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Animal cruelty by children exposed to domestic violence[☆]

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Abstract

Objective: The first objective of this study was to determine if children exposed to domestic violence were significantly more likely to be cruel to animals than children not exposed to violence. The second was to determine if there were significant age and gender differences between children who were and were not cruel to animals.

Method: A community sample of 47 mothers with two children and a history of domestic violence were compared to a matched sample of 45 mothers with two children who did not have such a history.

Results: Children exposed to domestic violence were significantly more likely to have been cruel to animals than children not exposed to violence. The age and gender of children who were cruel to animals did not differ from children who were not cruel to animals. However, exposed children cruel to animals were significantly older than non-exposed children cruel to animals.

Conclusion: Animal cruelty by children is correlated with exposure to domestic violence.

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Purpose

However disturbing, it is not difficult to visualize a link between family violence and animal cruelty. A violent father who lashes out at his wife, his children, and the family pet is conceivable. It is more difficult to consider animal cruelty carried out by children living in violent homes, but research

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supports this contention as well (Ascione, 1998; DeViney, Dickert, & Lockwood, 1983). An indirect, but equally important finding in the literature is that many children who experience or are exposed to family violence do not become cruel to animals. It is unclear why some children emulate the violence they are exposed to and others do not. The purpose of this study was to determine if a community sample of children exposed to domestic violence were more likely to be cruel to animals than children who were not exposed to family violence. The influences of age and gender on animal cruelty were also investigated.

Review of the literature

The need to understand the role violence may play in childhood animal cruelty has been emphasized by reports that animal cruelty is a serious risk marker for mental health problems. The DSM-IV-TR lists animal cruelty as one of the earliest and most severe symptoms of conduct disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Many studies have also found an alarming connection between animal cruelty by children and violence in adolescence and adulthood (Merez-Perez, Heide, & Silverman, 2001; Slavkin, 2001; Verlinden, 1999). This is especially true when the type of animal abused and the context within which the abuse takes place falls outside culturally sanctioned parameters of animal treatment. For example, cruelty against pets, such as cats and dogs, has been retrospectively linked to criminal violence for both male and female prison populations (Felthous & Yudowitz, 1977) and criminal behavior in general (Ascione, Kaufman, & Brooks, 2000).

When confronted with individual violent behavior, Locke (1693) encouraged his readers to look for experiences that might influence such behavior. Childhood animal cruelty may be a sign of a family environment that is violent or abusive (Duncan & Miller, 2002), but few studies have actually examined this link. A key study has found children committed one-third of pet abuse in homes where physical child abuse had been documented (DeViney et al., 1983). The researchers concluded that these children who were cruel to animals had learned disturbing lessons about power and control. A study by Ascione, Friedrich, Heath, and Hayashi (2003) also found that animal cruelty was more frequent among children who had experienced violence and abuse.

Exposure to domestic violence and animal cruelty by children

Children are often the unseen, unintended, and unassisted victims of domestic violence (Holden & Ritchie, 1998). Children may see the violence or become part of it, but most typically children are exposed by hearing the event and experiencing its aftermath (Edleson, 1999). Violence between parents is often chronic and occurs in an environment most children associate with safety and protection (Margolin, 1998). Moreover, the individuals involved are central to children's lives, and parenting is often disrupted. Thus, it is not surprising, that exposure to domestic violence is associated with childhood maladjustment. Many researchers have concluded that children exposed to domestic violence are at increased risk of developing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive difficulties (see Mohr, Lutz, Fantuzzo, & Perry, 2003 for review). As stated by Holden and Ritchie (1998), "The corpus of empirical literature clearly establishes that children who live in maritally violent homes are at risk for a wide variety of problems" (p. 6). Pertinent to the current investigation, children exposed to domestic violence are more aggressive than children without violent parents (Adamson & Thompson, 1998; Herrera & McCloskey, 2001). Further, domestic violence

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