

How Knowing a Child's Experiences with Animals Can Enhance the Advocacy Process

Barbara. W. Boat, Ph.D.
The Childhood Trust
Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center
University of Cincinnati Department of Psychiatry

Advocating for What?

- Trauma-informed/responsive care?
- Decreased stress/conflict?
- Safer living environment?
- Mental health/medical services?
- School-based services?
- Juvenile Justice services?
- Access to special programs/camps?
- Being the child's voice when needed?

What can you learn about a child from asking about animal-related experiences?

- Attachment potential
- Experiences of loss
- Attitudes towards animals, including fears
- Care of children and animals in the home and community
- Exposure to threats and violence at home and in the community
- **Increased risk for "Toxic Stress"**

Let's talk about the pets of your clients (and exposure to other animals)

- Ever had a pet? Tell me about it...
- Kinds of pets in your family? How many?
- A favorite pet?
- Comfort from a pet when you were sad or hurt or unhappy or worried?

- Lost a pet you really cared about? What happened?
- Threats to harm your pet?
- Ever been scared or hurt by an animal?
- How taught to be good? What happened when pet was naughty?

Take away messages

- Ask about animal-related experiences
- Know the research on ACEs and Toxic Stress
- Connect that a child's experiences with animals (witnessing cruelty; loss) can intensify the impact of adverse experiences
- Use this information to help protect and advocate for the wellbeing of children and families

Pets as Family



- 63% of U.S. households have at least one pet
- 99% of owners consider their pet a family member
- 83% refer to themselves as their pet's mom or dad
- 76% feel guilty about leaving their pet when they go to work
- 59% celebrate their pet's birthday
- 52% are better at remembering names of a neighbors' pets than names of actual neighbors

Adverse Childhood Events Study

Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACES)

- The largest study of its kind ever done to examine the health and social effects of adverse childhood experiences *over the lifespan*
- 17,337 adults with Kaiser Permanente Health (1995-97)
- 14 year study
- Mean age: 57 years (50% male – 50% female)
- 75% white; 11% Latino; 7% Asian; 5 % African American
- 75% attended college; most had jobs; all had insurance

Felitti, Anda et al. Am J Prev Med 14:245-58,1998

10 ACE Categories

ABUSE

- Emotional
- Physical
- Sexual

HOUSEHOLD DYSFUNCTION

- Mother Treated Violently
- Household Substance Abuse
- Household Mental Illness
- Parental Separation or Divorce
- Incarcerated Household Member

NEGLECT

- Emotional
- Physical

10

ACE Scores

Number of adverse childhood experiences were totaled

ACE score	Prevalence
0	36%
1	26%
2	16%
3	9,5%
4 or more	12,5%

- Almost 2/3 had at least one ACE
- 1 in 8 had 4 or more ACEs
- If the average pediatrician will see 2-4 children with an ACE score of 4 or more each day how many adults, adolescents and children will YOU see ?

Adapted from Anda RF et al., 2006. Eur Arch Psychiatry Clin Neurosci 256: 174-186.

Got the attention of the medical profession!

Dose response related to poor health outcomes
4+ ACES increased likelihood of developing:

Chronic pulmonary lung disease by 390%
Hepatitis: 240%
Depression 460%
Suicide 1,220%
6 ACES IV drug user 4,600%

Die 20 years earlier

12

The ACEs are Among Many Childhood Traumas and Adversities Measured by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network N=10,991¹

- The original ACEs (in red) are among the most commonly reported traumas in studies that look at additional traumas.
- Over 40% of the children and adolescents served by the NCTSN experienced 4 or more different types of trauma and adversity.

¹Pynoos et al (2014) Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice and Policy 6:59-513. CANarratives.org

Toxic Stress as the “Mediator”

Think about the potential relevance of this information to advocacy work:

- Provides “hard data”
- Connects to medical systems
- Promotes primary prevention
- Protects through the courts

14

Allostasis and Allostatic Load

- Allostasis:** process of achieving stability (homeostasis) through physiological or behavioral change. Every baby, child, adolescent and adult seeks allostasis.
- Allostatic Load:** the wear and tear on the body which grows over time when the individual is exposed to repeated or chronic stress

15

Why I Use Sex, Drugs and Drink/Eat a Lot!

