



When children abuse animals

When a child is cruel to animals, the behaviour is often dismissed as an exploratory stage of development. This may be partly true, though the intensity of and motivation for the child's actions must be considered. When the actions are motivated by exploration, teaching the child that all living creatures can experience pain and suffering, and discussing the similarities between animals and humans (empathy development), is often a successful intervention strategy to prevent future cruelty. However, when a child grows up in an environment filled with violence, there may be other factors, besides exploration, which motivate him or her to harm animals:

- An adult may force the child to abuse animals and use this to coerce the child into silence about his or her own abuse.
- A child, feeling powerless through abuse by adults, may find his or her own victims to exert control and gain a sense of power.
- A child may abuse a pet, sibling or peer as a way of displacing hostility towards his or her abuser.
- Animal abuse may take place as part of a gang initiation ritual.

"Most people seem to believe that there is some impenetrable psychological barrier in the human brain that neatly separates the capacity for violence by species, and every time we disregard blatant acts of animal cruelty as childish pranks, we make it easier for kids to believe it too. In other words, we give them permission to practice inflicting pain without fear of being punished," says Richard De Angleis in an article on the Violence Link.¹

All animal abuse situations must be taken seriously. Children who abuse animals are more likely to become bullies, be involved in juvenile delinquency and commit crimes, both adult

violent crime and nonviolent crime. If addressed early, these things can be prevented. Understanding why children may abuse animals is the key to appropriate intervention strategies.

What are the effects of animal abuse on abusers?

Animal abuse can be an early warning sign of the likelihood of future violent acts. This has been well documented in several research studies and has led to animal abuse being listed as one of the criterion for a diagnosis of conduct disorder in childhood. Abusers and impressionable children who witness abuse become desensitized to violence and the ability to empathize with the victim.² It is well known that abuse is often cyclical and that the only way to stop the cycle is intervention; the earlier the intervention the higher rate of success.

1 De Angleis, Richard, The vicious Circle. Animal Guardian Vol 11; No.3, 1998 pg 9.

2 Arkow, Phil, 1998. Linking the Circle of Violence.