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The importance of considering the treatment and care of family pets in domestic violence risk assessments and in planning interventions to support families in changing their situation

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The importance of considering the treatment and care of family pets in domestic violence risk assessments and in planning interventions to support families in changing their situation

A significant part of the health visiting role is to work with families where there is domestic violence. Pets are often regarded as members of the family and as such are additional victims in environments where domestic violence is perpetrated. This paper explores the co-existence of domestic violence and animal cruelty and the implications of the use of animal cruelty to exercise coercive control over intimate partners in terms of the dangerousness of the abuser. It also considers the impact of animal cruelty on the health and social and emotional development of children. In domestic violence situations, child safety should be held paramount and adult safety a priority; the authors argue that in the pursuit of the best outcomes for children and adults, health visitors should be cognisant of the treatment and care of family pets in their assessment and in planning interventions to support families in changing their situation. An overview is provided of the domestic violence risk assessment tools that refer to animal cruelty as a contributory factor for serious harm and the animal welfare services available to help families escaping domestic violence.

MeSH Key words

- Domestic violence
- Animal welfare
- Pets
- Family

Key points

- Research has shown a link between domestic violence and cruelty to animals
- Men who abuse their female partners and pets have been found to show more controlling behaviour than men who abuse their partners but not their pets
- Pets are part of the social unit that forms the family and women may delay leaving abusive situations because they do not want to leave their pet behind and at risk of further abuse and potential death
- Animal cruelty in the context of domestic violence has an impact on the health and social and emotional development of children

- Evidence based domestic violence risk assessment tools elicit information relating to animal cruelty in order to inform risk management decisions

Introduction

In 2014, it was estimated that 13 million households in the United Kingdom (UK) had pets, with 24% of households having a dog and 17% of households having a cat (Pet Food Manufacturers Association 2014). The human-animal bond is frequently regarded as mutually beneficial with evidence suggesting pet ownership can have health and wellbeing benefits across the life course. The benefits for children include reduced risk of allergic rhinitis in those exposed to pet allergens in the first year of life (Ownby et al 2002). Research also suggests that animal companionship can help children move along the developmental continuum and aid in the acquisition of social skills and the ability to show empathy to others (Gilligan 2000). In adulthood, the benefits include reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, higher survival rates from myocardial infarction and better psychological wellbeing in older people (McNicholas 2005).

Whilst the relationship between humans and pets is often reciprocal, health visitors must demonstrate a critical understanding of the nature and quality of human-animal interactions and be mindful not only of the benefits of pet ownership but also the potential for adverse events; for example, dog bites and dog attack related fatalities in babies and young children. Human-animal interactions may also negatively impact on animal welfare and over the last three decades there has been increasing interest in the abuse and exploitation of animals as well as the link between crimes against animals and other forms of interpersonal violence.

This paper focuses on the links between domestic violence and animal cruelty and the implications of these links for child health and wellbeing. The purpose of the paper is twofold. Firstly, it is to explore the evidence based literature regarding the co-existence of domestic violence and animal cruelty, the use of animal cruelty to exercise coercive control over intimate partners in terms of the dangerousness of the abuser, and the impact of animal cruelty on the health and social and emotional development of children in the context of domestic violence. Secondly, it is to provide an overview of the evidence based domestic violence risk assessment tools

that can be used to identify animal cruelty and the animal welfare services available to families escaping domestic violence.

The paper arose in response to a presentation given by spokespeople from the Dogs Trust at a Specialist Community Public Health Nursing student conference at City University London in January 2015. The Dogs Trust is the UK's largest dog welfare charity and the focus of the presentation was the interrelationship between domestic violence, child abuse and cruelty to animals, and the availability of pet fostering services for vulnerable families. The presentation demonstrated the value of collaborative working between educationalists and human and animal welfare agencies to ensure the dissemination of evidence based practice relating to work with families where there is domestic violence.

Co-Existence of Domestic Violence and Animal Cruelty

Much of the information pertaining to the relationship between domestic violence and animal cruelty is derived from studies with women in heterosexual relationships in Australia and North America. In one of the first studies examining the issue, Ascione (1998) reported outcomes based on a sample of 38 women who were interviewed during their stay at a shelter in Utah, United States (US). Of the women with pets (n = 28), 57% reported that their male partner had hurt or killed one of their pets. Threats of pet cruelty and/or actual pet cruelty were reported by 71% of women with pets. Over half of all respondents had children; however, no information was available on whether or not children had witnessed the abuse of one of their pets. In a similar study, Flynn (2000) reported on 107 women residing temporarily at a shelter in South Carolina, US. Of the women with pets (n = 43), 26% reported that their male partner had hurt their pets and 40% reported threats of pet cruelty. Over half of respondents reporting animal cruelty had children. Whilst no information was available on whether or not children had witnessed the abuse of one of their pets, the author considered it highly unlikely that at least some children did not either witness the abuse of pets or observe the effects of such abuse.

