

Practice Guidance on Harm to Animals and Possible Implications for Children

Introduction

There is increasing research and clinical evidence that suggest that there are sometimes inter-relationships or links between abuse of children, vulnerable adults and animals. Organisations responsible for the investigation of abuse and protection of animals have not been included in the 'child protection network' yet features and characteristics of abuse and abusers of children and animals are closely linked.

Four categories of child abuse are:

1. Physical - may involve hitting, shaking, throwing or scalding, drowning, suffocating or otherwise causing physical harm to a child;
2. Emotional - is the persistent emotional maltreatment of a child such as to cause severe and persistent adverse effects on the child's emotional development. For example: making a child feel worthless, unloved or inadequate;
3. Sexual - involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, not necessarily involving a high level of violence, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. They may also include non-contact activities. For example: involving children in looking at or in the production of sexual images, watching sexual activities;
4. Neglect - is the persistent failure to meet a child's basic physical and/or psychological needs, likely to result in the serious impairment of the child's health or development.

Three categories of animal abuse are:

1. Physical abuse - Includes kicking, punching, throwing, burning, microwaving, drowning, asphyxiation and the administration of drugs and poisons;
2. Sexual - Any use of an animal for sexual gratification;
3. Neglect - A failure to provide food, water, shelter, companionship or veterinary attention.

Safeguarding Adult categories also include financial, institutional and discriminatory abuse. However, these categories are not evidenced to be linked to child or animal abuse.

Key Findings

The key findings from research linking child abuse, animal abuse and domestic abuse undertaken in this country are as follows:

- If a child is cruel to animals this may be an indicator that serious neglect and abuse had been inflicted on the child. While research suggests that abuse of animals by children is quite widespread, in a minority of more extreme cases it appears to be associated with abuse of the child, or subsequent abusive behaviour by the child;
- Where serious abuse has occurred in a household there may be an increased likelihood that some other form of family violence is also occurring and that any child present in the household may also be at increased risk of abuse;

- Acts of animal abuse may in some circumstances be used to coerce, control and intimidate women and children to remain in, or be silent about, their abusive situation. The threat or actual abuse of an animal can prevent women leaving situations of domestic abuse;
- Sustained childhood cruelty to animals has been linked to increased likelihood of violent offending behaviour against people in adulthood;
- Where animals have been abused there may in some circumstances be an increased likelihood that the adults and children in the household will have been bitten or attacked by the abused animal;
- If a child exhibits extreme aggressive or sexualised behaviour towards an animal this may in some instances be associated with later abuse of other children or vulnerable adults unless the behaviour is recognised and treated.

Research suggests that animal abuse can be part of a constellation of family violence, which can include child abuse and domestic abuse. However this does not imply that children who are cruel to animals necessarily go on to be violent to adults and adults who abuse animals are not necessarily also violent to their partners and/or children. Effective investigation and assessment is key to determining whether there are any links between these factors and the possible risks to the safety and welfare of children, adults and animals.

It is essential that arrangements for cooperation and communication between statutory and voluntary organisations are developed and enhanced to ensure identification of risk factors that could have implications for the wellbeing and safety of children, vulnerable adults and animals.

Information Sharing

Personal information can be disclosed lawfully if there is concern about the safety of a child or animal. As harming children and animals are potentially prosecutable offences, the Children Act 1989, 2004 and 2006, Data Protection and Crime and Disorder Act allow the sharing of confidential information without consent. Appropriate information sharing is crucial in enabling effective risk evaluation and helping compile as full a picture as possible is often achieved through linking fragments of information obtained from a variety of sources.

Reporting of Concerns

Decisions as to whether or not concerns reach the threshold for statutory intervention are often a question of judgement for individual professionals. However there are risk factors that can be identified which need to be reported to appropriate agencies with statutory responsibilities for safeguarding children, adults and animals.

RSPCA referrals to Children's Social Care and/or Northamptonshire Police

The RSPCA will notify the Northamptonshire Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and/ or Northamptonshire Police if any of the following are identified or strongly suspected:

- Child alone in a household and that child is of an age or apparent level of functioning that indicates they should be supervised by a responsible adult;
- Home conditions appear harmful to health and wellbeing of members of the household;

- Where there is deliberate harm of animals and children are in the household;
- Where there is neglect of animals through deprivation of food, water, shelter or veterinary care and children are part of the household;
- Children deliberately harming animals;
- Sexual abuse of animals;
- Where animals have been harmed and it appears violence is the behavioural currency of the household where children are present;
- Instances where there is repeated abuse of animals and children are in the household;
- All of the above situations where there is a vulnerable adult within the household.

Referrals to RSPCA from agencies working with Children and Families

- Agencies will notify the RSPCA of any concerns relating to abuse and neglect of animals;
- Where it is known or strongly suspected that there are concerns about the welfare of animals in households subject to investigations, contact needs to be made with the RSPCA to alert them of suspected concerns, enquire if the household is known to the RSPCA and if appropriate give notice of actions likely to be taken.

Contacts for Referrals and Enquiries

RSPCA

0300 1234 999 - 24-hour cruelty line on to report a mistreated, neglected, injured or distressed animal.

0300 1234 555 - advice line.

Northamptonshire Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)

0300 126 1000

Northamptonshire Police

999 - Crisis protection situation including dangerous dogs.

RELEVANT READING

A helpful leaflet by the NSPCC ' [Understanding the Links between child abuse, animal abuse and domestic violence](#)'.