

Practice Guidance on Harm to Animals and Possible Implications for Children

Introduction

Any professional working with children and families may become aware that someone in a family they are working with has harmed an animal. This practice guidance has been created to support professionals working in such situation to help them make an evidence-based decision on what action is required.

There is increasing research both nationally and globally to suggest that there is sometimes a link between cruelty to animals and the abuse of children and vulnerable adults. This means that there is a duty for those organisations responsible for the protection of children and vulnerable adults and those responsible for the protection of animals to work closely with each other. These practice guidelines are designed to help with that.

Types of Abuse

Below is a list of categories of abuse that are common to the abuse of children, vulnerable adults, and animals.

1. Physical - may involve hitting, shaking, throwing, scalding, drowning, suffocating, inappropriate use of drugs, poisoning, or otherwise causing physical harm.
2. Sexual – any non-consensual activity involving a child, vulnerable adult or animal done for the sexual gratification of another, whether directly by the person doing the abuse or to produce images for others.
3. Neglect - is the persistent failure of a person with caring responsibility to meet the basic needs of a child, vulnerable adult, or animal that is likely to result in the serious impairment of their health or development.

Any time a professional is aware that any of these may be happening to a child, vulnerable adult, or an animal, they must check to see if there are other children, vulnerable adults or animals who may be at risk.

In addition, for children and vulnerable adults, there is the following category.

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.

The Care Act also includes additional categories of financial, institutional, and discriminatory abuse for Safeguarding Adult categories.

Where a professional is aware of these happening to a child or vulnerable adult, they must check to see if there are animals in the household as the research evidence suggests that child abuse and domestic abuse can be linked to animal abuse.

Messages from the Research

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

- Cruelty to animals in young children is relatively common and should not, by itself, be taken as a sign that a child is being abused.

- The age of the child is a key factor to consider when assessing risk. Many children under the age of 10 may harm animals in acts of exploration. Incidents such as this can be used 'teachable moments' to explore concepts such as empathy and kindness.
- It is important for professionals to consider the persistence and nature of cruelty. Single acts of cruelty that last a short time are different to multiple acts of torture of animals; similarly, cruelty that is done openly is more likely to be exploratory in nature than cruelty that is done secretly.
- It is essential to have a clear picture of what has happened. The context in which cruelty has occurred may indicate that a child or vulnerable adult is re-enacting abuse that has occurred to them.
- The more stylised or unusual the cruel behaviour displayed by the child, the more likely it is to be a re-enactment of abuse experienced by the child.
- It is important to pay attention to the reaction of person who has perpetrated the act of cruelty to an animal. In the example above, distress may be a sign of traumatic re-enactment of abuse whilst reactions of pride or pleasure are likely to require specialist assessment of the person's mental state and development.
- When assessing acts of cruelty to animals perpetrated by children, consider the possibility of developmental or other disorders.
- When a child has been cruel to an animal, seek a broad view of the child's development and presentation. Where possible, take the views of multiple carers and other professionals rather than relying on a single view from a parent.
- The voice of the child or the voice of the vulnerable adult must always be prioritised when assessing risk, but steps must also be taken to prevent risk to animals, vulnerable adults, and children.
- Providing appropriate therapeutic support to children who have displayed cruelty to animals reduces the risk of them going on to display these behaviours in their adult relationships.
- Someone who is abusing a child or a vulnerable adult may use violence against an animal as a way to threaten, coerce, and control the person they are abusing. This can include threats to animals should the person disclose the abuse or try and leave the relationship.
- Where a person is being abused and there are animals in the house, it may be important to work with animal welfare agencies to ensure that the animal is protected. Pets are sometimes important figures in the lives of children and vulnerable adults, so they need to be considered in any safety plan.
- For members of the LGBTQIA+ community, the unconditional acceptance received from pets may be especially powerful. This means that ensuring the well-being of a pet may be especially important when helping someone from the LGBTQIA+ community who is being abused.
- In some cases, someone who has abused a child or vulnerable adult might use an animal to harm the person they are abusing, so the person being abused may have been bitten or attacked by an abused animal.
- No single agency can adequately assess and intervene in a situation where there is cruelty to animals in a family. There needs to be a coordinated inter-agency approach.

It is important to reiterate that it is not uncommon for children to display cruel behaviour to animals. Whilst cruelty to animals can be an indicator of later adult psychopathology and/or violent behaviour, it is important not to assume that this is always the case as this can lead to over-reaction and inappropriate labelling of children.

However, it is essential that statutory and voluntary organisations work in cooperation and share appropriate information to identify risk factors, assess these thoroughly, and where appropriate implement an effective

intervention plan that meets the needs of those involved and promotes the wellbeing and safety of children, vulnerable adults, and animals.

Information Sharing

Whilst respecting the right to privacy and the duty of confidentiality, it is important to remember that personal information can be disclosed lawfully if there is concern about the safety of a child, vulnerable adult, or animal. Wherever possible, permission should be sought to share information with other agencies. However, given the nature of abuse and the risks involved, this may not always be possible.

There is a general right to share information under the Data Protection Act 2018 where you have a lawful reason to do so. For children, this lawful reason is likely to be under the 1989 Children Act. The Care Act 2014 provides a basis for sharing information between agencies where the public interest of information sharing is greater than the public interest of maintaining confidentiality. Finally, cruelty to animals is a prosecutable offence, so information can be shared under the Crime and Disorder Act.

If you have any concerns about information sharing, it is important to discuss these with an appropriate person inside your organisation and/or someone from the relevant safeguarding team.

Reporting Concern

Deciding if a concern has reached the threshold for statutory intervention is often a complex question of judgement. 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 regular 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

- Where a child or vulnerable adult is suspected to have been abused, relevant workers should ascertain whether animals are present in the house. If so, questions about the treatment of the animals should be included in the initial assessment and referrals made if one of the following two conditions apply.

- 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**'.