Neither the Ascione (1998) nor the Flynn (2000) studies included a comparison group of women who had not experienced domestic violence. To explore this comparison, Ascioine et al (2007) surveyed 101 women seeking refuge in five domestic violence shelters in Utah and 120 women with no history of domestic

violence from the local community. Thirty-nine children (aged 5 – 17 years) of shelter women were also interviewed. All participants were either current or recent pet owners. Fifty-four percent of the shelter women and 5% of the non-shelter women reported partner pet cruelty. Partner threats of harm to pets were reported by 53% of the shelter women and 13% of the non-shelter women. Sixty-six percent of shelter children responded affirmatively to whether they had ever seen or heard one of their pets hurt. These findings were confirmed by shelter mothers; 61% of whom reported their children having observed pet abuse.

In a similar study, Volant et al (2008) surveyed 204 women in Victoria, Australia; 102 of whom were accessing domestic violence services and 102 of whom were not. All participants were either current or recent pet owners. Forty-six percent of women accessing services reported threats of pet cruelty and 5% in the comparison group. Fifty-two percent of women accessing services reported actual pet abuse compared to none in the comparison group. The majority of respondents were mothers. Twenty-nine percent of mothers accessing services reported that their children witnessed their partner abusing the pets.

These findings demonstrate evidence not only of the co-existence of domestic violence and animal cruelty – cruelty not infrequently witnessed by children - but also suggest that violence towards family pets is one tactic used by abusers to exert power and control over their victims. This is a notion that has been developed by Safe Passage (No Date) who described how abusers may use pets to dominate, control and induce fear and/or subservience (see Figure 1). Controlling behaviour is also an area explored in research conducted by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) in an exploratory study into patterns of animal ownership and the treatment of animals in different groups of families in the north east of England (NPSCC 2007). The aim of the study was to explore attitudes and experiences of animal cruelty amongst a sample of respondents (young people and parents) recruited from social work settings (n = 51) and a sample of respondents who had not received social work intervention (n = 61). One of the research hypotheses tested was that significantly more respondents recruited from social work settings would report someone threatening an animal in order to control a person, compared to the comparison group. This hypothesis was supported by respondents from social work settings being found to be three times as likely as

those who had not received social work intervention to have experienced another person threatening to hurt an animal as a means of controlling another person. The authors highlight the increased likelihood that these respondents, particular mothers within the sample, were subjected to domestic violence; for example, one 23 year old mother described her partner killing her pet dog in the context of domestic violence.

Animal Cruelty as an Indicator of the Dangerousness of the Abuser

Controlling behaviours include physical violence, sexual violence, stalking, confinement, control over employment and socialisation, destruction of property, and threats of violence against loved ones (Tiplady et al 2012). Studies have found that men who abuse their female partners and pets show more controlling behaviour than men who abuse their partners but not their pets. For example, Simmons and Lehmann (2007) reported on a study of 1,283 women pet owners residing at a domestic violence shelter in Texas, US. The findings indicated that perpetrators who also abuse pets use significantly more forms of violence and demonstrate significantly greater use of controlling behaviours than perpetrators who do not abuse pets, which suggests that the presence of animal cruelty is a potential red flag for serious harm.

If someone needs to leave home because they are being abused they may choose to stay with family or friends or to go into emergency accommodation such as a refuge, bed and breakfast hotel, or hostel. Whilst some emergency accommodation may be equipped to take small animals such as fish, mice and other caged pets, few can take larger animals such as cats and dogs. Studies have shown that the vast majority of women whose pets have been abused have been distraught by the cruelty their pets experienced and delay leaving abusive situations because they do not want to leave their pet behind and at risk of further abuse and potential death. For example, 18% of women with pets reported that concern for their animals' welfare had prevented them from coming to the shelter sooner in the study by Ascione (1998), 22% of shelter women reported similar concerns in the study by Ascione et al (2007), and 33% of women living in some form of crisis accommodation in the study by Volant et al (2008). None of these studies explored how women with both children and pets balanced the safety of their children on one

side with their pets on the other. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that some women prioritised their pet over and above themselves.

