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# Animal abuse and child maltreatment:

## A review of the literature and findings from a UK study

October 2007

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Cruelty to children must stop. FULL STOP.

## Acknowledgements

The study forming the basis for this publication was funded by the NSPCC and has been undertaken by Simon Hackett of the School of Applied Social Sciences at Durham University, with Emma Uprichard of the Department of Sociology, University of York. John Warren has worked as research associate on the project and contributed to data collection.

The authors would like to thank Isobel Porter, area children's services manager with the NSPCC, for her enthusiasm and commitment to this project from its earliest stages through to its completion. Similarly, members of the NSPCC Links Group, particularly Fiona Becker and Chris Cloke, have supported the research and have provided advice at various points.

The study was made possible as a result of a research grant from the NSPCC to the authors arising directly from a donation from an NSPCC supporter committed to advancing knowledge of this issue. The authors would like to thank this individual (whose identity was not disclosed to them) for helping make this research possible.

Finally, we would like to thank the participants in the study, who gave their time and shared their experiences of a sensitive subject rarely discussed openly in UK society.

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# Introduction: The context to animal cruelty and child maltreatment

Over the last few years there has been a growing interest in the UK about the co-existence of child maltreatment and animal cruelty across family life[1]. This interest has manifested itself in relation to individual practitioner reports of animal abuse in families where children are harmed, as well as in broader concerns that the systems and policies in the UK intended to safeguard animals and children remain largely separate entities. Some momentum has been created in seeking to bring these issues into the consciousness of child and animal welfare professionals. In February 2001, the NSPCC and the RSPCA co-sponsored a conference entitled “Making the Links”, which brought together child and animal welfare professionals to discuss and debate a range of issues associated with both child maltreatment and animal abuse. In December of the same year, the NSPCC held a second conference on this theme entitled “Forging the Links”, which sought to further these debates. At both conferences, visiting experts from the USA presented aspects of their research and experiences in North America highlighting the importance of ensuring that the co-existence of these issues is taken seriously both at a practice and a policy level. As a direct consequence of these conferences, the NSPCC has convened from 2002 the multi-agency Links Group, which has involved representatives from key child protection and animal welfare organisations in an ongoing process of dialogue and work. Its aims, as described by Becker and French, are to:

- raise awareness of the links between child abuse, animal abuse and domestic violence
- consider the changes needed in policy and practice
- develop working relationships between member agencies and other agencies
- share and disseminate information about the subject, and promote evidence-informed practice.

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[1] Becker and French, 2004

As can be seen in the title and aims of the NSPCC group, as well as the title of the two conferences preceding the group's existence, 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. As such, it has been suggested that the existence of animal cruelty in a family context may be relevant as a potential indicator that children in that family are similarly at risk. In their review of the literature and their report on the work of the NSPCC Links Group, Becker and French state that:

> Professionals in the United Kingdom can no longer afford to ignore the potential links between child abuse and animal cruelty. The two forms of abuse should not be seen as mutually exclusive; it needs to be recognized that they can co-exist, or there may be associations between the two, and that there are consequently implications for policy and practice.

They go on to suggest that acknowledging and addressing the links in both policy and practice constitutes an important step towards offering new opportunities to safeguard children, and that further action is needed in the UK to "institutionalize the 'links' within policy and practice."[2]

More recently, however, the links proposition has attracted a degree of controversy.[3] Specifically, Piper and Myers have expressed a "profound concern that dominant discourses are moving in an unhelpful direction towards accepting these various links and cycles."[4] They suggest that far from addressing a longstanding dichotomy between the child and animal welfare systems, practices and policies based on the notion of such links may be unwarranted and unhelpful. They reject the notion of a cross-reporting protocol between animal and child welfare agencies and an integration of the links hypothesis into domestic violence practice. They suggest that "practitioners should continue to apply caution and develop a more analytic and less sensational understanding of the problem."[5]

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[2] Becker and French, 2004, p. 410

[3] Piper and Myers, 2002; 2006

[4] Piper and Myers, 2006, p179

[5] Piper and Myers, 2006, p. 185

How should the practitioner make sense of a call to develop more professional sensitivity to issues of potential links between child and animal abuse on the one hand and a call for scepticism about the fundamental existence of such links on the other? Clearly, there is an urgent need for more research, which can help to build an evidence base in this area. It is widely acknowledged, even by those such as Arkow, who argue strongly in favour of the importance of seeing the connections between animal and child abuse, that:

> ...more comprehensive and reliable information is needed about the incidence, prevalence, epidemiology, and etiology of animal abuse and its relationship to other forms of family violence.[6]

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 to explore and understand these possible links more fully. Even in North America, the empirical basis to support the links hypothesis is relatively weak, and much writing on this subject is anecdotal and speculative. Anecdotal evidence may be misleading and speculation may constitute a poor basis for policy and practice development. Most empirical research in this area is also based on samples drawn from specific clinical groups. In the absence of research studies, which include non-clinical comparison groups, it is easy to assume that animal maltreatment is more pronounced in families subject to child welfare concerns than in families where no such concerns exist.

This report attempts to move forward the debate about child and animal maltreatment in the UK context in two ways. In the first part, a critical literature analysis reviews the nature of the existing international research base into the co-existence of animal and child abuse. The strength of this research base is assessed; as authors we seek to delineate major research themes so that readers can make sense of the complex debates underpinning this overall area of investigation. We explore the claims associated with the notion of links and highlight the need for further research. In the second part of the report, in order to add to the empirical base, we present the findings of an exploratory study into patterns of animal ownership and treatment of animals in different groups of UK families.

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[6] Arkow,1999, p. 33

# Part 1 Critical review of the literature about child welfare and animal maltreatment

## 1.1 Context and strength of research in this area

In order to inform our study, we undertook a critical review of the literature into animal cruelty and its potential links with child maltreatment. A range of major bibliographic databases (AssiaNet, PsychInfo, ArticleFirst, FirstSearch, Web of Science) was searched using multiple keyword searches. The search findings suggest that research into these issues has developed significantly over the last three decades with some landmark studies, mostly in North America. Adapted from the work of the Animal Taskforce of Northern Arizona, Table 1.1 charts the chronology of some of the landmark studies in this area.

Arkow suggests that the critical weight of these studies over the last few decades means that we are once again accepting the importance of a link between animal abuse and other forms of community violence. He points out that, as long ago as the 19th century, the emerging societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals were founded on the premise that "persons who harmed animals would escalate their violent acts to include vulnerable humans."[7] He explains how the widespread development of animal cruelty legislation in the 19th century was primarily concerned with human welfare. In other words, concern at the time was less about animal suffering per se, but about how acts of animal cruelty debased human society. Therefore, it is clear that animal welfare, from the work of the earliest pioneering individuals and organisations, was conceived as an important aspect of interpersonal interaction and human welfare.

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[7] Arkow, 1999, p. 19

**Table 1.1** **A chronology of important findings on animal maltreatment and interpersonal violence**

| Date of study and author/s | Key findings |
|---|---|
| 1966, Hellman and Blackman | Suggested that cruelty to animals is part of a triad of behaviours useful for predicting criminal behaviour. |
| 1977, Rigdon and Tapia | Provided the first clear description and systematic study of children who commit animal cruelty. It suggested that the “typical animal abuser” was male, of average intelligence, with an early history of anti-social behaviour, and with a childhood history of gross neglect, brutality, rejection and hostility. |
| 1980, Felthous | Studied two groups of male psychiatric patients, one with a history of assault and one with a history of animal cruelty. The second group was significantly more likely to have had an alcoholic father, set destructive fires, had enuresis (bed-wetting) past age five, been separated from the father, and cruelty was more severe towards cats than dogs. |
| 1983, Deviney, Dickert and Lockwood | Studied 53 families in New Jersey experiencing domestic violence and found 60 per cent reported that pets were also abused and/or neglected. |
| 1985, Kellert and Felthous | Studied the relationship between cruelty to animals and aggression among offenders and non-offenders. Found significantly higher rates of cruelty toward animals among aggressive criminals. |
| 1986, Kellert and Felthous | Follow-up study to predict future violence. |
| 1991, Hickey | Found that in some cases killing animals was to relive the experience of killing human beings. |
| 1993, Ascione | Suggested that cruelty to animals is a serious manifestation of psychopathology, particularly when paired with other symptoms and a troubled family history. |
| 1995 and 1997, Edleson | Found that children growing up in homes where there is domestic violence are at risk of psychological disturbance, with one indicator being cruelty to animals. |
| 1997, Ascione | Surveyed 38 women seeking refuge at a domestic violence shelter and found that 74 per cent reported having a pet killed and 71 per cent reported the pet(s) were threatened or harmed. |
| 1997, Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and Northwestern University | Examined the criminal records of 153 animal abusers and 153 non-abusers over a 20-year period. The study found that people who abused animals were five times more likely to commit violent crimes than non-abusers. |

*(Adapted from: Animal Taskforce of Northern Arizona)*

Although the animal and child welfare movements developed in different ways throughout the 20th century, Arkow suggests that the weight of research, as indicated in Table 1.1, is once more beginning to highlight the role of animal welfare in human welfare concerns:

> Frustration with the failure of existing interventions to stem a rising tide of community violence has led the humane movement to re-examine animal abuse as a key indicator in the etiology of anti-social behaviours and as an overlooked component within the fuller context of family violence.[8]

Despite the range of studies undertaken to date, some concern has been expressed about the scientific quality of the research base. Piper and Myers (2002) maintain that there are major problems with the coherence of the arguments presented and they urge both a cautious and critical approach to the literature base. Indeed, there are several factors that make evaluating this literature – and drawing clear messages about the nature of connections that might exist between child and animal abuse – a far from straightforward process.

First, the publications indicated in the literature search cover very many disparate issues and concerns within the broad subject area. It is, therefore, important to begin to make some distinctions between these disparate issues and, where possible, to begin to cluster them into distinct emergent themes. This process should allow us to establish a deeper level of understanding about the interrelationship between factors. Importantly, as both child abuse and animal maltreatment are multiply determined and multi-faceted, it is likely that any connections that exist between them are complex.

