



# Juvenile Animal Abuse: Practice and Policy Implications for PNP's



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## ABSTRACT

Animal abuse has long been recognized as a sign of family violence and a warning sign of future aggression in children and adolescents. As leaders in youth violence prevention, pediatric nurse practitioners need to be aware of the prevalence and types of juvenile animal cruelty and its relationship to human violence. In doing so, they can champion for health care and related policies for this disturbing problem, described by Ascione as an underreported and understudied issue that may add to the understanding and prevention of youth violence. *J Pediatr Health Care.* (2004). *18*, 15-21.

"[One of the most dangerous things that can happen to a child] is when the child who kills or tortures [an animal] is not caught, or if caught is not punished."

—Anthropologist Margaret Mead (1964, p. 21)

On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold allegedly brought pipe bombs and guns to Columbine High School, where they killed 12 fellow students and one teacher before fatally shooting themselves ([Humane Society of the United States, n.d.](#)). Several students later remarked that Harris and Klebold frequently spoke of mutilating animals ([Humane Society of the United States, n.d.](#)). When juvenile animal abuse occurs, both the animal and the child suffer.

Cruelty to animals has been recognized as a sign of family violence and a warning sign of future aggression in children and adolescents by psychologists, sociologists, and criminologists. However, until recently, it has been virtually ignored by health professionals, including nurse practitioners. This article examines implications and presents policy implications for juvenile animal abuse, the problem described by Ascione (2001) as an underreported and understudied issue that may add to the understanding and prevention of youth violence.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PETS IN CHILDREN'S LIVES

Pets serve as family members in the majority of American households, where nearly three quarters of families with school-aged children have at least one companion animal ([Humane Society of the United States, 2002a](#)). Pets become a vital part of the healthy emotional development of children. As children develop, animals play different roles in helping children achieve tasks such as the acquisition of basic trust, compassion, empathy, and a sense of responsibility ([Robin & ten Bensele, 1998](#)).

In a study that examined children's representations of support from their pets compared with support from human relationships, McNicholas and Collis (2001) found that pets were often ranked higher than certain types of

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human relationships, and they featured prominently as providers of comfort and esteem support and confidants for secrets. These results, developed from a population of twenty-two 7- to 8-year-olds, confirmed previous claims that pets may assume significant relationships in children's social networks.

Rew (2000) analyzed manifest and latent qualitative data regarding loneliness from 32 homeless youths, ages 16 to 23 years, who participated in focus groups. Her findings showed that vulnerable, homeless adolescents often recognized the therapeutic values of pets in terms of unconditional love, reduced feelings of loneliness, and improvement in their health status. For many of these children, the need to care for a dog excited their urge to act more responsibly and to make better choices, and for many, the dog was the only one who gave them love.

In a review of the literature, Enderburg and Baarda (1995) described the effects of pets on child development. They note that caring for a pet aids in the development of self-esteem, responsibility, compassion, and empathy forecast, as well as unconditional acceptance, social support, and possibly the facilitation of language acquisition. When considering all that pets provide children, particularly compassion, responsibility, and unconditional love, the occurrence of animal abuse by children is particularly problematic, demonstrating dysfunction.

#### DEFINITION AND PREVALENCE OF ANIMAL ABUSE

Animal abuse or cruelty is a socially unacceptable behavior that intentionally causes unnecessary distress, suffering or pain, and/or death of an animal (Ascione, 2001). This definition takes into account cultural variations and socially condoned practices, such as legal hunting and certain veterinary and agricultural practices.

In a 2001 survey of 1863 perpetrators of animal cruelty, the Humane Society of the United States (2002b) noted that any animal could be abused, including wildlife and farm animals, but that a higher percentage of abuse (74%) is toward companion animals. This same survey also showed that teens account for 20% of cruelty cases, children 4%, and that the vast majority of these abusers are male (95% of teen abusers

and 96% of child abusers). Sex is one of the most consistent factors associated with the perpetration of animal abuse; almost all abusers are males (Flynn, 2001).

Using five items from the Boat Inventory on Animal-related Experiences, Flynn (1999a) studied a population of 267 undergraduate students taking introductory psychology and sociology courses at a southeastern university. He found that 17.6% of his subject population had perpetrated abuse; 13.1% killed a stray or wild animal, and 2.6% killed a pet. Flynn also found that 1.5% touched an animal sexually and that nearly half (48%) first abused an animal in their teens; 40% were between ages 6

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and 12 years, and nearly 11% committed their first act of abuse when they were 2 to 5 years old.