Impact on Children and Young People

Studies undertaken in Australia and North America established that children frequently witnessed animal cruelty in the context of domestic violence (Ascione et al 2007; Volant et al 2008). Research has shown that domestic violence can have a negative impact on children. In a study undertaken by McGee (2000) mothers reported a range of effects on their children including fear, emotional distress, depression, impaired social relations, poor educational attainment and anger, often displayed in aggressive behaviour.

In relation to emotional distress, Ascione et al (2007) measured responses in children whose pet was hurt or killed and found that 59% of respondents were very upset, 33% sort of upset, 3% not upset at all and 3% not sure. Fifty-one percent of children who took part in the study said they had protected one of their pets to save it from being hurt. Evidence shows that children are at risk of physical injury when they intervene to protect their mother in the context of domestic violence and the same is arguably true when they attempt to protect their pets. At the same time, where an animal has been abused there may be an increased likelihood that it will go on to bite or attack a household member (DeViney et al 1983).

Studies undertaken in Australia and North America have also highlighted cruelty to animals by children who have been exposed to animal abuse and/or domestic violence. For example, 32% of shelter mothers reported cruelty by their children to animals in the study by Ascione (1998), 13% of shelter children admitted hurting or killing pets in the study by Ascione et al (2007), and 19% of mothers accessing domestic services reported cruelty by their children to animals in the study by Volant et al (2008). There are a number of explanations for childhood cruelty to animals, which include the relief of boredom, curiosity, peer pressure and animal phobia. Cruelty to animals is also a potential reaction amongst children to exposure to domestic violence; for example, identification with the child's abuser, post-traumatic play, a vehicle for the emotional abuse of others and imitation (Ascione 2001). Whilst some commentators suggest that childhood cruelty towards animals is predictive of future behaviour and psychopathology, findings of a literature review

conducted by the NSPCC (2007) provide only mixed evidence for the argument that animal cruelty in childhood is predictive of violence in later life. Nevertheless, given the emotional distress experienced by children when their pets are harmed or killed witnessing, animal cruelty in the context of domestic violence clearly presents a risk of harm to children.

The Role of Health Visitors in Preventing an Escalation of Domestic Violence

The role of the health visitor in preventing an escalation of domestic violence is to institute a routine enquiry about domestic violence; assess safety in relation to both risk and protective factors; enable women to access specialist services; and support them change their situation (Institute of Health Visitors (iHV) 2014). Given pet cruelty may be a sign of the dangerousness of the abuser, practice guidelines on domestic violence state that health visitors should recognise the links with the abuse of animals in the assessment of safety (Great Britain, Department of Health (DH) 2013). Whilst the Common Assessment Framework does not include material relating to the harming of animals, there are nevertheless a number of domestic violence tools and risk assessment models that include explicit items relating to animal cruelty.

One such tool is the Duluth Model (the power and control wheel) (Pence and Paymar 1993), which outlines patterns of behaviour, including the abuse of pets, a perpetrator uses to control or dominate their intimate partner. It can be used with women who can point to each of the tactics on the wheel and clearly explain how these behaviours were used against them (Radford and Hester 2006). Risk assessment models include the Barnado's Domestic Violence Risk Identification Matrix (Barnado's London, East and South East 2011) and the Dash Risk Checklist (SafeLives 2015). The former was designed for use by first contact staff to assess the severity of domestic violence experienced by children and young people living in families where there is domestic violence. The model rates the severity of risk using a threshold scale from moderate risk (scale 1) to severe risk (scale 4); *perpetrators abuse of pets/animals/used to intimidate* would be indicative of a serious level of risk (scale 3).

The Dash Risk Checklist is intended to give a consistent and simple tool for practitioners who work with adults experiencing domestic violence to identify those

who are at high risk of murder or serious harm and whose cases should be referred to a Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) meeting. The checklist asks whether a number of factors are present including whether the abuser *has ever mistreated an animal or the family pet*. If respondents indicate the presence of these factors the practitioner are required to annotate the checklist accordingly. Visible high risk is indicated by the number of ticks on the checklist. Fourteen ticks or more would normally meet the MARAC referral criteria; however, a judgement would be based on the professional's experience and/or the victim's perception of their risk if they do not score 14 or more.

