

ANIMAL ABUSE AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Animal abuse is a “red flag” for the existence of, or potential for, serious domestic violence. An injured pet may be the first indicator to outsiders that abuse is occurring in a home.

Hurting or even killing a family pet or farm animal – or threatening to hurt or kill an animal – is one of a long list of tactics abusers may use to gain and retain power and control over their partner.

This animal abuse is sometimes committed in front of the family for added impact, to:

- Keep them in fear of him and what he is capable of (“You could be next”)
- Punish her or the children for a perceived challenge to his authority
- Silence them about the abuse
- Eliminate a source of comfort and support
- Eliminate a “rival” for their partner’s affection and attention
- Keep them from leaving for fear he’ll take his anger out on the pets.

“Animal cruelty is one of the earliest and most dramatic indicators that an individual is developing a pattern of [using] power and control through abuse of others.”

Sudbury-Wayland-Lincoln Domestic Violence Roundtable

When working with women experiencing or fleeing domestic violence, it’s important to ask them if they have pets. The [National Link Coalition](#), an American organization that works to stop violence against people and animals, recommends anti-violence workers routinely include three questions about the presence and welfare of animals in their crisis line calls, intake interviews and risk assessments:

1. Are there pets in the home?



2. How does each family member treat them?
3. Do you worry about something bad happening to them?

Women, and especially children, may be more willing to talk about what has happened to their pets or farm animals than about what has happened to themselves, especially during initial meetings.

Children who talk about having had many pets die or disappear may be living in homes with animal and/or domestic abuse.

Ensure family pets and farm animals are included in any safety plans. Remember that both women and children can be hurt while intervening to try to help their pets. Encourage women to keep evidence of pet ownership in a safe place, such as licences, adoption papers, vet bills, or pet food receipts in their name.

Have a list of pet-friendly transition houses or temporary animal shelters or foster homes. If there are none in your community, build relationships with local shelters, veterinarians and animal welfare groups that may be able to provide temporary homes to the pets of women fleeing abuse. A good example is the Ksan Society Pets Program in Terrace (<http://ksansociety.ca/ksan-happenings/ksan-pets-program/>).

In a 2012 Alberta SPCA study, 59 per cent of women delayed leaving an abusive relationship out of concern for their pets or farm animals. More than a third said that their animals were threatened by the abuser, and 85 per cent of that third reported the abusers carried out those threats.

[Inside the Cruelty Connection](#)



Abusers who also abuse pets are more dangerous, more controlling, and use more forms of violence than abusers who do not (Simmons & Lehmann, 2007).

Abused animals may be more likely to bite or attack family members and others. Neighbours may be reluctant to get involved in family violence, but may report suspected animal abuse, or an aggressive animal. A trained investigator may uncover unreported but related domestic abuse, and make appropriate referrals.

Should a survivor of abuse choose not to pursue charges, sometimes animal cruelty charges can be laid against her abuser, without her needing to be involved.

Cross-training and cross-reporting protocols could both build and enhance working relationships across sectors, enabling earlier and more effective interventions and supports for both those experiencing domestic violence and their abused pets.

Be aware of the effects of witnessing animal abuse on children.

Needless to say, witnessing animal abuse can have serious lifelong effects on a child. Sometimes abusers force children to take part in animal abuse. Witnessing or participating in animal abuse can desensitize a child to violence, and decrease their empathy and sense of safety. It can also make a child more likely to be violent to pets. Children who abuse animals may escalate to other types of abuse and violent crime as adults.

Children who are cruel to pets may be witnessing or experiencing domestic violence and/or animal abuse.

It is time for anti-violence groups, animal welfare groups, and law enforcement to work together to increase public awareness and address this important issue. Animal welfare agencies and anti-violence agencies are increasingly realizing that they are dealing with the same perpetrators. Experienced animal abuse investigators are not surprised to find evidence of domestic violence when probing animal abuse, and vice versa.

Professionals in social services, animal protection, health care, law enforcement and the courts should recognize animal abuse as a common dynamic intersecting all of their work, and routinely screen for concurrent animal abuse and domestic violence issues.

RESOURCES

BCSPCA webpage: *The Violence Link*:
www.sPCA.bc.ca/animal-issues/professional-resources/the-violence-link/

Pet Safety Planning: nationallinkcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/DV-SafetyPlanningSAF-T.pdf

Women and Pets Escaping Violence: cfhs.ca/athome/human_animal_violence_connection

Inside the Cruelty Connection: The Role of Animals in Decision-Making by Domestic Violence Victims in Rural Alberta:
www.albertasPCA.org/resources/publications/InsideTheCrueltyConnection.pdf