



Special MAHARO Colors



#15-1

HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND TO "THE LINK"?

The "Link" Across the Lifespan:

Animal Abuse as a Marker for Child Abuse, Domestic Violence and Elder Abuse

It is now widely recognized that violence against animals is not an isolated occurrence, a minor concern or a passing childhood phase. It is one of many forms of family and community violence that can hurt people as well as animals. When we recognize this Link, parents, educators, the general public, and professionals can intervene earlier and more effectively. By working together, we can prevent future violence to all vulnerable members of the family.

HOW SHOULD PARENTS RESPOND?

Children are surrounded by animals in their lives and media. The names of animals are the first words in toddlers' vocabularies and are more prevalent than any words except "mommy" and "daddy." Most children grow up with pets and have healthy relationships with them.

Parents may learn about acts of animal cruelty which their children have committed or seen. However, not all children who are abused or neglected harm animals, and not all children who harm animals become violent adults. A child who pulls an animal's tail, or who plays too roughly with it, is

not necessarily cruel. Children who are too young to understand that their actions have consequences, or whose mental or motor skills are not fully developed, may not be hurting animals deliberately.

However, if children's unintentional actions escalate into deliberate, serious, or repeated acts of cruelty, counseling by a trusted adult or professional may be necessary.

It is difficult for children to understand that animals have feelings. By instilling in children a respect for animals, and by gently guiding them at the first sign of violence, we can take early steps toward teaching them the importance of empathy to all living creatures.



There is no specific profile of children who harm animals. Children abuse animals for many different reasons. They may be curious and not know that what they are doing is wrong. They may be depressed: teenagers often make videos of their torturing animals to replay later when they are bored. They may be transferring their anger at the abuse that they have received to a more helpless creature, or trying to regain a sense of power after being abused. They may be forced into abusing an animal by a more powerful person, such as a gang leader or parent. They may be repeating what they see adults doing. Or they may be conducting a rehearsal for interpersonal violence.

Different types of animal abuse are more common at different stages of childhood:

Exploratory animal abuse, where the child is merely curious and lacks training in proper animal care, usually occurs in the earliest years. Humane education to instill in the child the awareness that animals have feelings may be the best response.



Older children, especially those with histories of sexual abuse, physical abuse, domestic violence or psychological disturbances, may commit pathological animal cruelty. Professional clinical intervention is usually necessary.

Adolescents who commit animal abuse as part of a larger pattern of defiant activities, often as part of a gang or combined with substance abuse, may be committing delinquent animal abuse. Clinical intervention and prosecution may be indicated.

Many children who are cruel to animals have been victimized themselves. Children who have experienced domestic violence, or whose friends or family members are cruel to animals, are much more likely to be cruel. These children need guidance to improve their self-concept and support to give them a positive, productive sense of empowerment.

Parents must ask children about their activities and their feelings. By examining children's artwork, writings and conversations, parents can be watchful for any indications of abusing animals. A child who re-enacts the harming of an animal during play, or who draws pictures of animals being tortured, or who watches videos of animals being hurt, or who brags to friends about hurting animals must be counseled. In any case it will be beneficial to have a conversation with the child to assess the situation and to encourage humane and respectful connections with animals.



Early intervention is important. Many future problems can be resolved through an explanatory talk or a mild reprimand. Ask the child supportively to describe his or her reaction, thoughts and feelings. Allow the child to tell the entire story. Help the child – and any friends who participated in or witnessed the incident – to understand what happened, express their feelings about it, and explain what the animal's feelings are and what can be done to help the abused animal.

HOW SHOULD TEACHERS RESPOND?

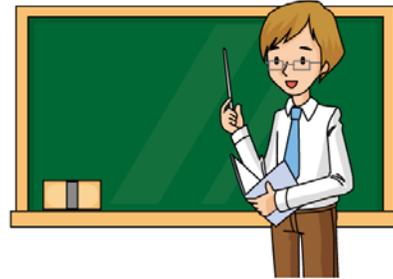
Teachers may overhear children's conversations, or see their artwork or writings, and have concerns. Identifying potential animal abuse as soon as possible enhances the safety of children, their classmates, animals, and other members of the family, school and community.

