

ANIMAL ACTION REPORT

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When Cruelty Begins at Home

Understanding and addressing the connection between domestic violence and animal abuse

By Emily Christie
Founder, Ahimsa House

It just might be the darkest family secret of all. The specter of domestic violence lurks behind the front door of an astonishing number of homes today, causing untold suffering and destroying lives. And, like other family traits, it is often passed along from generation to generation in an endless cycle of abuse.

The victims of domestic violence—women and children—cross racial, cultural and socio-economic lines. According to the National Council on Violent Crime, 50 women an hour are victimized by their intimate partners. Every 35 seconds, one child is reported abused or neglected.

But it may surprise you to know that women and children are not the only victims. Studies have shown that family violence often begins with the household animal companion being mistreated. In fact, the deadly connection between family violence and animal abuse has been so well documented that human services professionals call it "The Link."

Sadly, child abuse and pet abuse are almost always present at the same time. For example, a study in which New Jersey families were identified by the state as physically



abusing children showed that pet abuse was present in 88% of them. What we now know is that abusive family members often use the household's companion animals as a way of controlling, threatening or manipulating other family members.

In an estimated 57% of households where mental and physical abuse takes place, the companion animal is injured or killed when the human victim tries to leave. In fact, concern for a beloved animal's welfare prevents or delays more than 50% of battered individuals from escaping ongoing abuse perpetrated on themselves, their children or their pet. Likewise, a significant percentage of women leave the shelter prematurely out of concern for their pet.

It's not difficult to see why this is so. Psychologists have proven that the human-dog relationship is similar to the parent-child relationship. People are apt to consider their

dog as a child substitute and valued member of the family. More than 80% of shelter women reported being "very close" to their abused pet. Women whose pets were abused reported even stronger emotional ties to their pets, supporting the idea that batterers use pet abuse as a form of control. Further, 74% of pet owners found their pets to be "very important" in terms

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of emotional support, making the pet even more vulnerable to abuse. In abusive relationships, the abuser will do anything to destroy a support network of this kind in order to maintain total control over the spouse or partner.

The same is true for children. The majority of primary school-age children regard their pet as being in their top ten most special relationships, and this deep animal-child bond is often exploited by the abuser. Testimonies from child victims of sexual abuse reveal that threats and abuse against a pet are not only effective in gaining control over the victims, these actions ensure their silence by forcing them to decide between their own victimization or the pet's death. With the child silenced, continuation of the abuse is virtually guaranteed, thus paving the way for a physically and psychologically destructive life.

This is how the cycle of violence is carried forward through succeeding generations. Violence—including child, spouse and elder abuse as well as animal cruelty—is taught at home and passed on to children as life lessons. In almost every case of childhood animal cruelty, the child has previously been either a witness to or a victim of abuse.

Researchers have discovered that those who treat animals cruelly go on to treat people cruelly. In one U.S. study of 135 criminals, 118 admitted that as children, they had burned, hanged, and/or stabbed domesticated animals. A study conducted by Northeastern University and the Massachusetts SPCA found that individuals who committed acts of animal cruelty were five times more likely to commit violent crimes against humans. In the 1970s, the FBI discovered that the first common link among serial killers was cruelty to animals.

As a result of these findings, there is now greater awareness of the role animals play in family violence. Many law enforcement



"I am sometimes asked, 'Why do you spend so much of your time and money talking about kindness to animals when there is so much cruelty to men?' I answer, I am working at the roots."

George T. Angell, Founder, Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (MSPCA)

agencies, for example, now train officers to recognize animal abuse as a sign of violence elsewhere in the home. Nearly all states now have felony-level penalties for animal cruelty, which sends a clear message that animal abuse is taken seriously by the courts. Several states require veterinarians to report suspected animal abuse and offer veterinarians who report cruelty immunity from civil and criminal liability. Maine has enacted legislation that allows animals to be included in domestic violence protection orders. And a program in Columbus, Ohio places the pets of domestic violence victims in a women's prison, where inmates care for them.

In addition, there are now more than 100 Safe Haven for Pets programs around the country that are helping both the human and animal victims of family violence escape their abusers and get help to improve their life situation. The programs place pets with foster families who have volunteered their services to help pets and people in need.

