

# Animal Cruelty/Human Violence: The Link

[Holly Nash, DVM, MS](#)

*Veterinary Services Department, Drs. Foster & Smith, Inc.*



In recent years, a strong connection has been found linking animal abuse and domestic violence. In one study, 70.3% of women in domestic abuse shelters reported either threats to or actual harm of pets, with 54% reporting actual harm. In contrast, threats to pets were reported by only 16.7% of a control group of non-shelter women, and only 3.5% of these women reported actual harm of pets. A number of women in shelters said that their concern for their pets' welfare actually delayed their leaving the home environment to seek shelter.

Organizations such as the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), American Medical Association (AMA), National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV), local governments, communities, and animal shelters have recognized the problem and are finding new ways to increase awareness and help those involved. Social workers are learning that people who are being abused may hesitate to leave an abuser because of concerns about a pet. Some veterinary schools have added abuse recognition training to their curricula, and the link between animal cruelty and domestic violence has been a featured topic at veterinary conventions and seminars. Literature is available to help veterinarians learn the warning signs of animal abuse and how to distinguish injuries due to abuse from other injuries.

There are at least three ways that animal abuse and human violence can be linked.

## 1. Abusers use animals to influence or harm people

By abusing an animal another person cares for, the abuser can:

- **Demonstrate dominance or control**  
By inflicting violence on companion animals, abusers can powerfully demonstrate their power over a partner, elderly parent, or child. When an adult or child sees what an abusive person can do to a pet, they realize they are vulnerable to similar abuse, and in this way are taught submission.
- **Inflict punishment or retaliation**  
Abusers may harm animals to punish their partners for leaving, or attempting to leave. Animal abuse may also be used as a punishment for disobedience or some other action of which the abuser did not approve. It is a way to "get even" or "teach you a lesson." Many abused people have reported that the mental

anguish of having a loved animal abused is worse than some of the physical punishment they had received themselves.

In a different tactic, a perpetrator may use an animal as an excuse for violence against a human. For instance, if an animal misbehaves, the child or partner may be the recipient of the violence rather than the pet.

- **Silence, isolate, and threaten**  
By threatening to abuse an animal, a person can often prevent an abused adult or child from revealing their abuse to others and getting help. Abusive spouses or children may threaten to kill or harm an elderly person's pet if they do not sign over assets or property to the abuser.
- **Eliminate competition for attention**  
Jealousy over the amount of attention a companion animal receives may prompt an abuser to get rid of the pet.

## 2. Abused children may become animal abusers

Multiple studies have shown that children who grow up in an environment of animal abuse are more likely to be involved in animal abuse and human violence as they grow up. Young children growing up in an environment of abuse may become desensitized, and come to see violence as the norm. They may also learn that one way to demonstrate you have power or control is to abuse a creature that is weaker than you. Children in households with emotional or physical abuse between partners may vent or "act out" their resulting emotions, often through cruelty to animals.

## 3. Animal abuse may predict adult violence

People who abused pets as children are far more likely to commit murder or other violent crimes as they become adults. In fact, one of the most reliable predictors of adult violence is committing animal abuse as a child.

### What can be done?

Animal cruelty needs to be taken seriously. It is not only a crime in itself, but an indication of other violence past, present, and future.

**Report animal cruelty:** If you witness or hear about an act of animal cruelty taking place, report it to your local humane organization, veterinarian, or call your local police. Humane law enforcement agencies may be located in the

**Animal abuse and domestic violence can occur anywhere. There are no social or economic boundaries.**



Yellow Pages of a local telephone book under 'Humane Societies' or 'Animal Shelters,' and can also be found on a searchable database at [www.aspca.org/site/FrameSet?style=Animal](http://www.aspca.org/site/FrameSet?style=Animal).

**Encourage legislation:** Learn more about the animal abuse laws in your state and advocate for appropriate legislation. See

[www.aspca.org/site/FrameSet?style=StateLaw](http://www.aspca.org/site/FrameSet?style=StateLaw) to find out more about the laws in your state.

**Educate children:** Teach and encourage children to show kindness towards animals. If you are not a teacher, urge your local schools to integrate humane education into their curricula. If you are a teacher, bring humane education into your classroom. To help you, your local shelter may have outreach programs, education materials, camps, etc.

**Advocate for nonviolence:** Work within your community to increase awareness of the link between animal cruelty and human violence.

**Volunteer your services:** In some communities, foster homes for pets have been created to enable more abused persons to leave an abusive relationship. Some of these are connected with the "Safe Haven For Pets," a program sponsored by the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS). Contact your local animal shelter to see if "Safe Haven For Pets" or a similar program exists in your area, or if one can be started.

**Increase public awareness:** Work with your local animal shelters and domestic abuse shelters to increase awareness of the link between animal cruelty and domestic violence. A program called "First Strike," developed by the Humane Society of the United States, helps the public and relevant professionals treat animal abuse as a serious crime and an indicator of other forms of violence, including domestic violence. For further information, call the Humane Society toll-free at (1-888-213-0956) or visit their web site at [www.hsus.org/ace/15828](http://www.hsus.org/ace/15828).

**Give financial support:** Support your local animal rescue organization or shelter with donations of money, food, or supplies.

## References and Further Reading

Ascione, F; Barnard, S. The link between animal abuse and violence to humans; Why veterinarians should care. Recognizing and Reporting Animal Abuse, A Veterinarian's Guide, American Humane Association, 1998.

Ascione, FR; Weber, C; Wood, DS. The abuse of animals and domestic violence: A national survey of shelters for women who are battered.

Society and Animals, 1997; 5(3): 205-218.

Boat, B. (1995). The relationship between violence to children and violence to animals: An ignored link? *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 10 (4), 229-235.

Center for Research on Violence Against Women and Children.  
[www.uwo.ca/violence/html/petabuselinks.html](http://www.uwo.ca/violence/html/petabuselinks.html)

Center for the Human-Animal Bond, Purdue University School of Veterinary Medicine. [www.vet.purdue.edu/chab/abuse.htm](http://www.vet.purdue.edu/chab/abuse.htm)

Commentary from Research:  
[www.pcrm.org/issues/Commentary/commentary0010.html](http://www.pcrm.org/issues/Commentary/commentary0010.html)

DeViney, E., J. Dickert, and R. Lockwood (1983). The care of pets within child abusing families. *International Journal for the Study of Animal Problems*, 4, 321-329.

Humane Society of the United States. 2004 Animal Cruelty/Human Violence Awareness Week. [www.hsus.org/ace/20261](http://www.hsus.org/ace/20261)

Lockwood, R; Ascione, F. *Cruelty to Animals and Interpersonal Violence: Readings in research and application*. Purdue University Press, 1998.

Office of Public Engagement, University of Illinois, College of Veterinary Medicine. *Animal and Domestic Abuse: A Sobering Connection*.  
[www.cvm.uiuc.edu/petcolumns/showarticle.cfm?id=413](http://www.cvm.uiuc.edu/petcolumns/showarticle.cfm?id=413)

Patronek, G. *Issues and guidelines for veterinarians in recognizing, reporting, and assessing animal neglect and abuse*. *Recognizing and Reporting Animal Abuse, A Veterinarian's Guide*. American Humane Association, 1998.

Raupp, CD; Barlow, M; Oliver, JA. Perceptions of family violence: Are companion animals in the picture? *Society and Animals*, 1997:5(3):219-237.