Students may disclose animal cruelty for many reasons. They may be trying to impress someone. They may want to stop the abuse and do not know how to ask for help. A child may be taking a great risk in revealing what he or she saw: compliment the child on being able to discuss such a difficult situation. If the child reports suspected child abuse or domestic violence, it will be necessary to contact child welfare officials or the police. Do what you can to minimize the child's exposure to retribution.

Assess the situation and determine how serious it is. Try to discover what motivated the child to harm the animal. It may be helpful to talk with the student's family, friends, classmates, guidance counselors, and other teachers.

Youths with histories of bullying other children, or who have been bullied themselves, often take out their emotional problems on animals. These children may need professional counseling as well.

Refer to the school's protocols for handling matters such as these and involve school counselors or psychologists, police, animal welfare or child welfare agencies as necessary.



HOW SHOULD PROFESSIONALS RESPOND?

Growing awareness of how animal abuse affects people has prompted many changes. For example, crimes in the U.S. are divided into minor misdemeanors and serious felonies. In 1990 only five of our 50 states had felony animal cruelty laws. Because legislators now see animal abuse as having a bad effect on people as well as animals, all 50 states now have felony-level animal cruelty.

Some other important responses have been: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND ANIMAL ABUSE

Because so many women do not leave a batterer because they are afraid of what might happen to their animals, 85 women's shelters in the United States, Canada and Australia are now pet-friendly, allowing pets to accompany the human family members. In addition, 900 women's shelters refer clients to animal shelters, rescue groups and veterinarians who provide foster homes for the pets and a safety net until the women can get their lives back in order.

28 of our 50 states now allow courts to include pets and livestock in court orders that protect domestic violence survivors from their batterers.

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Safety plans now teach abused women how to escape with their pets. The animals' veterinary bills, licenses, vaccination records and pet supplies receipts should be in her name so she can claim custody if the batterer tries to get the animal back.

CHILD ABUSE AND ANIMAL ABUSE

A new federal law makes it illegal to bring a child to an animal fight.

In 18 states, all persons are required by law to report suspected child abuse to authorities, but veterinarians, animal control officers and animal welfare investigators are specifically mandated to report in only eight states. We are trying to increase this number.

Several states have introduced bills which would make the commission of animal cruelty in the presence of a child a more serious criminal offense.



VETERINARY MEDICINE AND ANIMAL ABUSE

To enable veterinarians to better diagnose animal cruelty cases and present evidence for prosecution, Veterinary Forensics has become a specialty practice with distance-learning training from the University of Florida and the International Veterinary Forensic Sciences Association. Veterinary associations in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand have published guidelines and professional codes of conduct to help veterinarians recognize and respond to suspected animal abuse.

Veterinary Social Work is linking human services and animal welfare.

INCREASED PUBLIC AWARENESS

Concerned people in 40 countries are reading the National Link Coalition's free monthly LINK-Letter.

There are community coalitions against violence that include animal protection agencies in 34 U.S. cities, plus Canada, the U.K., Scotland, Spain, Sweden, the Netherlands, and New Zealand.

Awareness of The Link prompted our Federal Bureau of Investigation to include animal cruelty among the crimes that 18,000 local law enforcement agencies tabulate for statistical purposes. Currently, animal cruelty cases are not counted and we do not have statistics as to the number or outcome of these cases.

KEY REFORMS NEEDED

We can no longer ignore the pets in the lives of people we work with. The number, types, histories, welfare, attachment, and dangerousness of animals in the home should be considered when professionals examine a family's situation.

Preventing violence to all vulnerable family members can be enhanced through multi-disciplinary assessment, prevention, intervention, and treatment programs that:

1. Recognize animal abuse as affecting human's health and welfare as well as animals'.
2. Include animal abuse as a form of family violence.
3. Describe animal abuse as an Adverse Childhood Experience.
4. Build lines of communication between human and animal services agencies to cross-train staffs to cross-report all forms of family violence.



Writing **Phil Arkow**

Phil Arkow has conducted over 200 trainings in 15 countries (including Japan) and authored more than 60 books, chapters and articles. He is Coordinator of the National Link Coalition (www.NationalLinkCoalition.org) which is the National Resource Center on The Link between Animal Abuse and Human Violence. He teaches three college courses on animal-assisted therapy and the Link. He has served with the American Veterinary Medical Association, the Delta Society (Pet Partners), the American Humane Association, the Animals & Society Institute, and the American Association of Human-Animal Bond Veterinarians.