Using criteria from Ascione (2001), the Humane Society of the United States (2002b) and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (n.d.), this article categorizes animal abuse/cruelty as either neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, hoarding, cockfighting, or dogfighting. Ascione (2001) points out that some people might argue that psychological abuse is also possible. This category certainly should be included when considering acts such as the ongoing teasing of animals or keeping animals chained or confined at all times.

Neglect occurs when a person deprives an animal of food, water, shelter, and/or veterinary care. It usually happens as a result of ignorance on the owner's part and is typically handled by authorities, who require the owner to correct the situation. Neglect cases are acts of omission rather than commission and do not give satisfaction to the person whose animals are neglected (Humane Society of the United States, 2002b).

Physical abuse results from malicious torturing, maiming, mutilation, or killing. These acts of intentional cruelty are often shocking and usually indicative of a serious human behavioral problem. Juveniles who commit these intentional acts of cruelty take satisfaction in causing harm (Ascione, 2001; Humane Society of the United States, 2002b).

Animal sexual abuse, or bestiality, is the sexual molestation of animals by humans and includes a wide range of behaviors, including fondling; vaginal, anal, or oral penetration; oral-genital contact; penetration with an object; and injuring or killing an animal for sexual gratification. Like rape, this is an eroticization of violence, control, and exploitation (Humane Society of the United States, 1999). In a study of 381 institutionalized, adjudicated, male juvenile offenders, Fleming, Jory, and Burton (2002) found that 23 of 24 juveniles (96%) who admitted to bestiality also admitted to sexual offenses against humans.

Hoarding, which is similar to neglect, occurs when a person accumulates a large number of animals, provides minimal standards of nutrition, sanitation, and veterinary care, and fails to act on the deteriorating condition of the animals and/or the environment. Unlike most other perpetrators of animal cruelty, the majority of hoarders are female (Humane Society of the United States, 2002b).

Cockfighting is the term used when two or more specialty birds, or gamecocks, are placed in an enclosure to fight to the death, sometimes of both birds. Dogfighting is a contest between two specifically bred, conditioned, and trained-to-fight dogs that are placed in a pit to fight. Usually the loser dies, is left to die, or is killed by the owner. Both cockfighting and dogfighting are for the purposes of gambling or entertain-

ment, and both, particularly dogfighting, may be associated with other criminal activity. Pit bulls and pit bull mixes are the most popular among dog fighters, including juveniles and inner-city gang members (Boston Animal Control, 2003).

### ETIOLOGY OF ANIMAL ABUSE

Several factors have been implicated in the development of juvenile animal abuse. A peer group may influence teenage boys to engage in cruelty if the boys want to gain approval or prove their masculinity. In a review of all complaints of animal cruelty in the records of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals between 1975 and 1996, Arluke and Luke (1997) noted that, while adult suspects committed cruelty alone, nearly half of minor perpetrators acted as part of a group.

Perhaps the most significant factors are those that provide negative role-modeling, particularly behaviors that create chaotic and abusive households. Children learn to mimic these abusive behaviors on others they have some power over, typically animals and/or other children, and some later perpetuate the cycle by continuing to be violent into adulthood. Thus juvenile animal cruelty can reveal information about the family as well as the child, and therefore may be a marker for family violence—that is, corporal punishment, child abuse, and domestic violence (Ascione, 2001; Flynn, 2001).

Although corporal punishment is still considered appropriate discipline by some persons, evidence continues to demonstrate its ineffectiveness and potential harm. In a study of 267 undergraduates, Flynn (1999b) found that for males, perpetrating animal abuse was positively correlated with the frequency of their exposure to paternal corporal punishment during adolescence. Those who had been spanked, slapped, or hit by their fathers reported 2.4 times higher incidences of animal cruelty than those who were not physically disciplined ( $P < .005$ ).

Both physical and sexual child abuse have been studied as factors in animal abuse. Although they are not recent studies, their results are compelling. DeViney, Dickert, and Lockwood (1983) studied 53 families that met New Jersey state criteria for child abuse and