Second, there are legitimate concerns about the cultural specificity of work in this area. It is clear that child abuse and animal maltreatment are both socially constructed and culturally influenced issues. While the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child exists as a legally binding international instrument to enshrine a set of civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights for children across cultures and national jurisdictions, no such universal statement of the rights of animals exists. This means that, although differing practices exist in relation to children's welfare in different cultural contexts, the issue of animal welfare and animal rights is a particularly thorny issue and subject to tremendous variation cross culturally. As Becker and French highlight, there are socially and culturally sanctioned practices which explicitly harm animals, such as hunting or killing for food.[9] As the overwhelming bulk of research in this area is North American in origin, this raises questions about the validity of findings for the UK context. This does not mean that research in relation to the links between animal and child maltreatment carried out in a different cultural context has nothing to offer in the UK. However, it underlines the urgent need to undertake research in the UK, which can add to the international research base in respect of this issue.

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[8] Arkow, 1999, p. 21

The socially constructed nature of the problem raises a third, and related, issue that which impinges on the quality of the existing research base – the problem of changing and non-specific definitions. Although the term 'child abuse' has undergone significant definitional change in the UK over the last three decades, there is at least government guidance which offers operational definitions of different categories of child abuse.[10] Definitions of animal abuse or animal cruelty (terms which are often used interchangeably) are much less well developed. When we talk about animal abuse, are we referring to all animals in all contexts? As Becker and French (2004) highlight, some authors have begun to use the concept of 'companion animal abuse' to exclude harm done to animals through the legal killing of animals for economic purposes. However, the relative nature of the concept is well illustrated in Ascione's definition of animal abuse as "*socially unacceptable* behaviour that intentionally causes *unnecessary* pain, suffering, or distress to and/or death of an animal."[11]

Who defines what is 'socially unacceptable' and what is 'unnecessary' harm? Piper and Myers pick up the theme of shifting and vague definitions associated with animal abuse very strongly. They suggest that research into the co-existence of child and animal abuse has "for the most part… paid scant [if any] attention to definition."[12] The problem, as they see it, is that researchers and proponents of the 'links' hypothesis have been prepared to accept vague definitions on which they have sought to build solid evidence of the links between animal and child abuse, as if each of these concepts is agreed and uncontested. Additionally, one of the major definitional problems associated with the literature base as we currently see it, is the failure of authors and researchers 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.

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[9] Becker and French, 2004, p. 400

[10] *Working together to safeguard children: a guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children*. HM Government, 2006

[11] Ascione, 1993, p.228; our italics.

[12] Piper and Myers, 2006, p. 181.

Fourth, significantly, much writing in this area is descriptive.[13] For example, there is a preponderance of accounts of intervention programmes and papers which theorise the relationship between animal and child maltreatment. While these publications are important, their findings are at best speculative. Relatively few studies report the findings of empirical investigation. For example, Boat suggests that:

> …a virtual absence of empirical research on the association between violence toward children and violence toward animals may be an ignored link in the field of child abuse and neglect.[14]

Flynn (1999) suggests that there had been, up to the point at which they were writing, only three studies *directly* examining the specific connection between violence to animals and various forms of family violence. Two of these studies focus on violence toward children: DeViney et al, 1983 and Miller and Knutson, 1997. The third, Ascione (1998) relates to women who are the subjects of domestic violence.

Cazaux (2000) notes that the few empirical studies in this area are cited repeatedly. In 1997, the journal *Animals and Society* published a special edition dealing with the issue of animal cruelty. Perhaps the best known book in this area, *Cruelty to animals and interpersonal violence: readings in research and application*, edited by Lockwood and Ascione (1997), brought together the major texts on the subject published up to that date. According to Cazaux, the subsequent book by Ascione and Arkow, *Child abuse, domestic violence, and animal abuse: linking the circles of compassion for prevention and*

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[13] Cazaux, 2000.

[14] Boat, 1995

*intervention* (1999), draws heavily on the same publications from the special issue of *Society and Animals* and the anthology by Lockwood and Ascione.

Where empirical studies exist, often these studies are based on small sample sizes, with a lack of comparison groups. There is a general lack of normative data on the treatment of animals per se which makes it difficult to compare findings on specific groups – such as users of social care services – with the wider population. Piper and Myers go so far as to suggest that "research supporting the supposed links is based mainly on extreme and non-representative samples."[15]

It is clear, then, that the evidence base relating to the co-existence of animal and child welfare concerns is, at present, relatively weak and in need of further development. However, Ascione and Arkow state in the preface to their edited collection of papers:

> Our ability to comprehend fully the relationship of animal abuse to other forms of family violence is currently limited by the absence of systematic data collection, but this much we can state unequivocally: those who are seeking innovative intervention and prevention strategies to prevent family violence might consider a whole new paradigm that incorporates animals as members of the family because the old strategies are clearly not working.[16]

As such, they delineate three major themes, depicted in Figure 1.1 as part of a Venn diagram of interlocking circles, each of which has direct relevance for professionals working in the child welfare field.

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[15] Piper and Myers, 2002, p. 38.

[16] Ascione and Arkow, 1999, p. xvi- xvii

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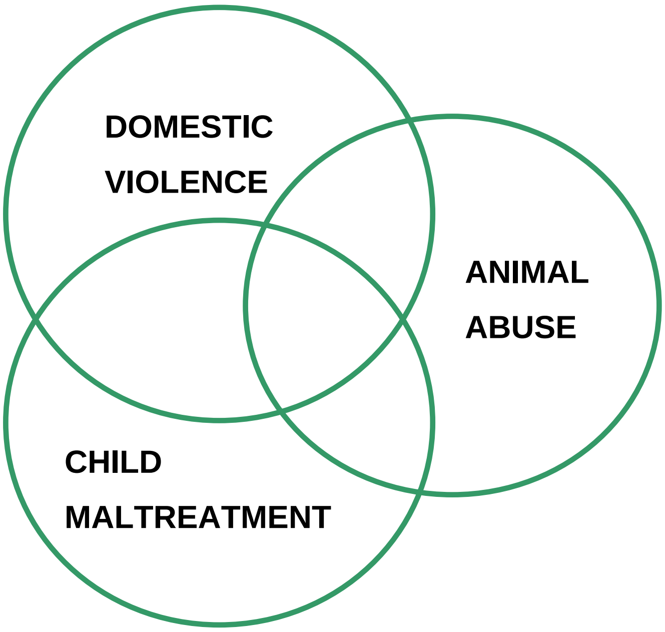
**Figure 1.1 The interlocking circles of domestic violence, animal abuse and child maltreatment (Ascione and Arkow, 1999, p. xvi)**



They suggest that this diagram helpfully assists our understanding of how each of these three distinct phenomena can occur independently and in conjunction with each other. Within these areas of interest, three major hypotheses appear to emerge from the existing research:

- Childhood violence or cruelty towards animals is predictive of future violent behaviour and psychopathology
- Domestic violence perpetrators frequently maltreat animals in the commission of their abusive behaviour, as a way of threatening, coercing, silencing or intimidating their human victims
- Adults maltreating animals present a risk of abuse to children (or conversely, adults abusing children pose a risk to animals).

The key findings in relation to each of these hypotheses are discussed in the remainder of this chapter.

## 1.2 Childhood cruelty towards animals: The 'violence graduation' hypothesis

This is the area of the literature that appears to have received the most attention to date. The core hypothesis here, labelled the "violence graduation" hypothesis by Arluke and colleagues (1999), purports that violence towards animals in one developmental period (i.e. childhood or adolescence) may be predictive of interpersonal violence at a later date (i.e. adulthood). If this hypothesis is supported, then animal abuse in childhood may be seen as one of a number of potential indicators of future violence or criminality.

A range of clinical studies of young people in trouble and retrospective studies of physically and sexually aggressive offenders has highlighted the frequency with which such adult offenders describe a history of childhood animal cruelty.[17] Summarising studies of this nature, Ascione (2001) claims that animal abuse may be characteristic of the developmental histories of between 25–66 per cent of violent adult offenders. Furthermore, it has been proposed that childhood animal cruelty may be a feature of serious developmental problems or even the existence of psychopathology.[18] Indeed, the American Psychiatric Association added cruelty to animals as one of the diagnostic criteria for conduct disorder in 1987.[19]

In one of the earlier pieces of research conducted in this field, DeViney and colleagues (1983) 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 response to their own victimisation; a replication of the dynamics of their own abuse on powerless pet figures.

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[17] For example: Felthous and Kellert, 1986

[18] Flynn, 1999.

[19] Ascione, 1993

A more recent study by Miller and Knutson (1997) compared a group of 314 young offenders, who had been incarcerated in the US state of Iowa, against a group of 308 university psychology students. The researchers used a self report questionnaire to assess the abusive childhood environments and exposure to animal cruelty in both samples. They sought to establish the number of abusive acts either perpetrated by the subjects, or witnessed by them, against any animals, including pets, farm animals or wild animals. The researchers found significant correlations, in both the young offender and the student groups, between aversive childhood experiences and animal cruelty. Of the offender group, approximately 66 per cent reported some exposure to animal cruelty, as can be seen in Table 1.2. In 11 per cent of cases this included either witnessing or experiencing sexual contact with animals.

**Table 1.2 Reports of exposure to animal cruelty (Miller and Knutson, 1997)**

| **Exposure to animal cruelty** | **Number of young offender subjects** |
|---|---|
| None | 87 |
| 1–4 types of animal cruelty | 149 |
| More than four types of animal cruelty | 63 |
| **Types of animal cruelty** | |
| Saw an animal killed | 158 |
| Killed a pet | 36 |
| Killed a stray | 98 |
| Was forced to hurt an animal | 7 |
| Hurt an animal | 49 |
| Saw others hurt an animal | 127 |
| Controlled by threat to hurt/kill animal | 14 |
| *Sex with animals* | |
| Touched an animal sexually | 16 |
| Watched someone have sex with an animal | 22 |
| Had sexual intercourse with an animal | 9 |

Miller and Knutson were also able to analyse whether different subgroups of offenders were more likely to report animal abuse in their backgrounds. In contrast to the work of Felthous and Kellert (1986) cited above, they found "virtually no support" for the hypothesis that violent criminal acts, over and above other non-violent types of offending, are associated with animal cruelty.