From Neurochemistry to Behavior

- Heroin and alcohol** decrease firing of the locus coeruleus (brain stress activation center).
- Nicotine and cocaine** stimulate dopamine release in the nucleus accumbens (reward center).
- Sex** releases oxytocin, which mediates pair bonding and social attachment. It also decreases cortisol levels.
- Cortisol** stimulates craving of high-sugar, high-fat foods

Nadine Brooke Hill

16

Stress

Defining and Measuring Stress

- Hugh individual variation
- Perception (subjective)
- Reaction (objective and physiological)
 - Positive Stress
 - Tolerable Stress

Social emotional buffers return us to baseline (allostasis)

17

Positive & Tolerable Stress

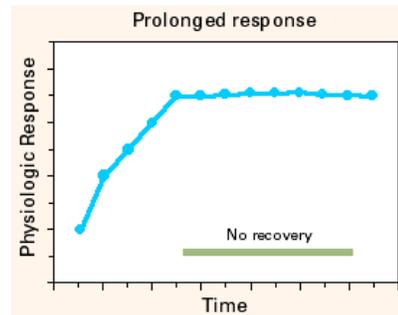
18

Self-Regulation

What if, over time, her caregiver was unavailable or unable to help her recover from this and additional ongoing stressors?

19

Toxic Stress



Toxic Stress

"Toxic Stress" results from exposure to *chronic stressors* for which there are *not adequate buffers* to reduce the *toxicity of the stress hormones*.

21

Excessive stress can harm the developing brain

- Cortisol = the stress hormone

Fight or flight response to stress: positive energy burst, lower pain sensitivity

"The Attack of the Adrenals": if stress hormones don't know when to quit, they remain active, injuring and even killing cells in the hippocampus

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2005). *Excessive Stress Disrupts the Architecture of the Developing Brain: Working Paper #3*. <http://www.developingchild.net>

The Attack of the Adrenals

- Prolonged stress hormones can make us learn less and remember less.
- Stress hormones may take 3 - 72 hours to normalize!
- Cause faster heart rate; decrease bone density, lower immunity, raise blood pressure

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2005). *Excessive Stress Disrupts the Architecture of the Developing Brain: Working Paper #3*. <http://www.developingchild.net>

Students with 3 or more ACEs

- Are 2 ½ times more likely to fail a grade
- Score lower on standardized tests
- Have language difficulties
- Are suspended or expelled more
- Are designated to special education more frequently
- Have poorer health

Courtesy of Chris Blodgett, PhD Washington State University

24

Epigenetics

- “At the moment of conception, the trajectory of that human being to-be is going to be different depending on the ACE score of the parents, the grandparents and generations before.”

Vincent Felitti, MD

25

So... toxic stress mediates health outcomes.
Why should we care?

Because toxic stress damages the human brain and

we are constantly confronted with the manifestations of this damage in our professional settings

... and because...

- As the number of **positive experiences** increases, risk for adverse effect of ACES decreases.
- The effect of ACES can be reversible if we **recognize ACES early** and provide positive experiences (a caring and responsive adult)
- **Animal cruelty can be an early “red flag” for ACES**

The Toxic Triad: Animal Cruelty, Child Abuse and Domestic Violence



The Toxic Triad and Toxic Stress

- ❑ Animal cruelty is embedded in many adverse childhood experiences
- ❑ Exposure to animal cruelty *potentially intensifies* the impact of adverse experiences
- ❑ Exposure to animal cruelty and/or children’s cruel behavior toward animals can be an **early indicator** that children are at risk to develop “toxic stress”

ACES Categories with potential links to animal cruelty

ABUSE

- Emotional
- Physical
- Sexual

HOUSEHOLD DYSFUNCTION

- Mother Treated Violently
- Household Substance Abuse
- Household Mental Illness
- Parental Separation or Divorce
- Incarcerated Household Member

NEGLECT

- Emotional
- Physical

30

Additional ACES for Children

Finkelhor, et.al, 2012

Peer Rejection

- No good friends
- Very overweight
- Physical disability
- Less masculine or feminine than others

School Performance

- Below-average grades
- Repeated a grade

Community Violence

Why should I obtain information about the child's experiences with animals?

- 73% of families with children have pets
- A child is more likely to grow up with a pet than with a father who lives in the same home
- *Children share the same environment as their pets*

Why should I obtain information about the child's experiences with animals?

"The behavior that harms the animal is the *same* behavior that harms the human."

Lynn Loar, Ph.D.



Common Legal Definitions of Animal Cruelty

- Causing death in an inhumane manner
- Abandoning an animal in an environment in which it is incapable of surviving
- Providing poor sanitary conditions, lack of proper nutrition or shelter, lack of veterinary care or inhumane confinement
- Inflicting pain beyond forms of discipline commonly accepted in society

DEAR ANN:

"My 5-year-old nephew is very cruel to animals. He choked a little rabbit to death and set fire to our cat. His parents think he'll outgrow it. What do you think?"