**BOX 1** Violent child/adolescent offenders with a history of animal cruelty

- Kip Kinkel, 15 years old, Oregon; killed his parents, two classmates, and wounded 22 other classmates; often bragged about torturing animals
- Luke Woodham, 16 years old, Mississippi; killed his mother, two classmates, wounded 7 others; burned and tortured his dog, Sparkle, to death, stating it was “true beauty”
- Mitchell Johnson, 13 years old, and Andrew Golden, 11 years old, Arkansas; killed 4 students and 1 teacher; shot at dogs with a .22 rifle
- Michael Carneal, 14 years old, Kentucky; killed 3 classmates; allegedly threw a cat into a bonfire
- Eric Harris, 18 years old, and Dylan Klebold, Colorado; killed 12 classmates and one teacher before killing themselves; Harris enjoyed smashing the heads of mice with a crowbar and setting them on fire; Klebold shot woodpeckers
- 7- and 8-year-old brothers with an 11-year-old friend, Texas; beat and sexually assaulted a 3-year-old girl; were involved in animal cruelty
- “Vampire cult leader” Rod Ferrell, 17 years old, along with cult members Heather Wendorf, 16 years old, Howard Anderson, 17 years old, Dana Cooper, 20 years old, and Charity Keesce, 17 years old, Florida; bludgeoned Wendorf’s parents; included animal torture and mutilation as part of their rituals
- Eric Smith, 13 years old; New York; beat a 4-year-old boy to death; choked his cat to death with a garden hose clamp
- Samuel Manzie, 17 years old, New Jersey; strangled an 11-year-old boy to death after he forced him to strip and perform oral sex; had a history of torching his family cats and dog
- Shawn Novak, 16 years old, Virginia; slashed the throats of two young neighborhood boys; wore a cat’s paw on a necklace, bragged to friends about killing animals, and showed them dead birds and animal bones

Data from The Humane Society of the United States, First Strike Program: [www.hsus.org/firststrike](http://www.hsus.org/firststrike)

who had pets in their homes. Their results revealed that the occurrence of animal abuse was 88% higher in families where physical child abuse was present

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than in families with other forms of child abuse. Freidrich et al. (1992) compared a sample of sexually abused children ( $n = 276$ ) with a sample of nonabused children ( $n = 880$ ), ages 2 to

12 years, and found that the abused children were significantly ( $P < .001$ ) more likely to have abused animals than the nonabused group.

In a survey of 38 women seeking shelter at a safe house in Utah for battered partners, 71% reported that their partner had threatened and/or actually hurt or killed one or more of their pets. Thirty-two percent reported that one or more of their children hurt or killed family pets (Ascione, 1998). Flynn (2000) reported that 46.5% of his study population of 43 battered women in South Carolina reported threats or harm to their pets by their partners, but only 7% reported cruelty by their children.

Children from dysfunctional families whose childhoods include neglect, brutality, rejection, and hostility are more likely to commit animal abuse (Quinn, 2000). Even in chaotic homes, pets play an important role in children’s lives, and these children rely more on pets for loyalty and love than do other children. However, pets rarely survive past the

**BOX 2** Strategies for promoting health practice and policy changes

- Become active in appropriate organizations
- Write articles for professional journals and consumer papers, including letters to the editor
- Encourage senators and congressmen to create legislation
- Speak at conferences to rouse colleagues
- Speak to consumer groups—libraries are always looking for people to give presentations
- Create a Web site
- Develop a newsletter—electronic newsletters save money and get more readers
- Be creative—draw, paint, write music
- Rally PNP students to find their own passions and become activists for policy development
- Stay hopeful—small changes may someday turn into something big

age of 2 years in violent households because they are either killed, die from neglect, or run away to escape the abuse. Even when overt human violence does not take place, this constant turnover of animals causes the children to suffer repeated cycles of attachment and loss (Quinn, 2000).

**JUVENILE ANIMAL ABUSE AND HUMAN VIOLENCE**

Violence breeds violence. Serial killers Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy, and David Berkowitz (the Son of Sam) all had histories of animal cruelty as youths (Quinn, 2000). Children who are exposed to violence can in turn abuse animals, and children who abuse animals can become violent toward other humans (Quinn, 2000). All forms of violence share common characteristics—their victims are living creatures who can display signs of pain with which humans should empathize, and may die as a result of their injuries (Ascione, 2001).

Ressler, Burgess, and Douglas (1988) studied convicted male sexual homicide perpetrators on their self-report of cruelty to animals during their childhood and adolescence. Thirty-six percent reported abusing animals as children, and 46% noted they abused animals as adolescents. In a study of 299 inmates incarcerated for various felonies and 308 undergraduate students, Miller and Knudson (1997) found higher percentages of animal abuse in the prison population compared with the college students: hurting animals, 16.4% versus 9.7%; killed a stray, 32.8% versus 14.3%; and killed a pet, 12% versus 3.2%. Schiff, Louw, and Ascione (1999) surveyed 117

men incarcerated in a South African prison. Sixty-five percent of the men who committed aggressive crimes had committed animal cruelty compared with only 10.5% of the nonaggressive inmates.

