

Feature



The Link Among Animal Abuse, Child Abuse, and Domestic Violence

by *Melissa Trollinger*

Editor's Note: *The Domestic Violence and the Workplace Project is a statewide project funded by the Attorney General's Office. As part of this Project, the Colorado Bar Association Family Violence Program feels it is important to provide readers of The Colorado Lawyer with information about violence in our culture. The following article is presented as the first in a series to be published as part of an ongoing effort to educate attorneys and their clients about violence in the home and workplace. For more information, please contact the CBA Family Violence Program at (303) 860-1115.*

Anyone who has accustomed himself to regard the life of any living creature as worthless is in danger of arriving also at the idea of worthless human lives.

—Albert Schweitzer, Humanitarian

It has been well documented that mass murderers often abuse animals before they turn to people. Jeffery Dahmer, Albert DeSalvo (the "Boston Strangler"), Ted Bundy, and David Berkowitz (the "Son of Sam") all admitted to mutilating, impaling, torturing, and killing animals in their youth.¹ A connection often exists between juveniles who have abused and killed animals and those who assault or even kill people. Classmates of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold reported that the boys bragged about mutilating animals before their attack on Columbine High School. Sixteen-year-old Luke Woodman, who stabbed and killed his mother and then shot and killed two classmates, wrote in his diary about beating, burning, and killing his dog Sparkle. Woodman described the act as "true beauty."²

This article discusses the link among animal abuse, child abuse, and domestic violence, with the intention of increasing attorney awareness of how such abuse impacts both clients and the community.

History of Abuse

Child protection cases in the United States were first brought pursuant to animal abuse laws. Henry Bergh founded the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals ("ASPCA") in 1866. In 1874, Bergh and Elbridge Gery, an attorney for the ASPCA, successfully petitioned to have eight-year-old Mary Ellen Wilson removed from her abusive home.³ Several months later, the first meeting of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children was held at the ASPCA's office.⁴

The American Humane Association also works to end animal abuse and child abuse. The work of this and other organizations has gone beyond attempting to end child abuse and animal abuse separately. It is now recognized that child abuse, animal abuse, and domestic violence are undeniably interwoven. Not only is there a link between child and animal abuse, but studies reveal a similar link between domestic violence and animal abuse and child abuse and domestic violence.

Child abuse itself was not fully acknowledged as a problem until 1962, when Henry Kempe, a physician, published an article entitled "The Battered Child Syndrome."⁵ In this article, Kempe concluded that parents could in fact purposely injure their children. He called for physicians to learn and be aware of the differences between accidental and non-accidental injuries in children.⁶ Since that time, it has become increasingly accepted that there is a link between child abuse and domestic violence, and that children who live in an environment in which their mother is being abused are more likely to be abused themselves. In a study involving 1,000 abused women, 70 percent admitted that their children also were abused.⁷

The same seems to hold true for abused animals. It is likely that if an animal is being abused, a child or partner in the household also is being abused. This link originates with the fact that women, children, and animals have shared similar histories and characteristics—all three were considered property in the past.⁸ Although women and children are no longer considered property, pets are still in that position. Additionally, women, children, and animals are often financially and emotionally dependent on their abuser.⁹ Children and animals cannot speak for themselves against the abuser.¹⁰

Studies Documenting the Link of Abuse

Although the research is fairly new, several studies have documented a link among animal abuse, domestic violence, and child abuse. For example, in 1980, a study in England found that in twenty-three families known to have committed abuse against animals, 83 percent also had been identified by social

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services as having children at risk for abuse.¹¹ In a more recent study, the largest battered women's shelters in forty-eight states were questioned about their experience with domestic violence, child abuse, and animal abuse. When asked the following question, 85.4 percent of the forty-eight shelters answered "yes": "Do women who come into your shelter talk about incidents of pet abuse?"¹² Moreover, 63 percent out of forty-six of the shelters answered "yes" to the following question: "Do children who come into your shelter talk about incidents of pet abuse."¹³