DSM Classification of Cruelty to Animals as a Symptom of Mental Disorder

DSM III and earlier: **Not mentioned**

DSM III R (1988): Included under **"Destruction Of Property"** as diagnostic of Conduct Disorder

DSM IV (1994): Included under **"Violence Against Others"** as diagnostic of Conduct Disorder

Conduct Disorder

" . . . persistent pattern of conduct in which basic rights of others and major age-appropriate societal norms or rules are violated. . .
DSM IV

- little empathy or concern for feelings, wishes or well-being of others
- misperceive intentions of others as hostile or threatening
- respond with "justified" aggression
- callous, lacking guilt or remorse

Conduct Disorder (312.8)

Aggression to people and animals

- (1) often bullies, threatens, or intimidates
- (2) often initiates fights
- (3) has used a weapon that can cause serious physical harm to others
- (4) has been physically cruel to people
- (5) **has been physically cruel to animals**
(earliest appearing symptom: mean onset 6.5 years)
- (6) has stolen while confronting a victim
- (7) has forced someone into sexual activity

Destruction of property
Deceitfulness or theft
Serious violations of rules

(DSM IV)

Motivations for Cruelty / Aggression to Animals

- Curiosity / experimentation
- Inadvertent harm
- Peer reinforcement
- Mood modification
- Species prejudice
- Displaced hostility / punishment
- Imitating adult discipline
- Instrument of aggression / emotional abuse
- Frightening / coercing another
- Retaliation / revenge

(Adapted from Kellert and Felthous, 1985; Ascione, 1993)

1993)

Motivations for Cruelty / Aggression to Animals

- Rehearsal of violent behavior
- Rehearsal of suicidal behavior
- Posttraumatic reenactment
- Implement of self-injury
- Traumatic stress reaction
- Hurting to nurture
- Sexual pleasure

(adapted from Kellert and Felthous, 1985; Ascione, 1993)

What Questions Should I Ask?

The Childhood Trust Survey on Animal-Related Experiences (CTSARE)
10 Screening Questions

- Number of pets
- Favorite or special pet
- Pet as support or comfort
- Pet harmed, lost, worries about pet
- Seen someone hurt an animal
- Hurt an animal
- Been frightened or hurt by an animal

Risk Factors for Children Hurting Animals

Sexually Abused
Exposed to Domestic Violence
Physically Abused

All of these are Adverse Experiences!



Incidence of Animal Abuse in 53 Child-Abusing Families

- Animal abuse was reported in 88% of homes referred for *physical abuse* of children, compared with 34% of homes referred for neglect or children-at-risk
- Animal abuse perpetrated by fathers (2/3) and children (1/3)
- Abusive households had more pets under 2 years of age and fewer over 2

DeViney, Dickert and Lockwood (1983) The care of pets in child-abusing families. *International Journal for the Study of Animal Problems*

Incidence of Animal Abuse in 53 Child-Abusing Families

- *Pets had injured a family member in 69% of animal abusive households vs. 6% in non-abusive households*
- *Family members were 11 times more likely to be bitten*

DeViney, Dickert and Lockwood (1983) The care of pets in child-abusing families. *International Journal for the Study of Animal Problems*

Dog Bites

- Definition: Bite is medically-attended or reported to animal control or law enforcement

(Canine Aggression Task Force, JAVMA, 128, 11, June 2001)

Dog Bites

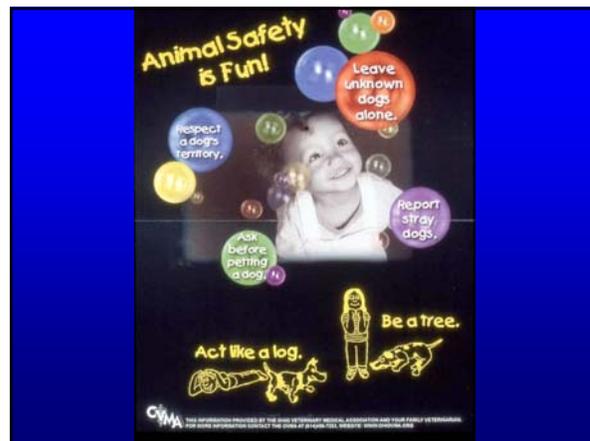
- 70 million dogs in US households
- 4.5 million bitten and 1 in 5 require medical attention: 50% are children and 70 % fatal bites; 66% head and neck
- 26,935 reconstructive surgeries for dog bites (2013)
- 11th leading cause nonfatal injury ages 1-4; 9th ages 5-9; 10th ages 10-14.
- 6,594 Postal employees attacked (2015)
- Insurance paid out \$571 million in dog bite claims (2015)

<https://www.avma.org/Events/pethealth/Pages/Dog-Bite-Prevention-Week.aspx?PF=1>

Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center

Dog bites to children:

During a 4 year period there were more than 2500 admissions to Emergency.