**P**ets rarely survive past the age of 2 years in violent households because they are either killed, die from neglect, or run away to escape the abuse.

Studies that look at the relationship between animal abuse and human violence suggest that animal abuse may be characteristics of the developmental histories of between one in four and nearly two in three violent adult offenders (Ascione, 2001). Statistics like these certainly bear recognition and action on the part of pediatric nurse practitioners (PNPs).

Perhaps the most graphic examples of animal abuse preceding violent behavior are the perpetrators of school shootings and other high-profile young homicide offenders (Box 1). Animal cruelty is one of the earliest and most

reliable predictors of later violent behavior (Ascione, 2001; Quinn, 2000).

**PRACTICE AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Decades of anecdotal and research evidence shows the relationship between animal cruelty and human violence. Yet little has been done to create any measure of health care practice or policy to intervene in a problem that is as unsettling as it is devastating. PNPs, known for their commitment to violence prevention, can be on the forefront of policy formation by using their knowledge, skills, and creativity (see Box 2) to advocate for health care and related policies that require mandatory reporting of animal cruelty; encourage problem recognition and training programs for health care professionals; enforce mandatory assessment and intervention; promote the development of inter-agency coalitions; support legislation for better anticruelty laws; and foster the creation of programs to teach children compassion for animals.

**Mandatory Reporting of Animal Cruelty**

The number of animals that are abused by youths and others can only be estimated because no nationwide reporting mechanism exists. An ideal policy would establish a national databank that could track trends and serve as a baseline to measure the effectiveness of interventions (Ascione, 2001). In the interim, PNPs could lobby for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to include questions about animal cruelty in their semi-annual Youth Risk Behavior Survey, and for mandatory reporting by veterinarians and health care personnel.

Veterinarians must be trained to recognize all forms of animal abuse and be mandated to report it. To date only two states, Minnesota and West Virginia, require such reporting (Ascione, 2001). Veterinarians also should be educated on the connection between animal cruelty and human violence, because their animal clients may be part of an abusive system in which children may also be victims. Community nurses should learn the signs of abuse and be responsible for reporting them. PNPs also can encourage policy that would allow for anonymous reporting by the public, similar to what is done for child abuse.

### Problem Recognition and Training Programs

Animal cruelty is one of the earliest and most reliable predictors of later violent behavior, particularly if the child exhibits any or all of the following: direct involvement in the cruelty, lack of remorse, engagement in a variety of cruel acts, victimization of different species, or mistreatment of valued animals, such as dogs (Quinn, 2000). PNP education, both entry curricula and continuing education programs, should reflect the nature of this problem, as well as assessment and treatment options.

Furthermore, PNPs can educate other health care providers and the public about juvenile animal abuse, and they can encourage the expansion of professional cross-training so that animal control agents can identify signs of child maltreatment and juvenile delinquency and health care providers can identify signs of animal abuse. The model way to reach multidisciplinary professionals is to organize a First Strike Workshop by contacting the Humane Society of the United States (<http://hsus2.org/firststrike/workshops/index.html>) to have them set up an all-day workshop for key members of the animal protection community and their counterparts in human service fields.

### Mandatory Assessment and Intervention

Assessing for the presence of animal cruelty must be part of all routine child health visits and episodic visits for children who present with behavioral problems or signs of child abuse. Cruelty has been associated with all forms of intrafamilial violence (Ascione & Arkow, 1998), and the juvenile may not be the only one abusing animals. Just asking the age of the household pets may prove significant because abused pets rarely live past two years because they get killed, die of neglect, or run away to escape the abuse. At the very least, in homes where this constant turnover takes place, children suffer from repeated cycles of attachment and loss (Quinn, 2000). Formal assessment protocols are in their formative stage of development. In the interim, PNPs can utilize questions that can easily be integrated into the psychosocial history (see Box 3).

Animal cruelty is not part of normal development. All episodes of abuse,

#### BOX 3 Interview questions to elicit animal cruelty histories

- Do you have any pets or other animals in your house?
- Whose pets/animal are they?
- What kind? What are their names? How old are they?
- Who takes care [the pet/animal]?
- Where does [the pet] sleep? What does [the pet/animal] eat?
- How is [the pet/animal] disciplined (trained)?
- Does anyone ever hurt [the pet/animal]? Who? How was [the pet/animal] hurt?
- Has anyone ever touched [the pet/animal] sexually or had sex with [the pet/animal]? Who? What did [the person] do to the pet/animal?
- Have you ever lost a pet/animal you cared about?
- Do you worry that something bad will happen to [the pet/animal]?