The findings of this study are supported in other studies and investigations. In Pennsylvania, when records from a local humane animal society and the county's youth social services agency were compared, it was found that "the behavior patterns towards one's children were similar to those toward one's pets."¹⁴ Similarly, a lieutenant with the Buffalo, New York, Police Department compared records from the local animal humane society with domestic violence complaints and discovered that approximately one-third of the names were on both lists.¹⁵ In Colorado Springs, Colorado, the Center for Prevention of Domestic Violence conducted a six-month survey and found that 24 percent of the 122 women seeking protection at a battered women's shelter reported their abusers also had abused the family pet.¹⁶

Pet Abuse Leads to Other Forms of Abuse

Abuse is about power and control. This is true whether the abuse is inflicted on a partner, child, or a pet. In the United States, approximately 150 million people have either a dog or a cat as a pet.¹⁷ Out of these 150 million people with pets, nine out of ten consider the pet to be a family member. Many people celebrate their pets' birthdays and display their pets' photographs, just like a child's.¹⁸ Often, for an abused woman or child, a pet is the only source of love and affection. This makes the tie to the animal even stronger and gives the abuser more power and control over the victim through the pet.

An abuser may give the pet to his victim as a gift with the express purpose of using the pet to "manipulate and control" his victim.¹⁹ The ability and need to control victims through pets is documented in a study conducted in New Jersey. In this study, a New Jersey public child protection agency found that of families receiving services for child abuse, 88 percent had also abused their pets.²⁰ Out of this 88 percent, two-thirds of the abusers admitted to abusing the animal to control a child.²¹ In another case, a judge told a story of a teenage girl who testified that her father threatened to kill her dog if she did not have sex with him.²²

When an abuser threatens, abuses, or kills an animal, several messages are being relayed to the human victim. The abuse, or even the threat to abuse the animal, displays the domination and control the abuser has over the victim. For example, following through on threats to injure or kill an animal shows the victim that the abuser is willing to kill an animal and that he may also kill the victim.²³ Not only can abuse of the pet be used to manipulate or coerce a partner or child into compliance with the abuser's wishes,²⁴ it also can be used to frighten, intimidate, punish, or retaliate against a partner or child.²⁵ Additionally, if the animal is the victim's only source of love and affection, killing or injuring the animal further isolates the victim from anyone or anything but the abuser.

The abuser often is successful in getting his message across through abuse of the pet. An advocate at a battered women's

shelter told the story of a woman who finally left her abuser and was staying at the shelter. One day, the woman approached the advocate at the shelter. She "came in very apologetic and said 'I have to go home.'"²⁶ The victim had received pictures of her abuser chopping off the ears of her dog with gardening shears. The victim knew that the only way to save the life of her dog and other animals at the house was to return to her abuser. Situations like this and the fear of what will happen to a beloved pet often keeps a victim from leaving their abuser.

Because of health code regulations, lack of space, and safety concerns, women are not allowed to bring their pets to the shelter when they leave their abuser.²⁷ The victims' only options may be to leave the pet with the abuser, stay with the abuser to protect the pet, or abandon the pet. As a result, it is estimated that as many as 40 percent of women postpone leaving their abuser because of fear of what will happen to their pet if they leave.²⁸

This lack of options is especially a problem for women who live in a rural area and have farm animals. In these situations, a large number of animals generally are involved. Such animals as horses, chickens, and cows cannot be properly cared for in humane animal shelters. Additionally, abuse of animals in rural areas is even more under-reported than abuse of household pets—neighbors are reluctant to report each other because of the closeness of the community.²⁹

When an abused partner does leave, the abuser's anger is likely to be taken out on the victim's pets. One woman found the courage to leave her boyfriend who had been abusing her for years. When she told him that she was leaving, he grabbed her pet bird and snapped its neck. He threw the bird at her feet and said, "If you are leaving, take this with you!" The woman took the bird with her and had it cremated. She kept the bird's ashes in her bedroom at her parent's house. Her boyfriend then broke into her parent's house and stole the bird's ashes. The man was eventually charged with cruelty to an animal, a misdemeanor, and breaking and entering.³⁰

When an abused partner is forced to leave the pet with the abuser, the victim often puts herself in added danger by returning to check on the pet that was left behind.³¹ If the victim absolutely cannot bring herself to leave the pet with the abuser, she may abandon the pet, which can lead to extreme feelings of guilt and grief. Abandoning the pet can prevent the victim and children from adjusting to the stress of their new life, especially if the pet was a source of unconditional love and support.³² This is particularly true for children, who already may have been forced to leave behind friends, school, and other constants in their life.³³