11 Things Humans Do That Dogs Hate

1. Using words more than body language
2. Hugging your dog
3. Petting the dog's face or patting her head
4. Walking up to a strange dog while looking her in the eye
5. Not providing structure and rules
6. Forcing your dog to interact with dogs or people she clearly doesn't like
7. Going for walks without opportunity to explore and smell
8. Keeping a tight leash, literally
9. Being tense
10. Being boring
11. Teasing

Mother Nature Network

Pediatric Dog Bite Victims: A Need for a Continuum of Care

- 34 children and their families
- Assessed ongoing needs 1 month post ED visit for dog bite
- 70% at least 1 new concerning behavior in child
- 85% parents endorsed concerns about their own reactions
- Majority endorsed interventions to help children with post-bite fears, education on dog bite prevention and offering additional supportive services in the ED

Boat, Dixon, Pearl, Thielen and Bucher (2012) *Clinical Pediatrics*

Wish List When Children Are Treated For Dog Bites

- Consider screening for *abuse* or *neglect*
- Follow up to assess *trauma/stress reactions in child and caregiver*
- Provide options for follow up interventions including:
 - Therapeutic*
 - Legal*
 - Dog safety*
 - Dog training*



The "Power and Control Wheel" of Animal Abuse and Domestic Violence

Isolation: Refusing to allow her to take her pet to her vet. Prohibiting her from socializing her dog with other dogs.

Threats: To harm or kill her pet if she leaves or asserts any independence.

Legal Abuse: Custody battles over pets. Filing theft charges if she leaves with the pet.

Denying & Blaming: Blaming her or the pet for his cruelty. Killing the pet and saying it didn't matter because the pet was old.

Emotional Abuse: Disappearing, giving away or killing pets to take away her source of unconditional love. Forced participation in animal sexual abuse.

Economic Abuse: Refusing to allow her to spend money on pet food or vet care.

Intimidation: Harming or killing pet. "Next time it'll be you..." Targeting pets of family/friends who aid her escape.

Using Children: Harming/killing children's pets to intimidate them. Blaming the "disappearance" of the family pet on her to create a wedge between her and the children.

Battered Women and Battered Animals

Harming animals:

- perpetuates context of terror
- demonstrates power
- warns "you may be next"
- eliminates source of support or comfort
- provides incentive for woman to stay
- reinforces that there is no safe place

Ontario SPCA (2000) Survey of Domestic Violence Victims

- Surveyed 111 pet-owning domestic violence victims at 21 shelters across Ontario.
- Nearly 50% of respondents reported partner had threatened, abused or killed family pet.
- 43% said concern over pets' welfare prevented them from leaving sooner.

Cincinnati YWCA Battered Women's Shelter Telephone Interview

- Children?
- *Any pets?*
- *Pets need to get out of your home?*
- *Need place for pets to stay while you are in shelter? (The SPCA will shelter your pets.)*
- Lethality questions: Weapons? Use alcohol or drugs? Threatened to kill you? *Ever harmed a pet?* Criminal history?

Lethality Assessment

3 top indicators that a woman will be killed by her batterer

- Homicide or suicide gestures / threats
- Access to weapons
- Threat to mutilate or kill pets

Why are batterers considered more dangerous if they abuse pets?

- Because they are more likely to use physical, sexual, and emotional violence and stalking
- We must address this issue in treatment and safety planning

Simmons, C.A. & Lehmann, P. (2007) Exploring the link between pet abuse and controlling behaviors in violent relationships. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 22(9), 1211-1222.

Exposure to animal cruelty harms children's health and society's wellbeing

- Child, like pet, is expendable
- Lose confidence that adults can protect them
- Physical harm OK in allegedly loving relationships
- Seek power by inflicting pain and suffering
- Desensitization/decreased empathy
- Destructive behavior
- AND ... adds to toxic stress resulting in a changed brain, unhealthy lifestyle and subsequent poor health.

Why should I obtain information about the child's experiences with animals?

- Assess loss, attachment, and coercion

Uncensored information from children: "Was there ever a time when you were upset and your pet was a source of comfort?"

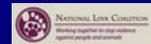
I would cry and hold my dog after my dad beat me.

Mom and step-dad had a fight. My dog jumped up and slept with me all night and licked my tears off.