In this study, findings in relation to the comparison group of students were also of interest. Although 48.4 per cent of students reported a degree of exposure to animal cruelty, the majority (57 per cent) of this subgroup indicated that they had only witnessed such acts. However, this finding was also differentiated according to gender; in total, 68.9 per cent of male students, but only 33 per cent female students reported exposure to animal cruelty. Of the total sample of students, only 20.5 per cent said that they had engaged in one or more acts of animal cruelty and only six of the sample reported sexual activity with animals.

Miller and Knutson conclude that reports of childhood exposure to animal cruelty were not uncommon among the student group, but active involvement in animal cruelty was less common. Significantly, the prevalence of animal abuse experiences among men in the two samples was very similar. However, the prevalence for women differed, with the female offender group much more likely to report such exposure than the women students. The authors suggest that their findings:

> …do not provide any evidence support for the hypothesis that exposure to animal abuse is importantly related to engaging in criminal activity in general or violent activity in particular.[20]

While their findings do not rule out the existence of a link between animal-related behaviour, child abuse and anti-social behaviour, they suggest that the link is not straightforward or simple.[21]

In a further study, Flynn (1999) explored the link between corporal punishment inflicted by parents and children's perpetration of animal abuse in a sample of 267 undergraduates. Nearly half (49 per cent) of this sample had been exposed to animal abuse in their childhoods. Forty-five per cent of students had witnessed other people in the process of abusing animals, but only 18 per cent had perpetrated abuse themselves. Most of those who had perpetrated animal abuse had also witnessed it. Most perpetrators of animal cruelty had committed only one kind of abuse. The percentage of respondents in this study who had perpetrated different types of animal cruelty is represented in Table 1.3.

**Table 1.3 Percentage of respondents committing animal abuse (Flynn, 1999)**

| Type of animal cruelty | Males | Females | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Killed a stray/wild animal | 29.8 % | 5.0 % | 13.1 % |
| Hurt or tortured animal | 31.1 % | 3.8 % | 6.7 % |
| Killed pet | 6.0 % | 1.1 % | 2.6 % |
| Touched animal sexually | 2.4 % | 1.1 % | 1.5 % |
| Performed sexual acts on animals | 2.4 % | 0.6 % | 1.1 % |
| Perpetrated any animal cruelty | 34.5 % | 9.3 % | 17.6 % |

*Number of males = 84; number of females = 182*

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[20] Miller and Knutson, 1997, p. 79

[21] Miller and Knutson, 1997, p. 80

Of those perpetrating animal abuse, nearly half (48 per cent) were in their teens when they first abused animals. However, Flynn found that slightly over 40 per cent were between the ages of six to 12-years-old. Eleven per cent were younger – between two and five. Interestingly, most of those who killed a wild animal were teenagers, while children hurting or torturing a pet 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 than males. As can be seen in Table 1.3, males were approximately six times more likely to have killed a pet or a wild animal than females. Females were also much less likely to have witnessed animal abuse than males. Flynn suggests that such differences may be accounted for by differences in socialisation experiences of males and female children, with males more routinely socialised into expressions of dominance and aggression, for which cruelty to animals may represent a rehearsal opportunity.

Flynn (1999) also found a relationship between parental physical violence towards children and children's subsequent expression of animal abuse. Respondents who abused animals were more likely to have been physically punished more frequently before adolescence than those who had never abused an animal. Being hit as a teenager emerged as the strongest predictor of animal abuse. Flynn highlights how this connection was not concerned with abusive violence, but held true at the level of more 'normative' smacking of children. Importantly, this finding was also gendered, prompting Flynn to conclude that "it is male-to-male physical punishment that increases the likelihood of animal abuse."[22]

Over half of the male teenagers in the sample who were hit by their fathers perpetrated animal abuse. Flynn goes on to propose that gender, empathy and concern for animals are related and that these findings are strongly suggestive that the perpetration of animal abuse by males can greatly inhibit their empathy development. Caution should be applied to these findings as Flynn's study involved a convenience sample and the data collection method relied on subjects' retrospective self report. Nonetheless, this study goes some way to suggesting that, at least for some, the experience of parent-to-child violence is associated with subsequent child animal cruelty behaviour.

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[22] Flynn, 1999, p.979

In a 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, which was sent to 25 schools in England. Follow-up interviews were held with eight boys aged 12–14, and 28 group interviews were held in eight different school settings. The researchers found that 450 of the young people responding to their survey said they knew of an adult harming an animal, and 382 knew of a child harming an animal. They conclude that their research neither confirms nor disputes the idea that children harm animals because they have been harmed themselves and that they are then likely to go on to harm other people or animals. They suggest that this is certainly true for a number of young people who exist at the extreme end of a continuum, but they are of the view that these are “probably a relatively small minority of those who harm animals as children.”[23] In reviewing this research, Piper subsequently writes:

> Many apparently well-adjusted children admitted that they and others they knew had harmed animals at some time, especially pulling the wings off flies or using straws to inflate frogs to bursting point, for example. Although harming animals seemed to be the accepted norm for many children at some stage of their lives, there was no suggestion that such violence is on the increase. A number of adults, who disclosed their own experiences [sometimes extensive] of harming animals as children, had no known criminal or psychiatric histories.[24]

In a further UK study, Duffield and colleagues (1998) investigated the frequency of young people with sexually abusive behaviour towards children to also present histories of sexually harming animals. The specific topic of human sexual contact with animals (or, in the psychiatric literature, zoophilia) has been virtually overlooked in research terms since the work of Kinsey and colleagues in the 1950s. Duffield and colleagues suggest that this is an area frequently overlooked by professionals in practice due to their embarrassment and discomfort with such sensitive subject matter. In Duffield and colleague’s retrospective review of 171 young people referred to their specialist service for adolescents with abusive sexual behaviour, they were able to identify a total of seven young men with a history of sexual contact with an animal (predominantly their pets), with a further seven cases where the young person had perpetrated non-sexual cruelty towards animals. Therefore, the overwhelming majority of young people who had sexually abused had not harmed animals, either sexually or non-sexually. However, in 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. In most of the cases, there was evidence of significant planning, grooming and targeting of the animals by the young person. The authors conclude that:

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[23] Piper et al, 2001, p. 53

[24] Piper, 2003, p.162

> In the majority of the cases we have gathered, zoophilia is but one of a repertoire of abusive sexual behaviours.[25]

Duffield and colleagues go on to suggest that the presence of zoophilia should alert the practitioner to the possibility that other sexual problems co-exist or may yet develop. There is no clear suggestion from the evidence of their small scale study that in such cases the sexual abuse of animals was a developmental precursor to young people's abuse of children. 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, such as severe conduct disorder, personality disorder, substance abuse or psychosis. Clearly, the nature of the specific population being studied by Duffield and colleagues means that it is not possible to draw any firm conclusions about the frequency of animal-related sexual behaviour in the general adolescent population. We know of no studies which have sought to establish this baseline information. However, it is possible to speculate that as sexually abusive behaviour towards animals appears to be relatively uncommon behaviour for adolescents who have sexually abused children, it is equally uncommon (or less common) in non-clinical groups. For a minority of young people, however, who exhibit abusive sexual behaviour both towards children and animals, the existence of such behaviour appears to be an indicator of a high level of distress and a chronic experience of developmental adversity and abuse.

The above four empirical studies, therefore, provide only mixed evidence for the hypothesis that animal abuse in childhood is predictive of violence in adulthood, or the violence graduation hypothesis. This is a theme taken up by Piper and Myers (2006) in their recent critique. Citing the examples of notorious US serial killers who, it subsequently emerged, had histories of animal cruelty, Piper and Myers argue coherently about the danger of conclusions being made regarding the violence graduation hypothesis on the basis of retrospective extreme case examples. They identify how researching a “limited and extreme” population to produce a broad generalisation is inherently problematic.

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[25] Duffield et al, 1998, p. 302

As Arluke and colleagues note, the problem with the violence graduation hypothesis is not only that it is too simplistic, but also that it has:

> … led researchers to ignore the possibility that aggressive individuals instead might begin with violence towards humans and later move on to animals or might restrict their violence to human victims.[26]

Instead they propose an alternative link – the “deviance generalisation” hypothesis – in which animal abuse is seen as one of many manifestations of anti-social behaviour that can develop from childhood, which has the same underlying causes and occurs in no particular time order. Arluke and colleagues tested this hypothesis by examining the official records of criminality in a group of animal abusers who came to the attention of an animal welfare organisation in the USA. Over an 11-year period, 153 people (146 male and seven female) had been prosecuted for at least one form of intentional physical harm of an animal. Of the sample, 58 per cent were younger than 21 at the time they committed the abuse. Arluke and colleagues also identified a community comparison group matched against each animal abuser for gender, race and socioeconomic status, and street of residence. Both groups’ records were examined using the state’s computerised criminal records database. There are obvious limitations to the methodology of this study. First, childhood offence records were not available. Second, it is well established that recorded crime is an inaccurate reflection of the scale and nature of abuse committed. Nonetheless, the authors found that animal abusers were significantly more likely than the control participants to be involved in some form of criminal behaviour, including violent offences. Seventy per cent of those who abused animals also committed at least one offence. In contrast, this was true for only 22 per cent of the comparison group. Details for the various offences are presented in Table 1.4.