For children, the abuse of the pet can have vast, long-term effects on their well-being. Certainly not all children who abuse animals or witness abuse will grow up to be abusers or mass murderers. However, the fact children witness abuse of both their mothers and pets can only increase the chance that they will adjust poorly to life as they get older.³⁴ Additionally, children who are raised in an abusive environment learn that violence is a way to solve problems.³⁵ Children who witness or are victims of domestic violence may abuse pets as a way of releasing their anger or expressing their distress.³⁶ In a study of abusive households with pets, it was found that in 32 percent of these homes, the children abused their pets.³⁷

Identifying an abused animal may prove to be more difficult than identifying an abused human. First, animals cannot speak and tell someone what is happening to them. Second, animals

are often confined to the house, with the abuser being the only person who has contact with the animal. Finally, it may not be obvious from bruises or scratches that the animal is being abused.

Some of the ways to identify an abused animal are similar to those used to identify an abused child. These include being aware of explanations of accidents that do not fit the injuries, the pet owner's lack of concern as to how the animal was injured, bruising, eye injuries, or the animal appearing malnourished.³⁸ Also, an abused animal may become timid and frightened when in the presence of the abuser and overly excited when with anyone else. However, some animals may show intense loyalty to their abuser so their behavior may not be the best indicator as to whether the animal is being abused.³⁹

Defining and Prosecuting Animal Abuse

In further understanding the link among domestic violence, child abuse, and animal abuse, it is important to define animal abuse. In Colorado, cruelty to animals requires someone "knowingly or with criminal negligence overworks, tortures, torments, deprives an animal of necessary sustenance, cruelly beats, needlessly mutilates, needlessly kills or otherwise mistreats or neglects any animal."⁴⁰ Abuse includes failing to provide an animal in someone's custody proper food, drink, or protection from weather. Sentencing for committing cruelty to animals varies, but can include up to a \$400 fine, completion of an anger management program, or jail time for a Class 1 misdemeanor if the defendant is a repeat offender.⁴¹

All fifty states in the United States have laws making cruelty to animals a criminal offense.⁴² However, for many reasons, law enforcement, prosecutors, or abusers rarely take these laws seriously nor are they strictly enforced. This may be because animals are regarded as property with little or no commercial value, there is a lack of agreement as to what constitutes animal abuse, and minimal penalties exacted for the abusers if they are convicted.⁴³

Recent case law indicates that courts are beginning to recognize the link between animal abuse and other forms of abuse. For example, in *State v. Bellows*, the appellate court of Wisconsin held that a defendant could be tried for child neglect and animal abuse in the same trial.⁴⁴ The court in *State v. Pugsley* held that a defendant charged with sex offenses involving children "reinforced his threats by actually killing animals in front of them."⁴⁵ In a child custody case, the court awarded custody to the mother, citing that the father's killing of the family cat in front of the children had a toxic effect on the children.⁴⁶

Attorney Involvement

Two teenage boys killed a cat by trapping it, shooting it with arrows, and stomping on it. The boys videotaped the killing and showed it to their friends. Caught and convicted of the crime, they were each fined \$100. When the judge hearing the case was asked to explain the light sentence, he stated, "It was only a cat."⁴⁷

As the link among animal abuse, domestic violence, and child abuse becomes clearer, attorneys can use this information to



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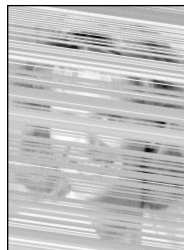
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help put an end to such forms of abuse. First and foremost, awareness is essential. Understanding that abuse is about power and control in all forms, with all victims, is the first step toward ending abuse. Simply because the victim is "only a cat" does not mean such abuse should be ignored or dismissed. Today the victim may only be a cat, but tomorrow it could be a child or another human. Animal abuse should be viewed as a red flag that people living in the house also may be abused. Such abuse should be noted when considering legislation, when clients are requesting a restraining order, and when abusers are being sentenced.

Attorneys who work with children should take seriously any abuse of animals that their clients speak about. Family law attorneys who represent people accused of domestic violence should not ignore stories of animal abuse. Although confidentiality likely prevents counsel from reporting the abuse, attorneys can help clients by recommending counseling or anger management classes.

