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Animal Cruelty and Elder Abuse

By

Edward F. Ansello, Ph.D.

Do people who mistreat animals also mistreat humans? Over the course of time, does someone who mistreats small creatures “graduate” to abusing humans, especially vulnerable older adults?

We’ve heard, of course, about the extreme, sociopathic murderers who escalated from cruelty to creatures to cruelty to humans. Clearly, there is a sub-set of simply bad people who do extreme harm to vulnerable others, whether animal or human. And their paths may have begun with awful abuse of animals. On a more modest level, is there a link with indifference or neglect of pets leading to the same with humans, with those in later life?

Quite some time ago I posed these questions to my colleague Jim Vanden Bosch, the creative mind behind Terra Nova films, during a break at the annual meeting of the Virginia Coalition for the Prevention of Elder Abuse. I was a VCPEA board member fairly constantly for 20 years from its founding in 1993 and was schooled in the theory that most elder abuse by others is really elder neglect, brought on by caregivers being overwhelmed by the burden of their responsibilities. Indeed, when office mates Marilyn Block and Jan Sinnott at the University of Maryland Center on Aging conducted and published their seminal study, *The Battered Elder Syndrome*, in the late 1970s, only the third or fourth published report in this new area of investigation, “family member under stress” was a key conclusion. Despite this risk factor now being out of favor, I still believe that family caregiver stress accounts for a substantial amount, perhaps the majority of instances, of elder abuse caused by someone else, i.e., the majority of confirmed elder abuse cases remain cases of self-neglect. When someone else is involved, the family caregiver and the underpaid and under-trained hired caregiver have the greatest exposure in hours of time and amount of stressful pressures.

When I asked Jim Vanden Bosch about the animal-human link, he replied back then that his wife is a veterinarian who’d come across anecdotes recounting this very connection. So, she conducted a literature search of veterinary medicine at the time but came up with only consensus findings and anecdotal histories, with a fairly strong correlation between animal abuse in childhood and later criminality. But there was, at the time, relatively little empirical research in professional journals on the range of animal abuse and their connection to elder abuse or domestic violence in later life.

There have been a number of developments since then. Causality is difficult if not impossible to prove with human behaviors but associations and correlations now abound.

The American Psychological Association has a Section on Animal-Human Interaction. APA published guidance in 2011 under the heading *What Every Clinician Should Know about the Link between Pet Abuse and Family Violence* by Mary Lou Randour (www.apa.org/education/ce/pet-abuse-family-violence.pdf). It states that clinicians should include a number of questions about animals in the family as a routine part of assessing family well-being.

By 2011, the number of states with animal cruelty statutes having felony-level provisions rose from seven to 43. There is some discussion among family therapists nationally about mandatory reporting to authorities about found cases of animal abuse because of its strong perceived association with other forms of family violence.

The National Link Coalition-The National Resource Center on the Link between Animal Abuse and Human Violence (<http://nationallinkcoalition.org>) has emerged as a significant voice. The Link focuses on species-spanning violence, and provides connections to coalitions, resources that include bibliographies and videos, fact sheets, and much more. They state up front on their home page: “Mistreating animals is no longer seen as an isolated incident that can be ignored: it is often an indicator or predictor of crime and a “red flag” warning sign that other family members in the household may not be safe.” The Link sees animal abuse as part of a continuum of human violence and urges that mistreatment, neglect, and intentional cruelty of animals be seen as likely to lead to species-spanning acts.

We cannot dismiss mistreatment if the victim is “only an animal.” Indeed, child anti-cruelty laws owe their origin to already-existing animal anti-cruelty laws. Before the age of the automobile, work horses were protected before children were; subsequently, children, being considered “property,” became similarly covered under legislation that protected animals that were owned.

Behavioral scientists have been investigating animal and human abuse relationships. They have extensively documented that animal abuse is a predictor of abuse against humans. Developmental psychologist, Frank Ascione, PhD, has been investigating the connection for years; he’s written *Children and animals: Exploring the roots of kindness and cruelty* (2005), and edited both *The international handbook of animal abuse and cruelty* (2010), and, with Phil Arkow, *Child abuse, domestic violence, and animal abuse* (1999): Clifton Flynn, PhD, chair of the Department of Sociology, Criminal Justice, and Women’s Studies at the University of South Carolina Upstate wrote the textbook *Understanding animal abuse: A sociological analysis* (2012). There are positive interventions also; some believe that just as harmful behavior can be observed and internalized, so too might nurturing be assisted. Michelle Rivera has written *Early intervention: Canines in the classroom: Raising humane children through interactions with animals* (2004) and *On dogs and dying: Inspirational stories from hospice hounds* (2010).

The National District Attorney’s Association (NDAA) and the ASPCA have published *Understanding the link between violence to animals and people* (2014). Written by Allie Phillips, JD, this 84-page manual discusses child abuse, elder abuse, domestic violence, and animal abuse.

It employs “animal abuse” as a broad term to describe various crimes toward animals, including neglect and failing to protect, and “animal cruelty” to describe intentional criminal conduct. Among its pages one sees that abuse of animals is strongly predictive of battering behavior toward animals. Also, Phillips notes that older adults may hoard animals and that some may have too little funds to feed or care for a pet adequately. You can access the manual at: www.ndaa.org/pdf/The%20Link%20Monograph-2014.pdf.

The website of NCALL, the National Clearinghouse on Abuse in Later Life, has a page entitled “Intersection of Animal Abuse and Elder Abuse” which references the continuum of violence and encourages NCALL’s visitors to obtain more information at The Link’s website.

Still, the question I posed years ago is not fully answered: while cruelty apparently leads to cruelty and violence against pets predicts the same against children and spouses, is there a slippery slope from neglect of animals to that of older adults? As many dissertations conclude, “more research is needed.” Having felony-level consequences for animal cruelty and abuse may, among other results, help to produce more data, as would broadening the categories of mandatory reporters. In Virginia, for instance, veterinarians who report animal cruelty to authorities are immune from any civil or criminal liability (Code 54.1-3812.1) and preliminary protective orders in cases of family abuse grant the petitioner possession of any companion animal (Code 16.1-253.1). So, some level of awareness of the continuum of violence is there, but there needs to be greater public awareness that protecting the vulnerable may begin with pets and domestic animals.

On the positive, proactive side, continuing and expanding APA’s guidance that those in counseling roles be alert to and ask questions about care of animals could provide some early warnings, perhaps in time to avoid harm to both animals and people. And certainly encouraging our children to interact with kindness towards animals can’t help but pay dividends over the life course. We need to pay attention to the links.