Despite the growth of these programs, though, more needs to be done. In the

U.S., few animal shelters have any programs in place to help the animal victims of domestic violence. Only 27.1% of domestic violence shelters report asking about pets during their intake procedure, yet 83.3% of those surveyed observed that abusive homes contained both animal abuse and domestic violence. Few offer any psychological or practical services related to this issue.

Ahimsa House is the only organization completely dedicated to obtaining shelter and aid to animals caught in the cycle of domestic violence. Read more about this organization and the NAVS Sanctuary Fund grant that helped them with some of their veterinary and operational expenses on the next page.

Safe havens, like Ahimsa House, hope to break the cycle of violence through intervention of a nonviolent nature. They believe that by helping animals, we human beings grow in our ways to help each other. By stopping animal abuse, we not only save animals, we can set the right example for the next generation by teaching children empathy for others. 🐾

Escaping the Nightmare of Abuse

Ahimsa House provides a safe haven for animal victims of domestic violence

Ahimsa is the Sanskrit word for nonviolence—and quite an appropriate name for a place that is dedicated to helping the victims of domestic violence flee with their pets. Their motto is to “help humans and animals reach safety together.”

Ahimsa House is the inspiration of Emily Christie, who, more than a decade ago, lost her cat as a result of an abusive situation. Seeking to help other women who found themselves caught in the cycle of family violence, Emily began Ahimsa House in 2004 with a tiny three-room shelter, and later, two foster homes.

Today, Ahimsa House assists victims of abuse in the Atlanta, Georgia area by providing a safe haven for their companion animals in either a shelter, veterinary clinic or within its growing network of foster homes. The animals are kept safe in a confidential environment, with updates on an animal's well being, visitation and photographs available for the families. Vaccinations, spay/neuter, disease testing and parasite treatments are also performed at no charge.

Ahimsa House maintains a 24-hour helpline, and in emergency situations can pick up an animal at any time of the day or night and bring him/her to a veterinary clinic, boarding facility or foster home. All services are available to any non-aggressive animal whose family has been referred by a domestic violence shelter, law enforcement agency or mental health professional.

“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Through its network of veterinary clinics, boarding facilities and foster homes, Ahimsa House can provide care for animals for up to 65 days. Under its no-kill policy, animals who are permanently unable to return to their families are placed in a new home through an adoption organization.

Unfortunately, Ahimsa House has recently become a victim as well—of its own dramatic growth. Not long after it began operating, a very special abuse case—a dog, Tiny Tim, whose leg had been broken by his abuser—was brought to Ahimsa House. Emily decided to take Tiny Tim's case to the media and the public to raise funds for surgery and rehabilitation to save his leg. Emily and her volunteers were overwhelmed with phone calls, messages and media attention not just from the Atlanta area, but across the U.S. While they succeeded in raising enough funds to help Tiny Tim, the awareness the case generated caused Ahimsa House to be flooded with clients—almost more than it could handle.

A NAVS Sanctuary Fund grant is helping Ahimsa House with its extensive veterinary expenses, to help ensure that no one should have to choose between their own safety and the safety of their companion animal. 🐾

GOING TO COURT FOR ANIMALS

State legislatures propose protections for companion animals in domestic violence cases.

Since the adoption of laws in Maine and Vermont that would allow courts to issue an order of protection for companion animals in domestic abuse cases, a flurry of bills have been introduced on this issue. An Illinois bill, HB 9, was introduced early this year and passed through the House by a unanimous vote. It is now being considered by the Senate.

Bills have also been introduced in California (S 353), Colorado (HB 1235), Connecticut (SB 284), New Jersey (A 3082 and S 2246) and Virginia (SB 932). Legislators in Utah introduced HB 342, but it was defeated with little debate.

You can make a difference!

If your state has introduced this legislation, call or write your legislator with support for this initiative. It is an important component in breaking the cycle of violence faced by animals and humans in an abusive situation. Go to the NAVS Advocacy Center on the NAVS website at www.navs.org to make your voice heard, or call **800-888-6287** to find out how to contact your representative.

If you would like to see a bill passed in your state that would allow judges to include companion animals in orders of protection, go to AnimalLaw.com to find a “model law” you can bring to your legislator to introduce this year.

Not only do these laws protect companion animals from domestic abuse, they help the thousands of human victims who may be unwilling to leave a violent home for fear that the family pet will be harmed.