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[26] Arluke et al, 1999, p. 964

**Table 1.4 Abusers and controls who committed various offences, Arluke et al (1999, p. 969)**

| | Abusers | | Control group | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Number | % | Number | % |
| Violence | 57 | 37 % | 11 | 7 % |
| Property | 67 | 44 % | 17 | 11 % |
| Drug | 57 | 37 % | 17 | 11 % |
| Disorder | 57 | 37 % | 18 | 12 % |

*(Note: The total number of offences is greater than 153 as some of the sample committed more than one type of abuse.)*

As can be seen, animal abusers were 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 behaviour. Moreover, Arluke and colleagues found that the idea of violence graduation in these offenders was not supported. Animal abuse was no more likely to precede than follow violent offences or non-violent offences. Indeed, while not statistically significant, the authors claim that there was a tendency for animal abuse to follow rather than precede non-violent offences. The authors state that it is reasonable to assume that if the pattern of graduation does not occur in adulthood, this is also likely to be the case in childhood. They conclude that the deviance generalisation hypothesis, at least in the general population, is a more accurate characterisation of animal abuse.

What conclusions can be drawn from this first theme in the animal and child maltreatment research? In summary, research studies here seem to provide relatively clear evidence that a significant proportion of children and young people either witness or perpetrate animal cruelty. A diverse set of motivations is likely to explain animal abuse perpetration in children and young people, as listed by Ascione:[27]

- 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)

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[27] Ascione, 2001, p.6

- 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 (i.e. a pre-emptive attack on a feared animal)
- identification with the child's abuser (e.g. a victimized child may try to regain a sense of power by victimizing 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. using 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).

Such a diversity of motivations emphasises the need for careful professional approaches to young people demonstrating this behaviour. Such behaviour should be responsive to these different motivations and provide practice responses commensurate with the level of risk and need in individual cases. Ascione (2001) further suggests that children who are cruel to animals can be classified into two broad categories. The behaviour of children in the first group is described as "exploratory/curious animal abuse" and emerges in the pre-school or primary school years. It is suggested that for such children animal cruelty reflects an underlying lack of knowledge and understanding about appropriate physical care of animals. Ascione (2001) suggests that, for such children, low level educative input is sufficient to stop the development of the behaviour. By contrast, children in the second category are generally older and demonstrate "pathological animal abuse", which is seen as a symptom of underlying psychological disturbance, including victimisation-related trauma, requiring more intensive clinical intervention. Recently, Currie (2006) has provided some empirical support for this categorisation in finding that children abusing animals who had been exposed to domestic violence were on average significantly older than those children harming animals who had not been exposed to family violence.

In conclusion then, findings relating to this research theme appear somewhat mixed. Although we should certainly not conceive of abusive behaviour towards animals as a feature of a ‘normal childhood’, studies are beginning to indicate that experiences of animal abuse are more widespread than was originally assumed in ‘normative’ samples of young people, especially among boys and young men. In some cases, the extent of these experiences appears to be no less extensive than in more clinical or deviant samples of young men. This suggests that not only are children and young people’s pathways into animal abuse behaviour with animals diverse, but the progression of the behaviour and the risks for adulthood associated with them varies tremendously.

Importantly, there appears limited empirical support in the literature to date for the idea that abuse of animals, in and of itself, is a strong predictor of future violence. Rather, it may be more accurate to conceive of animal abuse as one pronounced form of problematic behaviour in some individuals who are multiply troubled and whose behaviour targets animals and humans alike in no particular sequential order.

It is also reasonable to assume (although this is again speculative rather than empirically tested) that most young people who witness or perpetrate individual acts of animal cruelty grow out of such behaviour and do not develop into adulthood with ongoing or escalating patterns of violence towards either animals or people. However, it is also clear from analysis of some highly deviant individuals, that abusing animals is a developmentally significant experience, which may contribute to the development of empathy deficits and which may project them towards violence later in adolescence and adulthood. For such highly deviant individuals, the experience of harming animals in their childhood may well have served as a powerful developmental mechanism, which desensitises them to pain inflicted on others and which may inhibit the development of their capacity for empathy to other people.

As in other forms of early onset deviance, such as sexually abusive behaviour exhibited by children and young people, it is not easy to predict whether an individual young person will fall within a ‘desister’ or ‘persister’ category. In other words, a critical question for practice is whether an individual child demonstrating abusive behaviour towards animals is likely to continue, and perhaps generalise, this behaviour through childhood and into adulthood, or whether this child will grow out of this behaviour without more extreme manifestations of violence towards either animals or humans. It is the authors' view, however, that the **inter-linking** nature of **multiple risk factors** is likely to be the key to answering this question.[28] Thus, for example, the presence of animal cruelty coupled with fire-setting behaviour and enuresis have long since been identified as a triad of high-risk childhood indicators predictive of future violence.[29] However, as Quinn (2000) notes, research has found that these three behaviours by themselves do not necessarily predict future violence, unless the animal abuse behaviour is particularly aggressive and includes some or all of the following features:

- The child is directly involved in the perpetration of the animal abuse, not just the witness
- The child is impulsive and shows no remorse following the abuse
- The child engages in a variety of acts and victimises different species
- The child is cruel to valued animals, such as dogs (as opposed, for instance, to rodents).

Similarly, young people who abuse animals are likely to be significantly more at risk than other young people abusing animals (whose environmental and family contexts are healthy and act as a protective buffer against the problematic behaviour being exhibited by the child) if:

- They have unresolved victimisation experiences of their own
- Their parents model violence in their parenting behaviour
- They are subject to harsh and emotionally cold family environments
- They are isolated among their peer group
- They have low self-esteem, self efficacy, etc.

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[28] Rutter, 1999

[29] Hellman et al, 1966

## 1.3 Domestic violence and the maltreatment of animals

This area of interest is the one which has, perhaps, the strongest clinical or anecdotal support, but is one where relatively few empirical studies have been undertaken.[30] It has been long recognised by professionals involved in the domestic violence field that some perpetrators use animals to coerce or silence those whom they seek to victimise. For example, in their book on domestic violence, Jacobson and Gottman (1998) state that animal abuse is often a component of the abuse experienced by women and that when physical abuse by men decreases, emotional abuse often increases (the abuse of animals being used in such cases as a powerful way of emotionally controlling women and, indeed, children). One problem in gathering reliable data on this issue, according to Ascione, is that assessments in cases of domestic violence may not record this issue explicitly, making comparisons between groups and estimates of the scale of the problem difficult. Nonetheless, several important markers are available from the research, which indeed suggest a link between domestic violence and animal abuse.

Quinlisk (1998) investigated these issues in a sample of women in domestic violence refuges. Eighty-six per cent of the families concerned had owned pets, and from the accounts of women seeking shelter from a physically abusive partner, the overwhelming majority of these perpetrators (in 80 per cent of cases) had been violent to animals in addition to their violence towards women.

Ascione's (1998) report represents one of the first empirical studies of women in domestic violence situations and their pet-related experiences. A sample of 38 women who had sought safety in a refuge for victims of partner violence were asked to complete a voluntary questionnaire about pet ownership and violence to pets. The women's ages ranged between 20–52-years-old, with a mean age of 32.2 years. The women were interviewed by staff working in the women's refuge using the Battered Partner Shelter Survey (derived by Ascione and Weber, 1995) shortly after their admission. Interestingly, the interviewers reported that many of the women had expressed gratitude to them for asking them about concerns they had for their pets. This suggests that fearing for the welfare of pets is, indeed, an issue of relevance for women in making decisions about leaving abusive partners.

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[30] Ascione, 1998

In Ascione's study, as in the previous study by Quinlisk, a high proportion of women (74 per cent) reported that they had owned pets in the 12-month period leading up to their move into the domestic violence refuge. Furthermore, of those women reporting pet ownership, 71 per cent indicated that their partner had either threatened to harm, or had actually harmed, one or more of their pets. Actual harm or the killing of animals was reported by 57 per cent of the women with pets. Most often, these acts were of considerable violence. Two of the women indicated that they had harmed animals, but in both cases this was described as accidental. Interestingly, of the 22 women with children, seven (or 32 per cent) said that one of their children had harmed animals. A significant minority of the women with pets also stated that their concerns about their pets' safety and welfare in the home meant that they had delayed their move to the refuge.

Ascione's study reports only a small sample without a comparison group, which means that caution should be applied in generalising from the findings. Nevertheless, it highlights a very important area potentially linking the abuse of animals directly to a form of family violence. As Ascione maintains, if the 71 per cent of women from this study for whom animal abuse was a feature of their experience of domestic violence is also true for women in the general population who experience partner abuse, then it is part of a "broader landscape of terror" and should be on the agenda of child welfare organisations providing support to women and children in such situations. According to Ascione (1998), more research is needed into this particular link in order to examine the forms, severity and chronicity of the problem of partner abuse of animals and its value in making assessments of risk.

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 a group 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. Using individual telephone interviews they asked participants the following questions about their experiences of animals in their families:

1. Do you currently have a pet or other animal? If yes, what type and how many of each?
2. Have you had a pet animal or animals in the past 12 months?
3. Has your partner ever hurt or killed one of your pets?
4. Has your partner ever threatened to hurt or kill one of your pets?
5. Have your children ever witnessed your partner hurt or kill one of your pets?
6. Have your children ever witnessed your partner threaten to hurt or kill one of your pets?
7. Have your children ever hurt or killed one of your pets?
8. Have your children ever threatened to hurt or kill one of your pets?
9. Has any other member of your family ever hurt of killed one of your pets?

In response to these questions, the authors found a striking difference in responses between the two groups of women. In total, 46 per cent of those women who had experiences of domestic violence reported that their partner had threatened to harm their pets. In contract, only 6 per cent of the women from the comparison group reported such threats. Perhaps more startlingly, 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 experience. When limiting their analysis only to incidents where pets had been killed, a total of 17.3 per cent of women with domestic violence experience reported that this had occurred in their family. For women reporting that their partner had harmed their pets, four specific behaviours made up the majority of the animal harm incidents; kicking, by far the most prevalent behaviour in 33 per cent of cases; punching or hitting (15 per cent); throwing the pet, for instance against a wall (10 per cent); and hitting the animal with an object (5 per cent). A substantial minority of the women whose pets had been harmed said that they had, indeed, delayed their exit from their abusive partner due to concerns about their pets.

