

Adult Protective Services and Animal Welfare: Practice Implications



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Research Brief - adapted from Peak, T., Ascione, F., & Doney, J. (2012). Adult Protective Services and Animal Welfare: Should Animal Abuse and Neglect Be Assessed During Adult Protective Services Screening? *Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect*, 24(1), 37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08946566.2011.608047>

National survey in 2013 of APS practices relating to animal abuse and neglect

- APS representatives from 50 states were contacted
- Phone survey conducted with APS from 41 states
- 51% of respondents do not ask any questions regarding pets
- Only 1 state asked about pet-related concerns, beyond the initial inquiry of whether the household had a pet
- 4 states reported animal welfare important but did not specifically assess for
- In all states that responded, APS workers could add notes of pet-related concerns in “additional information” sections

National survey – most common safety concerns

- Owner inability to care for pets
- Owners spending money on pets instead of self
- Not knowing what to do with the pet(s) when emergencies occurred



National survey – other concerns

- Emotional abuse – pets may be used as leverage to coerce older adults
- Co-occurrence of self-neglect and neglect of pets reported
- Older adult may be inadvertent perpetrator of animal harm
 - Inability to care for animal
 - Hoarding

Consistent with findings from 2003 survey

- 200 APS professionals surveyed in 40 states
- 35% of respondents indicated that older adults described pets being threatened or harmed
- 92% reported older adult self-neglect co-occurred with pet neglect
- 75% reported pet-welfare issues complicated process of providing services to older adults (e.g. client refusing relocation if pets not allowed to accompany them)

More on emotional abuse...



Witnessing Animal Abuse

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Emotional Abuse of Children



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Adapted from McDonald, S., Graham-Bermann, S., Maternick, A., Ascione, F., & Williams, J. (2016). Patterns of Adjustment among Children Exposed to Intimate Partner Violence: a Person-Centered Approach. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, 9(2), 137–152. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-016-0079-y>



What is emotional child abuse?

- Emotional or psychological child abuse is a *pattern of behavior that impairs a child's emotional development* or sense of self-worth. This may include constant criticism, threats, or rejection, as well as withholding love, support, or guidance.
(<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/can/identifying/emotional-abuse/>)
- Numerous behaviors are listed as emotionally abusive, including:
 - Terrorizing: The adult creates a climate of fear, bullies and frightens the child, and makes the child believe that the world is capricious and hostile.
 - Corrupting: The adult encourages the child to engage in destructive and antisocial behavior, reinforces deviance, and impairs a child's ability to behave in socially appropriate ways.(<https://preventchildabuse.org/resource/preventing-emotional-abuse/>)

Background

- At least 25% of children whose mothers experience domestic violence also see their pet threatened or abused
- Most often the child says the motivation is to control the mother
- Since pets are often sources of social support for children, this may be especially traumatic (“**terrorizing**” behavior)
- Alternately, kids may become complicit in the abuse of the animal (“**corrupting**” behavior)
- Follow up study (focus of today’s presentation) examines the harmful effects on children of witnessing abuse to pets

McDonald SE, Collins EA, Nicotera N, Hageman TO, Ascione FR, Williams JH, & Graham-Bermann SA (2015). Children's experiences of companion animal maltreatment in households characterized by intimate partner violence. *Child abuse & neglect*, 50, 116-27 PMID: 26520828

Follow-up study on how witnessing animal abuse affects child mental health

- An ethnically diverse sample of 291 children between the ages of seven and 12 took part.
- Recruited through their mother's use of domestic violence services in one state in the United States
- All had a family pet at home.
- On average, the women had been experiencing domestic violence for nine years.

Follow-up study - method

- Each mother and child completed questionnaires.
- The child's exposure to animal cruelty was assessed via questions that asked the mother whether her partner had "ever threatened to hurt or kill a family pet" and if the partner had "ever actually hurt or killed a family pet."
- Researchers examined six domains of adjustment among children:
 1. social problems
 2. attention problems
 3. internalizing behavior (anxiety, depression, etc.)
 4. externalizing behavior (disruptive/aggressive behavior)
 5. Empathy
 6. callous/unemotional traits

Follow-up study – findings

- Children could be grouped into three categories depending on how well they were coping: Resilient (66 percent; n=191), Struggling (28 percent; n=83), and Severe Maladjustment (6 percent; n=17).
- Children exposed to animal cruelty were 3.26 times more likely to be in the Struggling group and 5.72 times more likely to be in the Severe Maladjustment group compared to the reference group of resilient children
- Children in the Severe Maladjustment group exhibited clinically significant social problems, attention problems, internalizing behaviors, and externalizing behaviors

Implications of findings

- *Witnessing violence toward animals, because it is predictive of emotional development impairment, meets the definition of “emotional abuse”*
- *Only 15% of children in the resilient group had been exposed to animal abuse*
- 48% of struggling group and 41% of severe problems group were exposed to animal abuse
- Concomitant exposure to animal abuse in the context of intimate partner violence is a strong predictive factor in resilient versus maladjusted youth
- Inclusion of witnessing violence toward animals in child assessment/intake procedures may help identify children at greatest risk of psychological maladjustment

Emotional abuse, pets and older adults

- Coercion of older adults via threats to pets is emotional abuse
- Witnessing pet abuse is emotional abuse

National APS 2013 survey – practice implications

- Screen for animal welfare concerns in elder abuse cases
- Include general questions as well as specific items to identify issues related to pet management and care
- Screening protocol and follow-up protocol questions (in event of animal abuse) available at National Adult Protective Services Association:

<https://www.napsa-now.org/get-informed/research/putting-research-into-practice/animal-welfare/>

- Make connections with animal welfare organizations to link clients to needed support services for pets

Support Services/Resources for Older Adults with Pets

- Pet food banks (include mobile services)
- Low cost veterinary clinics (some may do outreach/home visits)
- Volunteer programs that assist with pet care tasks
- Temporary foster care in cases of owner hospitalization
 - Small animal rescue nonprofits
 - Humane Societies
 - Programs emerging that specifically provide this service

Other resources

- Aging in place – seniors and pets

<https://www.aginginplace.org/seniors-and-pets/>

- National Summit on Loneliness in Older Adults and Pets

<https://habri.org/pressroom/20200220>



Questions?