Moreover, as citizens and members of a community, attorneys who become aware of animal abuse should make a report to the police or an animal protection agency. These organizations can investigate such concerns and may be able to determine if there are human victims in addition to abused animals. Lawyers also can become involved with and support local humane shelters such as the Aurora Animal Shelter and Dumb Friends League. Both of these organizations provide short-term care for animals of abused women who seek refuge at battered women's shelters.⁴⁸

Lawyers may be in the best position to help their clients find appropriate resources. Staff members at local battered women's shelters can help clients by offering options, listening to their concerns, and, possibly, providing clients, their children, and animals with a safe place to go.

NOTES

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2. The Humane Society of the United States, "Youth Violence and Animal Cruelty" (June 22, 2001) at: www.hsus.org/current/teen_cases.html.

3. Loar, "Why Human Service Professionals Should Pay Attention to Cases Involving Cruelty to Animals," in *Child Abuse, Domestic Violence, and Animal Abuse*, *supra*, note 1 at 121.

4. *Id.*

5. Munro, "The Battered Pet: Signs and Symptoms," in *Child Abuse, Domestic Violence, and Animal Abuse*, *supra*, note 1 at 199.

6. *Id.*

7. Lacroix, *supra*, note 1 at 63.

8. *Id.* at 63-64.

9. *Id.*

10. Munro, *supra*, note 5 at 199.

11. LaCroix, *supra*, note 1 at 65.

12. Ascione, Weber, and Wood, "The Abuse of Animals and Domestic Violence: A National Survey of Shelters for Women Who are Battered," in *Society and Animals* (1997) at 5(3).

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14. Lacroix, *supra*, note 1 at 65.

15. "Link Between Animal, Domestic Violence" (June 23, 1998) at: www.jointogether.org/gv/wire/news/reader.

16. Lerner, "From Safety to Healing: Representing Battered Women with Companion Animals," *The Domestic Violence Report* (Dec./Jan. 1999) at 18.

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20. Davidson, "The Link Between Animal Cruelty and Child Maltreatment," *ABA Child Law Practice* (June 1998) at: www.abanet.org.

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22. Boat, "Abuse of Children and Abuse of Animals: Using the Links to Inform Child Assessment and Protection" in *Child Abuse, Domestic Violence, and Animal Abuse*, *supra*, note 1 at 84.

23. Lerner, *supra*, note 16 at 29.

24. *Id.*

25. Ascione, Weber, and Wood, *supra*, note 12.

26. Lerner, *supra*, note 16 at 17.

27. *Supra*, note 19.

28. Santiago, "DAs Link Pet Abuse, Domestic Violence," *The Zero* (Nov. 5, 2000) at: www.vachss.com/help_text/archive/pets_dv_nydn.html.

29. Lembke, "Animal Abuse and Family Violence in a Rural Environment" in *Child Abuse, Domestic Violence, and Animal Abuse*, *supra*, note 1 at 228.

30. *Supra*, note 28.

31. Lerner, *supra*, note 16 at 31.

32. *Id.*

33. *Id.*; Lacroix, *supra*, note 1.

34. Ascione, Weber, Wood, *supra*, note 12.

35. Lacroix, *supra*, note 1 at 65.

36. *Supra*, note 20; *supra*, note 12.

37. *Supra*, note 12.

38. Munro, *supra*, note 5 at 203-05.

39. *Id.*

40. CRS § 18-9-202 (1)(a).

41. CRS § 18-9-202.

42. Lacroix, *supra*, note 1 at 67.

43. *Id.*

44. *State v. Bellows*, 582 N.W.2d 53 (Wis.App. 1998).

45. *State v. Pugsley*, 911 P.2d 761 (Idaho Ct.App. 1995).

46. *Boarman v. Boarman*, 459 S.E.2d 395 (W.Va. 1995).

47. Ascione, "The Abuse of Animals and Human Interpersonal Violence," in *Child Abuse, Domestic Violence, and Animal Abuse*, *supra*, note 1 at 52.

48. Gateway Battered Women's Shelter, "Safety Plan for Pets" (June 2001) (handout). To obtain a copy, please contact Betty House at (303) 343-1856. ■

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