Overall, the findings of the study by Gullone and colleagues prompt the authors to conclude that:

> The high degree of co-occurrence provides strong support for the hypothesis that abusive behaviours toward animals and humans very likely have the same underlying causes. The relationship has now been demonstrated predictably across studies by different researchers in different locations. Consequently, we

> propose that assessment of animal abuse should be considered an important part of any standard assessment procedure by professionals working with families and children considered to be at risk of abuse.[31]

If Gullone and colleagues are correct in this conclusion, it is therefore important for child welfare services not only to be alert to the possible presence of animal abuse as a feature of a domestic violence perpetrator's abusive behaviour, but also to ask specific questions to illicit this information in their work with families. As this is not identified as an explicit area for professional attention in current national guidance on child welfare assessments in the UK[32], we suggest that the range of questions presented above – and used by Gullone and colleagues in their study as a data collection tool – form the basis of a useful checklist for practitioners to assist women in situations of domestic abuse give voice to their experiences and concerns. In Appendix 1 we present these questions in an adapted form as an interview checklist for practitioners undertaking family assessments. It must, however, be stressed that these questions be considered as an exploratory and indicative tool for clinical practice, rather than as an empirically validated assessment tool.

A final aspect of the literature linking the co-existence of domestic violence and animal abuse is the impact upon children's development of witnessing such behaviour. In the study by Gullone and colleagues, a significant number of children in families where domestic violence occurred had witnessed parental animal abuse. Moreover, mothers reported 19 per cent of children who had engaged in such behaviour. This finding is also mirrored in the work of Currie (2006), who investigated whether children exposed to domestic violence were significantly more likely to be cruel to animals than were children not exposed to this type of family violence. Although the majority of children in both groups did not perpetrate animal abuse, Currie found that children in the domestic violence exposed group were nearly three times more likely to engage in animal cruelty than those who from the non-exposed group. They suggest that children engaging in animal cruelty may have been using animals to model or replay the violent behaviour they had witnessed in the home. They conclude that parents engaging in aggressive acts

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[31] Gullone et al, 2004, p. 10

[32] DoH *Assessment Framework for Children in Need and their Families* (2000)

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teach their children that aggression is a powerful and appropriate tool for interpersonal relationships.

## 1.4 Adults maltreating animals present a risk to children

A third area of debate in this field concerns the significance of animal abuse in influencing adults' ability to safely parent children in their care. This is the area in which the literature base is, perhaps, least well developed. It is also the most contentious issue for practice.

As Raupp and colleagues (1997) note, the question here is usually asked in simplistic terms: Do adults who abuse their children also abuse their pets? Conversely, of course, we might also ask: Do parents who abuse pets also abuse children? It should be noted that answers to these two questions might be significantly different.

If these connections exist, then current systems in the UK dealing with animal and child welfare rarely address them. For example, screening or assessment tools for child abuse rarely take the treatment of animals into account, the DoH *Assessment Framework for Children in Need and their Families* (2000) being no exception. 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. Raupp cites the example of the commonly used Milner Child Abuse Potential Inventory. While this has 160 distinct items, only one relates to the treatment of pets in families.

Boat (1995) suggests that while the research in this specific area is minimal, some "intriguing" links between animal and child abuse have already been demonstrated. For example, two decades ago, Deviney et al (1983) found higher rates of animal abuse by parental figures in confirmed cases of child abuse than in the general population. In this study, 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. In studies of sexual abuse of children, it has been noted that some perpetrators force children to engage in sexual acts with animals as part of the abuse, or make threats about harming pets as a way of silencing children who are being abused.[33]

While the evidence to date in respect of this issue is far from conclusive, there are clear calls for the better exchange of information between child and animal welfare agencies, which could help identify situations where the abuse of an animal might also be accompanied by the abuse of a child (or vice versa). For example, Walker (1979) found 9 per cent of families were referred to both animal and child protective services. Walker identified that in these families there were close similarities in the patterns of abuse of children and animals. Boat (1995) suggests that the possibility of an animal-child abuse link in adults should be explored by professionals concerned that children may be living in abusive or traumatising environments. This might suggest that questions should be routinely asked by workers intervening in the lives of children about the existence and treatment of pets in the family context. Boat 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 animals, may be being compromised. Bell (2001) calls for the inclusion of animal abuse by either children or adults on child abuse risk instruments. Boat (1999) has developed the Boat Inventory on 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.

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[33] Faller, 1990.

# Part 2 Patterns of animal ownership, attitudes towards and experiences of animals in families: a study in the north east of England

## 2.1 Focus and aims of the study

The rationale for this study was to contribute to the ongoing debates in the literature and to add to the limited existing UK research base by offering a small-scale, but carefully considered, investigation of issues associated with animal and child abuse. More precisely, the principal aim of the research was to explore attitudes about, and experiences of, animals in a sample of participants recruited from a variety of social work settings (referred to below as the clinical group). Also, the aim was to compare data generated from this sample with information provided by a further sample of participants that had not received social work intervention (the comparison group). The specific research questions this study sought to address were:

- Is there a higher rate of pet ownership in families subject to social work intervention than in families without such intervention?
- Is the nature of pet ownership, including the type and number of animals owned, different between the groups?
- Are attitudes towards pets different between families with and without social work intervention?
- Are parents who receive intervention for child welfare issues more likely to report having experiences of animal harm/abuse than a comparison group of parents without such intervention? Are they more likely themselves to have harmed animals?

On the basis of our review of the literature, we formulated a number of hypotheses relating to each of these research questions that we wished to test in the study. Specifically, we expected to find that:

- The nature of pet ownership would be different between the clinical and comparison groups. We also anticipated that individuals and families with social work intervention (the clinical group) would have a higher number of pets than families without social work intervention
- There would differences in the type of pets owned between the two groups
- Participants who had received social work intervention would report having witnessed animal maltreatment (perpetrated by others) more frequently that participants from the comparison group
- Participants receiving social work intervention would be more likely to report having harmed animals themselves than participants from the comparison group
- Significantly more participants from the clinical group would report someone threatening an animal in order to control a person, compared to the comparison group.

As a small-scale and exploratory study, we recognise from the outset that the findings from the research outlined in this report are necessarily indicative, rather than conclusive. Nevertheless, within the UK context, we hope that this study will act as a step in raising awareness and that as a result practice for safeguarding children may be strengthened.

## 2.2 Methodology

Views, experiences and attitudes relating to animals were explored using a data collection tool, which was designed specifically for the purposes of this research, but which was developed from the Boat Inventory on Animal-Related Experiences. Our data collection tool, the Animal-Related Experiences Questionnaire (ARE-Q), is presented in Appendix 2. The questionnaire comprised 14 key questions from which over 190 variables were derived, forming the basis of the data analysis presented below. Each question was constructed specifically in to obtain information relevant to the research questions we had formulated. Thus, questions dealt with:

- the nature of past and present pet ownership both, in terms of the quantity and type of pets
- the nature of professional intervention with the respondent and her/his family
- attitudes towards pets by children and parents within the respondent's household
- the respondent's direct or indirect experiences of animal cruelty or harm
- experiences the respondent had of humans being injured by animals, either accidentally or deliberately.

The questionnaire was piloted alongside two parents who were social work service users to ensure clarity of language and ease of understanding. On the specific advice of these two former users, the words "hurt" and "cruelty" were used throughout when seeking information about the respondent's experiences of animal maltreatment. Particularly emotive terms such as "child abuse" or "animal abuse" were avoided.

## The sample

Fifty-one social work service users comprised the clinical group. There was a mix of respondents within this group, including children and their parents (who had received social welfare intervention as a result of various childcare-related matters or as a result of their child's offending behaviour). Ethical considerations meant that it was not appropriate to recruit young people under the age of 16 to participate in the research; therefore the young people participating in the study were restricted to those aged 16 or over. In total, 17 participants in the service user group were young people and a further 34 were parents. All were approached to participate through one of the following social case service settings:

- two children and family social work teams within a local Social Services Department (SSD)
- two teams within a local Youth Offending Service (YOS)
- one voluntary agency supporting parents whose children had been removed from the home and placed in care

- one voluntary agency offering support to families where children and young people had displayed harmful sexual behaviour.

The range of participating agencies was negotiated purposefully in order to include a range of key dimensions identified in previous animal-related research, as outlined in previous sections of this report. This includes young offenders (as in Miller and Knutson, 1997); parents whose children had been removed from their care by professionals due to child welfare concerns, many of whom had also experienced domestic violence (e.g. Ascione, 1998); specific cases of sexual abuse and sexual aggression (e.g. Faller, 1990); and families referred to child protection teams (e.g. Walker, 1979).

The comparison group consisted of students from a local university. In order to attempt to produce a match with the parents and young people in the clinical group, two distinct groups of students were selected. The first of these sub-groups comprised a group of 41 undergraduate students in the second year of their degrees. The second group comprised 19 final-year mature postgraduate students. In total, this provided a student comparison group of eight parents, which was matched in terms of age (mean age 38, standard deviation 9.8), with the parents within the clinical group (mean age 38, standard deviation 7.0). Similarly, the young people in the comparison group broadly matched in terms of age (mean age 21) the clinical group of young people (mean age 18) as shown in Table 2.1.

**Table 2.1 Age comparison between groups**

| Group | Identification | Mean age | Number | Standard deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Clinical group** | Young person | 18 | 17 | 4.0 |
| | Parent | 38 | 34 | 7.0 |
| | Total | 31 | 51 | 11.6 |
| **Comparison group** | Young person | 21 | 52 | 2.4 |
| | Parent | 38 | 8 | 9.8 |
| | Total | 23 | 60 | 7.0 |
| **Total** | Young person | 20 | 69 | 3.2 |
| | Parent | 38 | 42 | 7.4 |
| | Total | 27 | 111 | 10.2 |

The final sample, therefore, included 111 people: 51 people in the clinical group and 60 in the comparison group. The total sample was overwhelmingly white British (97 per cent of the total sample); the number of participants from black or minority ethnic groups was too low to conduct any meaningful statistical comparison between ethnic groups.