Data from Boat, B. (1998).

even those done out of curiosity, warrant intervention. Ascione (2001), utilizing typology from juvenile firesetters, created a typology for juvenile animal abuse with suggested interventions that can serve as a foundation for health

only determining factor because animal cruelty is the earliest sign of conduct disorder.

- Pathologic animal abusers are more likely to be older (but not necessarily). These children may be symptomatic of psychological disturbances of varying severity, and/or may have a history of physical abuse, sexual abuse, or exposure to domestic violence. Professional clinical intervention is warranted.
- Delinquent animal abusers are typically adolescents with other antisocial behaviors, sometimes gang or cult related. Substance abuse may be involved with the cruelty. Both clinical and judicial interventions may be required.

### Development of Interagency Coalitions

PNPs should support policy that encourages and supports the development of innovative, multidisciplinary interagency programs and collaborations that aid in early detection and prevention of violence toward humans and animals. Nationally, these agencies could include the Humane Society of the United States, the National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners, the American Veterinary Medicine Association, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. On the local level, coalitions should form between PNPs, police, animal control agents, the district attorney's office, and at least one counseling agency. Interagency coalitions are also more capable of influencing legislators to better the animal cruelty laws.

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policy regulations regarding mandatory interventions:

- Exploratory/curious animal abusers are likely to be preschoolers or very early school-aged children who are poorly supervised and lack training on the physical care and humane treatment of animals. Developmentally delayed children also may fit into this category. Humane education is likely to be sufficient intervention; however, age should not be the

### Legislation for Better Anticruelty Laws

All 50 states have anticruelty laws that vary drastically from state to state and often go unenforced ([www.animal-law.org/statutes](http://www.animal-law.org/statutes) lists the laws for each state). Currently, 37 states and the District of Columbia have laws making certain types of cruelty a felony. Felony laws send a powerful message and assist the criminal justice community in recognizing animal cruelty as having serious implications for both animals' protection and society's welfare (Fox, 1998). Eighteen states have provisions for counseling as part of a sentence for persons, mostly juveniles, convicted of felony cruelty.

Even in those states with felony, however, laws remain weak. For example, the cruelty statute in Pennsylvania only considers animal fighting (ie, dog- or cockfighting) a felony. The willful and malicious killing of someone's companion animal is a misdemeanor, punishable by a fine of not less than \$500 and/or imprisonment for no more than 2 years (SPCA of Luzerne County, n.d.). PNPs should lobby for appropriate laws in all 50 states, laws that make all forms of serious animal cruelty felonies with significant sentencing requirements and mandatory counseling; necessitate immediate removal of suspected abused animals from abusive situation; require forfeiture of the abused animal and disallow the abuser to own other animals until he or she is deemed suitable to do so; force the abuser to incur all costs for the abused animal; and allow for interagency reporting of all forms of family violence, including animal cruelty.

All forms of abuse need to be at a zero-tolerance level to break the cycle of violence. In 2001, Rhode Island became the first state to pass a law establishing the definition of "guardian" to be used in the same context of "owner" (Animal Protection Institute, 2001). Viewing animals as living, feeling beings instead of property is a huge step in promoting human compassion.

### Creation of Programs to Teach Children Compassion for Animals

Humane education is not a panacea, but it helps, as evidenced by programs like Green Chimneys that aid even troubled youths with animal-assisted therapy (Ross, 1998). Therefore, health

care policies should provide for humane education as part of school curricula to better enable all children to develop compassion for all living creatures and create what Ascione and Arkow (1998, p. 10) call a *trans-species kinship*.

### AN OVERDUE TIME FOR CHANGE

Acts of aggression against vulnerable family members are matters of control, and whether the victims have two legs or four is more a matter of opportunity than anything else. These acts of aggression endanger all members of the household and place the community at risk (Ascione & Arkow, 1998), as is well documented in the high-profile juvenile animal cruelty cases noted in Box 1.

**As leaders in youth violence prevention, PNPs need to be on the forefront for health practice and policy creation to address the issues of juvenile animal cruelty.**

As leaders in youth violence prevention, PNPs need to be on the forefront for health practice and policy creation to address the issues of juvenile animal cruelty. As Ascione (2001) notes, vandalism may be a costly form of juvenile destructiveness, but smashed windshields and graffitied walls do not feel pain or cry out when damaged. Addressing abused animals means helping the children who abuse them.

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