My cat - when dad was hitting me and stuff - just by coming up to me.

Amazing Resource!

- *The National Resource Center on the Link between Animal Abuse and Human Violence*
- 3000+ members in 50 states and 40 countries... and growing! Free membership.
- Publish monthly *LINK-Letter*.
- Encourage local LINK coalitions.
- Trainings for professional and public groups.
- www.nationallinkcoalition.org



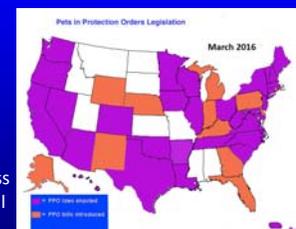
How Are We Responding to The Link?

Legislative Solutions

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

"Pet Protection Orders": 29 states, Puerto Rico and Washington DC allow courts to include animals in domestic violence/stalking protection-from-abuse orders.

Federal bill H.R. 1258 would extend these provisions across state lines -- and make federal \$\$\$ available to build pet-friendly shelters



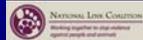
States in purple = enacted PPO laws
States in orange = PPO bills introduced, not yet passed



How Are We Responding to The Link?

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

- SAF-T™ – Sheltering Animals & Families Together -- 85 pet-friendly shelters allow pets on-site.
- 900 shelters have “Safe Haven” referrals: foster care with local animal groups.
- Safety Planning: get all pet documentation/ receipts in woman’s name. Have pets and supplies ready to go at a moment’s notice.



Legislation

- **New York:** A-706 would include animal cruelty in the presence of a child as an element in **endangering a child's welfare**, and within the definition of a **neglected or maltreated child**.
- **Oregon Law:** increases the punishment for animal neglect in the first degree to a maximum of 5 years imprisonment and/or a \$125,000 fine for repeat offenders, offenses involving 10 or more animals, or **neglect that occurs in the presence of a minor child**.

Investigating and Prosecuting Animal Abuse in Child Abuse or Domestic Violence Cases

- Include questions about pets in the forensic interviews of children and adults
- Gather corroborating evidence from animal investigator or vet (neglect, injuries, etc.)
- Charge animal abuse if present
- **Do NOT dismiss animal abuse charges!**
- A plea to animal abuse can result in important interventions:
 - Protective orders for family and pets
 - Probation orders prohibiting ownership
 - Evaluation and counseling

Allie Phillips, Senior Attorney, APRI

Gain Additional Information About Child's Environment

Observe pets in the family setting:

- Food, water, shelter
- Frightened, cowering, aggressive
- Injuries
- Filthy house (feces, etc.)
- Owning a “vicious dog”
- Food for pet, not child (failure- to- thrive)

Gain Additional Information About Child's Environment

Observe child and adult behaviors:

- Abusive language, yelling
- Rough handling (throwing, kicking)
- Bragging about dog's fighting skills
- Trying to run over or chasing with bike or car
- Fears

Informants

- Teachers (classroom animals)
- Neighbors (see abuse/neglect outdoors)
- Veterinary reports of injuries or malnutrition
- Necropsy reports
- Animal control citations

Good News! Academy on Violence and Abuse

- Mission: *The recognition, treatment, and prevention of the health effects of violence and abuse are fully integrated into healthcare and society so that people of all ages are safe and healthy.*
- Vision: *Advance health education and research on the recognition, treatment and prevention of the health effects of violence and abuse across the lifespan .*
- AVA Affinity Group on The Link Between Cruelty to Animals and Violence to Humans

www.avahealth.org/

73

Two Helpful Tools

- The Childhood Trust Survey on Animal-Related Experiences (CTSARE)
- The Childhood Trust Events Survey (CTES)

www.childhoodtrust.org

Obtain information about children's experiences with animals because ...

- they share the same environments as their pets
- talking about pets can assist with rapport building
- they will often talk about their pets before they will talk about themselves
- they can develop lifelong fears about animals that we know how to treat
- related forensic and child abuse/neglect issues can be corroborated
- pets can provide therapeutic and healing assistance

and because childhood exposure to animal cruelty is...

- an **adverse experience** that can contribute to toxic stress
- a **potential intensifier** of adverse experiences

Screen for adverse experiences and **always** include information about pets and other animal-related experiences!

76

Remember.....

“The behavior that harms the animal is the **same** behavior that harms the human.”

Lynn Loar, Ph.D.

Barbara Walling Boat, Ph.D.

Associate Professor
Department of Psychiatry
University of Cincinnati College of Medicine
ML 0539
Cincinnati, OH 45267

513-558-9007
Fax: 513-558-4107
Email: barbara.boat@uc.edu