While it is recognised that students are not necessarily typical of the general population, it is important to note two key aspects that guided our sampling strategy. First, previous studies in this area typically involved a group of undergraduate students (e.g. Miller and Knutson, 1997). Second, while we sought to create comparison groups within the sample, the purpose of doing so was not to emulate a randomised control trial in which like-for-like comparisons were made between groups of participants. Instead, just as theoretical sampling in grounded theory focuses sampling efforts to cases likely to be theoretically useful to deepening exploration and understanding (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), we too wanted to explore two different groups as a way of providing an additional layer to interpreting the data. The notion that the sample consisted of two distinct groups in this study is supported by the fact that significant differences between the clinical and comparison groups were found in relation to the number of professionals involved in the family and particular types of professionals. While this was to be expected, given the targeted agencies we approached to access the clinical group, it also confirms the view that the sample consisted of categorically different clinical and comparison groups. In turn, the reliability and validity of any differences or similarities in our findings within and between the groups in general is also increased.

### Recruitment of service users into the study and data collection procedure

Access to young people and parents involved in the clinical sample was negotiated carefully through each of the four participating social care agencies. Designated lead contacts – on behalf of the researchers – from each agency (usually team leaders or equivalent) directly approached young people or parents, who were receiving services from their team or agency to ask them to consider becoming involved in the study.

The selection of users for the purposes of the study was done using typical case sampling. This is where cases are selected using programme staff or other knowledgeable people, who can help identify participants who reflect the normal range of characteristics of people within the broader setting in question (Patton, 2002). Using this method, the sample is chosen, not because of any specific features of the characteristics, but because it is not in any major way atypical, extreme or deviant in comparison to the wider group. As a result, in the current study, there were no formal criteria for involvement in the study (eg, current pet ownership was not a requirement of participation) other than current receipt of a service in the respective social care setting. In each case, however, agency contacts were asked to take into account risk and safety issues in order to ensure that participation in the study would be ethically appropriate and would not place the person taking part, or other people, in a situation of unmanaged risk.

All potential participants approached by agency contacts were given written information about the study and were offered an opportunity to talk to one of the researchers in order to ask additional questions about the research before making a decision about participation. It was stressed in all cases that participation was entirely voluntary and that any information given by the service user was confidential and would not be shared with the agency through which the service user had been approached. Users were also assured that no identifying features about them, such as names or addresses, would be recorded at any stage during the research. If, on the basis of this initial agency approach, an individual indicated a willingness to become involved in the research, the agency designated contact sought the user's permission to pass on her or his contact details to the researchers. Subsequently, a member of the research team contacted the person directly to make arrangements for their participation.

The recruitment and involvement of service users proved to be the most difficult aspect of the current study. In part, this reflects the inherent difficulty of approaching users about a highly sensitive and not commonly discussed subject area. Additionally, it was obvious that for some users, despite their initial willingness to be consulted, the stresses brought about by being involved with child welfare agencies, together with frequent crises and unforeseen difficulties in their lives, meant that it was no longer possible to take part. Families contacted through the Youth Offending Teams appeared especially affected by these issues and appeared to represent a very transient group, with frequent changes of contact details and addresses within the duration of the research which meant that follow-up through initial contacts was often difficult. Many interviews, which had been carefully arranged with users, were not attended or were cancelled at short notice.

While the preferred data collection method for the majority of the clinical group was through interview, either in person or by telephone, some service users asked for the questionnaire to be sent to them. In the event of questionnaires being sent but not returned, follow-up letters enclosing a second questionnaire and a stamped-addressed envelope were sent, followed by a telephone call from one of the researchers to improve the response rate. Participating service users from the clinical group were offered a £10 gift voucher from a selection of local shops as a way of meeting expenses and in recognition for their time.

## Research ethics

Ethical approval for the study was sought and gained from the Durham University's Ethical Advisory Committee. Due to possible evidence of criminal activity, in the form of active cruelty to animals and/or humans that might have been discovered (directly or indirectly) throughout the course of this research, clear ethical protocols with all individuals involved were established at each stage of the research. For example, prior to interviews taking place, discussions with team members were held in order to establish clear agreement about the general principles and procedures to be taken should a respondent have revealed information incriminating themselves or another named person.

Child protection parameters were outlined to each respondent both from the clinical and comparison groups and all individuals were informed that the researchers obliged to pass on any information suggesting a person was harmed or was at risk of significant harm. This is consistent with the Children Act (1989) and the local area child protection guidance, as well as the practice within the Youth Offending Service. In addition, each person completed and signed a consent form confirming that he or she had understood what the research was about, as well as the issues of confidentiality related to it.

While the researchers took care to debrief and check on the emotional wellbeing of all participants from both the comparison and clinical groups following their participation, additional support was made available for any participant who wished it. For the service users, this was offered from the agencies through which they had been recruited to the study. The university's counselling service provided support for the comparison group.

### Data analysis

Data was entered into the statistical software package SPSS (version 12) and was subsequently analysed using exploratory and descriptive statistics. Tests of significance, i.e. Chi Square, were used at a 95 per cent confidence level. Measures of association, e.g. Cramer's V and Phi, were used to assess the strength of any relationships found to be significant. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare groups. While a wide range of other statistical techniques exist for the analysis of quantitative data, due to the non-random selection procedure employed in this study and the relatively small sample size obtained in this research, these techniques were considered the most appropriate for our purposes. This was particularly with regard to obtaining meaningful comparisons of available groups within the small sample (e.g. male/female, young person/parent, those accessed through a social care agency/those in the comparison group).

## 2.3 Study findings

The findings presented below are structured around three main themes:

- the nature of pet ownership
- the roles of animals in families
- animal related experiences.

Within each main theme, findings are presented on the similarities and differences between the clinical and comparison groups.

## Nature of pet ownership in families

Understanding the nature of pet ownership was necessary as a baseline to understanding potential similarities and differences between the two groups of participants. Not only was it important to ascertain whether the simple issue of pet ownership differed or not, but it was also important to have this information in order to provide a meaningful context for subsequent interpretations of results. Indeed, although no particular attempt was made to deliberately recruit pet owners, of the total number sampled, 92 per cent (101 out of a total of 111) of the participants responded that they currently own or previously owned an animal in their family home, with approximately the same percentage of people across the clinical and comparison groups (92 per cent and 90 per cent respectively). Table 2.2 presents the total number of pet owners and types of animals owned across the two groups.

**Table 2.2 Total number of pet owners in each group (past or present) by type of animal owned**

| Group | Dog | Cat | Bird | Fish | Rabbit/ Guinea pig |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Clinical | 39 | 27 | 14 | 15 | 22 |
| Comparison | 32 | 28 | 14 | 28 | 19 |
| Total | 71 | 55 | 28 | 43 | 41 |
| **Group** | **Gerbil/ hamster** | **Mouse/ rat** | **Tortoise / turtle** | **Lizard/ snake** | **Other** |
| Clinical | 18 | 5 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Comparison | 23 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 7 |
| Total | 41 | 7 | 2 | 4 | 10 |

Among those who owned a pet, most (83 per cent) owned a cat or a dog. Of those who owned a cat, 69 per cent also owned a dog; of those who owned a dog, 49 per cent also owned a cat. In terms of simple pet ownership, then, the clinical and comparison groups did not differ significantly from one another. The mean total number of animals owned was 13.1 and 10.9 for the clinical and comparison groups respectively. This suggests that with respect to the total number of animals owned, the two study groups were not significantly different. However, when animal ownership was explored further to investigate the number and types of animals owned, several findings emerged that differentiated the clinical and comparison groups.

Specifically, there were differences in the distribution of total animals owned, as well as the total type of animal owned, across the groups. In the clinical group, only four people owned between 0–1 animals, compared to 14 cases in the comparison group. More people in the clinical group owned dogs than those in the comparison group, with 39 (out of 48) of those in the clinical group having ever owned a dog, compared to 32 (out of 58) of those in the comparison group. Further analysis confirms this relationship, but suggests that the relationship is relatively weak and must therefore be treated with caution (Chi-square test, $p<0.05$; Phi 0.274). Not only did more people in the clinical group own more dogs (mean of 2.4, standard deviation of 3.6 dogs), they also owned more dogs per household than those in the comparison group (mean of 1.2 dogs, standard deviation of 1.6 dogs). It was not possible, given our data collection tool, to establish whether there were differences in the types of dogs owned both within and between groups, although this would be a useful aspect to include in further research. In contrast to these findings on dogs, however, there was no relationship between any other areas of particular animal ownership in either the clinical or comparison group.

## Roles of pets in families

In order to explore attitudes towards animals and the role of pets in families, participants were offered a series of statements and were asked to scale their responses as “very true”, “a bit true” and “not very true”. Overall, when controlling for group membership, gender or whether the respondent was identified as a young person or a parent, there was no significant relationship between the variables (Chi-Square test, $p>0.05$) for any of the statements. However, there are two exceptions to this overall finding.

First, when exploring responses in relation to the statement “sometimes, animals are a source of comfort to a child in my family”, Chi-square analysis showed a significant difference ($p<0.5$) between the clinical and comparison groups. More precisely, 72 per cent of people in the clinical group strongly agreed with this statement, as opposed to 47 per cent of those in the comparison group. Furthermore, at the other end of the scale, only 5 per cent of the clinical group responded to this statement saying, that it was either “not very true” or “very untrue”, compared to 23 per cent of those in the comparison group.

Second, there was also a significant difference between the groups regarding the statement “animals are more important to the children in my family than to the adults”, with 30 per cent of the clinical group strongly agreeing with this statement, as opposed just 8 per cent of the comparison group. Furthermore, of those selecting “very true” to this statement, 77 per cent belonged to individuals in the clinical group, whereas of all those selecting “very untrue” as their response, 77 per cent belonged to the comparison group.

