being perpetrated in a family. The interview questions and questionnaire are included as appendices to the report to assist practitioners in establishing a language and an approach to this most sensitive of issues.

The weight of attention has been on the issues of risk and harm, but it is clear that the presence of animals in families in situations of adversity can serve as a significant protective factor, particularly for children and young people. Professionals should be alert to the possibility that the presence of pets can represent a powerful opportunity to promote self-esteem, encourage the development of empathetic concerns and positive social interactions in children who are subject to psychosocial risk.

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Weston House
42 Curtain Road
London EC2A 3NH
Tel: 020 7825 2500
www.nspcc.org.uk

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