In order to make effective use of these models, health visitors must understand the significance of the questions posed and responses provided. The application of these tools should be used by those who have undertaken appropriate training. Whilst the majority of health visitors have undertaken domestic violence training, an unpublished survey of 28 health visitors in London and southern England suggested that only 25% (n = 7) of respondents had received training on the links between domestic violence and animal cruelty (Jeffers 2015).

As well as identifying animal cruelty in the context of domestic violence, health visitors clearly have a role in supporting women and children leave the home and move to a place of safety. In the absence of emergency accommodation suitable for all family members, a number of animal welfare charities have established pet fostering schemes for people fleeing or escaping from violence at home. These schemes provide a retreat for pets belonging to families who are going into temporary accommodation until such time as the owner has a new, safe place to live, when they can be united. All placements are strictly confidential. A list of such services can be found in Figure 2.

Conclusions

There is a paucity of research exploring the links between domestic violence and animal abuse in the UK. Whilst much of the empirical evidence originates in Australia and North America, there is no reason to believe that people in the UK are any kinder to their animals than they are elsewhere in the world. For example, there were 3,870 convictions for cruelty contrary to the Animal Welfare Act in England and Wales in 2013 (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA)

2013). Nevertheless, the international evidence base on the links between domestic violence and animal abuse would be enhanced by the inclusion of research undertaken with respondents in the UK.

Health visitors make an important contribution to tackling domestic violence in families. Whilst the family is often defined as comprising only human parts, pets are also considered by many parents, children and young people as part of the social unit that forms the family. This paper has shown the co-existence of domestic violence and animal cruelty and the use of animal cruelty to exercise coercive control over intimate partners. It has also argued that witnessing animal cruelty presents a risk of harm to children. The key principle guiding intervention in families where there is domestic violence is to ensure child safety is paramount, at the same time as ensuring adult safety is a priority (DH 2013). We argue that in the pursuit of the best outcomes for children and adults, health visitors should be cognisant of the treatment and care of family pets in their assessment and in planning interventions to support families in changing their situation. The starting point would be to utilise evidence based risk assessment tools. However, to work effectively in this field, training should be provided that outlines the links between domestic violence and animal cruelty and the community services available to help children, adults and animals in need.

Figure 1: Power and Control Tactics (Safe Passage (No Date))

Intimidation	Harming or killing a pet and threatening that the same thing will happen to the woman if she doesn't comply with the abuser's demands
Emotional Abuse	Calling the pet names (<i>Your stupid, ugly dog is useless. We should just put him down!</i>). Giving away or killing a pet to take away the woman's primary source of comfort and unconditional love
Isolation	Refusing to allow the pet to be taken to the preferred veterinarian. Prohibiting the woman from socialising their dog with other dogs.
Minimising, denying and blaming	Blaming the woman or their pet for the cruelty. Killing a pet and then saying that it doesn't matter because the pet was old
Using children	Harming or killing the children's pet in order to intimidate the children, or blaming the <i>disappearance</i> of the family pet on the woman in order to create a wedge between her and her children
Economic abuse	Refusing to allow the woman to spend money on adequate pet food and/or veterinary care (then blaming her when neglect is noticed by authorities)
Legal abuse	Trying to take possession of a pet for which the woman has been the primary caretaker upon separation
Coercion and Threats	Threatening to harm or kill the pet if the woman leaves or asserts any independence.

Figure 2: Pet Fostering Schemes

Schemes	Areas Covered	Telephone	Email
Dogs Trust Freedom Project	Greater London, Hertfordshire	0800 298 9199	freedomproject@dogstrust.or.uk
	Yorkshire	0800 083 4322	
Paws for Kids	Cumbrian, Lancashire, Greater Manchester, Merseyside, north Cheshire	01204 394 482	infor@pawsforkids.org.uk
Raystede Centre for Animal Welfare	Kent, East & West Sussex	01825 880478	petfostering@raystede.org
Refs for Pets	Nottinghamshire	07971 337264	Refs4pets@yahoo.co.uk
RSPCA PetRetreat	Avon, Berkshire, Cornwall, Cumbria, Devon, Dorset, Gloucestershire, Hampshire, Herefordshire, Isle of Wight, Leicestershire, Rutland, Shropshire, Somerset, south Lincolnshire, Staffordshire, Surrey, Wales, West Midlands, Wiltshire, Worcestershire, the north of England	0300 123 8278 07715 540182	petretreat@rspca.org.uk
Wood Green Foster Circle	Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Norfolk, Northamptonshire, Suffolk and Warwickshire	08442 488181	fostering@woodgreen.org.uk

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