### Animal-related experiences

A range of questions sought to establish participants’ overall experiences of animals in their families. When asked if they, or anyone in their family, had been hurt or injured by an animal, just over half of the whole sample (51 per cent) answered “yes”. No significant relationship ($p>0.05$) was found in responses to this question across the groups. Out of those who responded “yes”, over 64 per cent explained that they or someone in their family had been bitten by a dog. The next most frequent answer was a cat-related injury (12 per cent). Both of these findings are unsurprising and fit with the general patterns of pet ownership within the sample, as reported above.

When asked: “Have you ever worried about bad things happening to an animal that you really cared about?” 52 per cent of the whole sample (56 people) responded “yes”. Furthermore, the Chi-square test indicates a significant relationship ($p<0.05$) between the clinical and the comparison group, although the low Phi-value (0.028) shows that the relationship is weak. Of those who answered “yes” to this question, 64 per cent were from the comparison group, compared to 36 per cent from the clinical group.

### Experiences of someone threatening to harm animals in order to control a person

All participants were asked if they knew of someone threatening to hurt an animal in order to control someone. We deliberately introduced the broad category of "hurting animals", allowing participants to include any kinds of behaviour that they themselves considered harmful, rather than limiting them to any pre-existing definitions and categories. However, if a participant indicated that they had experienced this, we asked them to describe what had happened in their own words. In response, 16 per cent (18 people) of the total sample replied "yes". Chi-testing ($p<0.05$) suggested that there was a difference between the groups. Seventy-five per cent (38 people) of the clinical group replied that they did not know of anyone, compared to 92 per cent (55 people) in the comparison group. Put differently, of all those who responded that they did know of someone threatening to hurt an animal to control another person, the overwhelming majority (72 per cent) were from the clinical group. Again, although there is a statistically significant association between these variables, the relationship is weak (Phi=0.232 and Cramer's V=0.232). As can be seen from Tables 2.3 and 2.4, the majority of those making threats to animals were adults known to the respondent.

**Table 2.3 Age of person threatening to hurt an animal by group**

| | **Age of person making threats** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Group** | **11–16 years** | **17–20 years** | **Over 21 years** | **Total** |
| Clinical group | 1 | 1 | 11 | 13 |
| Comparison group | 0 | 0 | 5 | 5 |
| Total | 1 | 1 | 16 | 18 |

**Table 2.4 Relation of person making threats by group**

| Group | Self | Friend | Stranger | Husband/ boyfriend | Other relative | Other | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Clinical | 1 | 5 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 13 |
| Comparison | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 5 |
| Total | 1 | 5 | 2 | 2 | 5 | 3 | 18 |

### Experience of someone deliberately hurting an animal

All participants were asked whether they had known or suspected someone other than themselves of deliberately hurting or being cruel to an animal. Overall, 44 per cent (49 people) answered “yes” and 56 per cent (62 people) answered “no”. However, Chi-square analysis showed no significant difference between the groups in general or when controlling for gender. However, there was a significant difference ($p<0.05$) found between young people and parents when considering the sample as a whole. Thirty-six per cent of young people (25 respondents), compared to 57 per cent of parents (24 people), answered that they had known someone (other than themselves) to deliberately hurt or be cruel to an animal.

Within the total sample, 12 types of deliberate cruelty to animals were witnessed by the respondents, as presented in Table 2.5. There was no statistically significant difference between groups concerning overall frequency of observed cruelty. By far the most common type of cruelty witnessed by both groups was of an animal being hit (17 people), followed by an animal being shot (five), starved (four people) and poisoned (four people). Those who had witnessed another person deliberately hurting an animal sexually or using multiple types of cruelty were all from the clinical group. All deliberate harm in the comparison group involved a single type of cruelty. Nine categories of animals were reported to have been harmed: dogs, cats, horses, lizards or snakes, mice or rats, rabbits or guinea-pigs, gerbils or hamsters, insects, and wild animals. There were no significant differences in the types of animals harmed across the groups. Dogs were most frequently harmed, with dog-related incidents accounting for just over half (51 per cent) of all incidents of harm.

**Table 2.5 Type of deliberate animal cruelty witnessed**

| Type of deliberate animal cruelty witnessed | Group | | Total count |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Clinical group | Comparison group | |
| | Total count | Total count | |
| Drowned | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Shot | 2 | 3 | 5 |
| Starved | 1 | 3 | 4 |
| Hit | 10 | 7 | 17 |
| Kicked | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| Poisoned | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| Stoned | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Medical experiment | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Sexual | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| Hit and starved | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Hit and kicked | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Shot, stabbed, starved and hit | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Total count** | 23 | 19 | 41 |

## Self-reporting deliberately hurting an animal

Having explored participants' experiences of other people deliberately hurting an animal, the final question in the questionnaire explored whether participants themselves had ever deliberately hurt, been cruel to, or killed an animal. Over 92 per cent of the total sample indicated that they had killed insects. As killing insects is clearly acceptable behaviour in most circumstances, this section reflects those participants who indicated that they have *only* harmed an insect in the "not harming an animal" category, even though, as will be discussed below in relation to the "outlying" cases, the insect-related data has actually helped raise interesting questions relating to the study as a whole (which might not have otherwise emerged). Thus, excluding the issue of harm to insects, it was found that 24 per cent (25) of all participants had deliberately hurt an animal, and 76 per cent (80 people) stated that they had not. Again, no significant difference (p>0.05) was found when comparing respondents' experiences across the two groups.

### Violence to animals – the 'outlier' cases

While the above findings relate to aggregate data, our study revealed a number of 'outlier' cases – cases which appear atypical of the experiences for the majority of the sample. More specifically, five cases stood out in relation to the level and context of violence against animals being described by respondents. Although few in number, these 'outlier' incidents provide useful qualitative case descriptors of more extreme examples of animal cruelty.

*Case example:*
*A 42-year-old mother (clinical group) who described strangling her pet cat.*

This mother of four children reported a high level of professional involvement in her family, including a current social worker and previous input from an adult psychiatrist, a psychiatric nurse, a probation officer, a health visitor and a special needs worker. These professionals had been involved due to physical violence towards her children perpetrated by her two previous partners. She said:

> I used to be married… he used to hit the kids. Then I met a new guy and he hit them too. He was cruel. Well, basically, there was a murder... and well, it's really got to me.

While there were currently no pets in her family, the respondent indicated cat, hamster and fish ownership in the past. Like many others in the sample, she worried about bad things happening to an animal she really cared about. She described an incident from her childhood involving a puppy that belonged to her and her siblings.

> Mum said we couldn't pick it up and we cried. So Mum took a baseball bat and smashed it. Two days later, it died.

In addition to this, she explained that she had suspected that the death of her pet hamster when she was younger had been caused by her brother. The participant then went on to describe her own experience of killing another pet cat by strangulation when she was a child. She could not remember her age at the time this took place. She said:

> I just dropped it… I just picked it up and took it in my fingers and wrung its neck. I cried for three days afterwards. We hadn't had it for long – just three weeks. I'll never have one now. Never again.

In describing her own experience, she also said: "I'd never have one [a cat] again," approximately five or six times, in addition to: "I feel awful telling you." Although the researcher clearly reassured this respondent and gave her the opportunity not to continue with the interview, the woman replied that she wanted to talk about her experiences.

*Case example:*

*A 23-year-old mother (clinical group) who described her partner killing her pet dog in the context of domestic violence.*

This 23-year-old woman chose to fill in the data collection questionnaire in private rather than answer during an interview. She had two children and limited professional involvement in her family. Only two professionals had ever been involved: a social worker and a health visitor, both described as "involved with the welfare of my sons" and who "still check in with us from time to time".

Although this respondent stated that she herself had never been hurt or cruel to an animal or thought about deliberately hurting an animal, she provided considerable detail about others' cruelty. Indeed, most of the data about these incidents were provided via an additional two page typed letter that she had attached to the completed questionnaire. The letter included details of her own experience of domestic violence by her ex-fiancé, who also deliberately harmed their pet dogs on a regular basis.

Although she said she currently had no animals of her own at home, she owned a dog and a cat, house in an animal sanctuary where she also helped out as a volunteer. Her previous experiences of animal cruelty were also closely related to her own experience of domestic violence. She said:

> I lived with a man who owned a Staffordshire bull terrier. This dog used to get beaten regularly [as I did] as a form of punishment for me disobeying my ex. As

> well as beating this dog to punish me, my ex used to attack the dog regularly just because he could. After this dog died, my ex got me a pit bull, which received the same kind of treatment until he too died.

Her ex-fiancé hardly ever fed or let out the dog. This caused the dog to regularly defecate in the bathroom, which resulted in both herself and the dog being physically harmed. She said:

> [The dog] would be beaten and occasionally strangled until he fell unconscious. I tried to help this dog as much as I could, but I was being beaten too. [The dog] died after my ex held him under the water in the bath for trying to get into the garden.

In the last incident, she described another pet dog trying to protect her when her partner was beating her, and which was subsequently killed by her ex-fiancé:

> My ex beat [the dog] with a baseball bat until he was nearly unconscious, and tied him [up] in the garage. Two days later he was shot between the eyes.

The letter ended with the final paragraph typed in bold, where the respondent stated that she was “not proud of standing by and letting this happen”. Although she said she had “tried my hardest” to help the dogs, she felt she “wasn’t strong enough to stand up to my ex”. She went on to explain that she had acted in the way that she had to avoid “endangering the lives of my children and myself”.

*Case example:*

*A female foster carer (clinical group) reporting her foster son’s sexualised behaviour towards a dog.*

This female foster carer reported that, on one occasion, she came into the living room and caught her foster child (male, aged 10) touching the dog’s genitals and masturbating it. The foster child denied the incident. The boy had a history of chronic sexual abuse and had demonstrated a range of problematic sexual behaviours for several years leading up to his placement in the foster care placement. He was receiving specialist help from a project working with children and young people, who display harmful sexual behaviour.

