

Children who abuse animals - when should you be concerned about child abuse?

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Introduction

- Animal abuse has been defined by Ascione¹ as socially unacceptable behaviour that intentionally causes unnecessary pain, suffering, or distress to and/or death of an animal.
- Adults who discover that a child has been abusing animals are often appalled; the behaviour is often thought to be highly abnormal.
- A review of the literature was conducted to help health professionals evaluate whether a child's abuse of an animal is a sign of a wider safeguarding concern by identifying relevant factors in the presentation that may make child abuse more likely.

Method

A search of published articles on the subject was conducted on pubmed/medline in April 2018.

Results

- Animal abuse by children is common, with 3–44% of children being reported to abuse animals at some point during their childhood.²
- Much of this behaviour may be regarded as an extension of exploratory behaviour in a younger child (see figure 1). However, there is a link between child and animal abuse; with children who abuse animals being 2–3 times more likely to be directly abused themselves.²
- Abuse to an animal that is perpetrated by an older child (>10 years) is more likely to be associated with child abuse.⁴
- Animal abuse is less common in girls compared with boys and there is some suggestion that child abuse may be more likely in these cases.⁵
- Some papers have reported a higher prevalence of animal abuse in children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, developmental delay and conduct disorder,^{6–9} but the relationship with child abuse in these cases is unknown.

References

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FIGURE 1: MOTIVATIONS FOR ANIMAL ABUSE (ADAPTED FROM ASCICONE)³

NON PATHOLOGICAL ABUSE

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

PATHOLOGICAL ABUSE

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



FIGURE 2: TAKING A SAFEGUARDING HISTORY FOR AN ANIMAL USING THE FINISH MNEMONIC

FOOD

– are animals in the house adequately fed and watered?

INJURY

– have animals recently been injured or died? Were they taken to a vet?

NUMBER

– how many pets are there currently/previously been kept in the household. Is there a high turnover of animals due to death or injury?

INTIMIDATION

– Is the treatment of animals ever used to intimidate or control other members of the family (for example threatening to kill an animal if a partner leaves?)

SHELTER

– Are animals being housed adequately?

HOW?

– Are injuries to animals consistent with the mechanism given?

