



Research on the Link

Why do people abuse animals?

Researchers Kellert and Felthous have identified some motivators for cruelty towards animals. The most common are:

- to control the animal by eliminating undesirable characteristics (punitive training methods);
- retaliation against a presumed wrong by the animal (punishment for undesirable behaviour);
- to satisfy a prejudice against a species or breed;
- to instill violent tendencies in the animal to cause it to attack others (e.g. guard dog).

Other reasons include:

- to shock people for amusement;
- to enhance one's own aggressiveness by impressing others with one's capacity for violence;
- retaliation against another person;
- displacement of hostility towards a person (abused children abuse animals to get even for their abuse);
- to derive pleasure from causing suffering (sadism).

Understanding these motivators is useful when developing an intervention plan for the abusers.¹

Killers: The animal connection

Most serial killers and mass murders have a history of animal abuse. They often rehearse their crimes on animals or desensitize themselves to the pain and suffering of animal victims before carrying out violence on humans.

Well-documented cases include:

- Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the boys responsible for the Columbine school shooting, bragged about mutilating animals to their friends;
- Gary Ridgway, the Green River Killer, a US convicted serial killer, suffocated a cat as a child;
- Jeffrey Dahmer, a notorious serial killer, impaled frogs, decapitated dogs and staked cats to trees before turning the violence toward human victims;
- Luke Woodham, before killing his mother and two high school students, beat his dog with a club, doused her with lighter fluid, set her on fire and threw her in a pond;
- Andrew Golden, 11, told friends he shot dogs with a .22 all the time. He and Mitchell Johnson, 13, killed four students and one teacher ambushed during a fire drill.

It is important to note that animal abuse and human violence is not a cause and effect issue. However, it is not surprising when there is a link. Very often the first step of violent acts against humans is abuse of animals.

What the research shows

- 36% of women with animals reported that their abuser threatened or harmed their animals;²
- 85% of threats against animals were carried out;²
- 94% of child protection workers reported that they observed evidence of animal neglect during their investigations;³

- An Ontario study which took place in over 21 shelters throughout the province found that 44% of the women had had a family pet killed or abused;⁴
- "Pet abuse was a stronger risk factor for abuse than having fair or poor mental health, having problems with drinking, or drugs, or not completing high school."⁴

1 Kellert, S.R., & A. R. Felthous (1985) Childhood Cruelty Toward Animals Among Criminals and Non-criminals. *Human Relations*. 38:1113-29.

2 Bohac, Clarke, V., & D. Crawford (July 2012) Inside the Cruelty Connection: The Role of Animals in Decision Making by Domestic Violence Victims in Rural Alberta. Retrieved from www.albertaspca.org/resources/publications/InsideTheCrueltyConnection.pdf

3 Girardi, A., & J. Pozzulo (2012) The Significance of Animal Cruelty in Child Protection Investigations. *Social Work Research*. 36.1 (2012): 53-60. *Criminal Justice Abstracts with Full Text*. Web. 5 Jan 2013

4 Zorza, J. (2010) Dealing with Animal Abuse to Alleviate Family Violence. *Family & Intimate Partner Violence Quarterly*, 2(4), 345-358.