*Case example:*
*A 16-year-old male (clinical group) who had sexual intercourse with a dog.*

The second example involving sexual harm to a dog was reported by a 16-year-old with two siblings. The young person had been moved from his family home in a residential unit and was receiving treatment from a specialist project working with children and young people displaying harmful sexual behaviour. A child psychiatrist, a clinical psychologist, a social worker and a Youth Offending Team had been involved as a consequence of this young person’s sexual assault of an adult woman. Unlike the majority of the participants in this study, the young person said that there had never been any pets in his family. He stated that he had never known anyone threaten to hurt an animal (in order to control a person) or deliberately hurt an animal. However, he said that when he was between 10–16-years-old, he had “had sex with a dog”. He went on to explain that this dog was owned by an adult man who was sexually abusing him during this same period of time. His victimisation experience appeared to be chronic and long-standing. The young person was initially coerced by his abuser to penetrate the dog while the abuser watched. In total, the young person estimated that he had done this about 10 times. Sometimes his abuser was present, but on occasions, the young person was on his own.

*Case example:*
*A 19-year-old male (comparison group) who described the elaborate killing of a wasp.*

This particular respondent claimed to come from a family with no history of professional involvement. Like the vast majority of participants, he indicated that he had “hurt, been cruel to or killed an insect”. However, unlike the majority of respondents, who simply stated that they had “squashed” insects, this person wrote:

> I froze a wasp, tied it to a bit of thread, let it come back alive, then dipped it in brandy and burned it.

This final case – the only one from the five ‘outliers’ to come from the comparison group – highlights the complexity of drawing conclusions about animal-related behaviour simply on the basis of the type of animal harmed. In this case, the respondent was engaging in a specific type of behaviour, and which could be viewed in many contexts as socially acceptable. For example, a parent who kills a wasp which is threatening to sting her child, might be described as demonstrating responsible and protective parenting. In contrast, the degree of systematic planning and precision underlying this incidence of animal cruelty suggests that it is a qualitatively different act. Although it is not possible to draw conclusions about this specific incident, or about its significance for the individual reporting it, it emphasises the need for careful assessment by professionals of behaviour involving animal cruelty. We reflect on this in the following section.

# Part 3 Conclusions and recommendations

Given its small sample size and its exploratory nature, the findings from the study should be seen only as indicative and tentative. As one of a mere handful of empirically based investigations into this subject area conducted in the UK to date, the findings further highlight the importance and complexity of this area of practice and research. Further research is clearly needed in order to build an evidence base upon which effective and sensitive policy and practice responses can be built.

## 3.1 Conclusions against original hypotheses

A number of research questions were posed at the outset of the study, and hypotheses were generated from our review of the available literature base. In this section, we address the extent to which these hypotheses have been confirmed or disputed in our study by the findings which have emerged.

### Research question 1 - A higher rate of pet ownership?

The first research question was whether there is a higher rate and different nature of pet ownership in families subject to social work intervention than in families without such intervention. We formulated two hypotheses relating to this research question. First, we expected to find a different pattern of pet ownership between the clinical and comparison groups. Specifically, we thought that individuals and families with social work intervention would have had a higher number of pets than families without social work intervention. This hypothesis was supported only partially by the findings. Specifically, we found no differences between the groups in relation to the overall extent of pet ownership, either now or in the past. Participants with social work intervention owned only a minimal – and not statistically significant – higher average total number of animals compared to the comparison group. At the same time, members of the comparison group were four and a half times more likely than those in the clinical group to have owned only one animal or none at all. Second, we anticipated that there would be differences between the groups in the types of pets owned. Out of 10 types of animal, there was a significant difference between the groups only in respect of dog ownership. The clinical group was both significantly more likely to have ever owned a dog, and also reported on average twice the number of dogs in their families than the comparison group.

### Research question 2 - Attitudes about and role of pets?

The second key research question concerned the degree to which attitudes towards pets differ between families, with and without social work intervention, and what pets mean to people. We formulated no specific hypotheses as a result of the literature review. However, we were interested in exploring the way in which beliefs about animals and their place in families may be similar or different across the groups. As other elements of the study were designed to focus specifically on animal cruelty, this area could embrace some of the positive aspects of animal ownership and, we anticipated, might give clues as to the potential protective value of pets for children in families.

We found few significant differences in participants' views on the role of animals in their families. This held true not only in terms of group membership, but also in terms of gender and role in the family. However, significantly more of the clinical group than the comparison group agreed that animals were a source of comfort to a child in their family. Additionally, nearly four times as many members of the clinical group said that animals were more important to their children than to the adults in the family. This may provide tentative evidence for the suggestion that pets in families 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). This is not to say that animals in the comparison group were viewed as unimportant, but it may be that the difference in weighting reflects the additional protective significance of companion animals for children in situations of adversity. Indeed, one of the defining characteristics of a protective factor, as suggested by Rutter (1999), is that it exerts a higher level of protective benefit to individuals in situations of higher psychosocial risk.

### Research question 3 - More likely to report experiencing animal harm/ abuse?

The third research question focused on whether people who receive social care services are more likely to report experiences of animal harm than people in the comparison group. We made three specific hypotheses here:

1. **We expected that participants, who had received social work intervention, would report having witnessed animal maltreatment (perpetrated by others) more frequently that participants from the comparison group**.

   This hypothesis was not supported. Overall, we found that nearly half of the total sample (44 per cent) had known or suspected that another person had maltreated an animal, and this was nearly always an adult known to them. In a similar finding, Piper et al (2001) found that just over half (56 per cent) of young people in their non-clinical sample knew of an adult harming an animal. In our sample there were no significant differences between the two groups in terms of the overall proportion of respondents witnessing animal maltreatment. Additionally, while 12 distinct types of deliberate cruelty to animals were reported overall, there were no significant differences in the frequency these behaviours were observed between the two groups. There were also no significant differences between the groups as to what type of animals had been harmed. However, all instances of multiple types of cruelty observed towards an animal came from the clinical group.

2. **We anticipated that participants receiving social welfare interventions were more likely to report having harmed animals themselves than were participants from the comparison group.**

   We found no significant differences between the groups – indeed the proportion of respondents in each group who admitted harming animals was remarkably similar. In Miller and Knutson’s (1997) comparative study, 20.5 per cent of the students in a comparison group had themselves engaged in one or more acts of cruelty, whereas the figure for their clinical group of young offenders was approximately 21 per cent. In the current research, as in the Miller and Knutson study, while the overall rate of animal maltreatment does not appear to differ between groups, the few extreme animal maltreatment behaviours reported were all located within the clinical group.

3. **We predicted that more participants from the clinical group would report threats to animals than participants in the comparison group.**

   This hypothesis appears to be supported by the findings of the current study. Members of the clinical group were over three times as likely as participants in the comparison group to have experienced another person threatening to hurt an animal as a means of controlling another person. It is possible that this finding may reflect the increased likelihood that members of the clinical group, particularly mothers within the sample, were subjected to domestic violence. This conclusion, however, is speculative.

## 3.2 Recommendations and implications for policy/practice

Undertaking research into the experiences of social work service users in an area which remains contested in the UK context has been an immensely resource intensive process. Asking people, who are already vulnerable and stressed by dint of their involvement with professional services, to talk about or acknowledge their experiences against a backdrop of societal denial and silence on these matters is a methodologically challenging task. We suspect that for some service users, this was one demand too many and accounted for why some users withdrew from the study before being interviewed or before completing questionnaires.

For the participants taking part in the study, it was also obvious that recalling experiences of animal cruelty, including their own animal-related behaviour, at times invoked a significant degree of shame and distress. Our experiences of talking to participants from both the clinical and comparison groups about these issues during the course of the research bears out how difficult it is for many people to faced, often for the first time in their adult lives, specific questions relating to experiences that occurred in their childhoods. Although by no means the majority of either the comparison or the clinical group, the participants who had experienced or engaged in significant animal cruelty appeared, in particular, to need support to share and help to come to terms with their experiences. We believe, therefore, 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 the 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 in order to allow individuals with these experiences to deal with their unresolved feelings about such incidents.

The results of this study, together with the findings of the existing literature, point to a complex inter-relationship between animal and child cruelty. Contrary to some previous accounts, we did not find animal cruelty widespread for young people in either the clinical or community sample. 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. In other words, such individuals are likely to experience a range of other difficulties in their lives, in addition to animal cruelty. For such individuals, animal cruelty behaviour may represent one of a range of risk factors, which can interact to influence their overall functioning or developmental pathways. Some children who perpetrate animal cruelty within the presence of other experiences of psychosocial adversity may be particularly prone to failing to meet their overall developmental outcomes and may be at risk of being drawn into criminal behaviour and violence in the future. However, for the majority of people who engage in lower-level animal cruelty behaviour, these exploits are unlikely to be predictive of any future psychosocial risk, impaired parenting or interpersonal violence. 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 with the abuse of animals, a balanced approach is needed, targeting not only their own behaviour, but seeking to meet their broader developmental needs.

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.

There are various motivations which might underpin a person’s abuse of animals. Careful assessment of individual cases is needed to explore the meaning and significance of behaviour on a case-by-case basis. Similar acts may have very different meanings for the individual engaging 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 beyond what might be understandable in the context of the presenting situation. For example, disciplining a pet or protecting a child from an insect bite)
- the meaning of, and the motivation for, a specific behaviour.

Varying levels of support and intervention are likely to be needed where assessments indicate that behaviours causing concern exist. 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. Such an approach would emphasise both behavioural change, and would seek to identify and correct any distorted cognitions about animals and animal harm.

Animal abuse appears to be a common feature of the domestic violence perpetrated on women by men in families. The findings of the current study lend some empirical support to other studies, suggesting that animals are used as a way of threatening or maintaining power over women and children. In the current study, these behaviours were more prevalent in the clinical population than in the wider community sample. It is, therefore, our strongly held view that workers in the child welfare field should routinely include discussion about concerns regarding 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 included as appendices to this report will, we hope, assist practitioners in establishing a language and an approach to this most sensitive of issues.

Finally, although the weight of attention, both in the literature and in our study, has focused on issues of risk and harm, it is clear that the presence of animals in families facing 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 empathic concerns and encourage positive social interaction in children subject to psychosocial risk.

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