

Animal Cruelty and Family Violence: Making the Connection

Pets are part of the family in the majority of American households, where nearly three-quarters of families with school-age children have at least one companion animal. These animals are often treated like members of the family, but if the family is experiencing violence they can become targets as well. Pets are often an important source of comfort and stability to the victims of abuse, particularly children. But abusive family members may threaten, injure, or kill pets, often as a way of threatening or controlling others in the family.

A 1997 survey of 50 of the largest shelters for battered women in the United States found that 85% of women and 63% of children entering shelters discussed incidents of pet abuse in the family. Children who have witnessed domestic violence or who have been the victims of physical or sexual abuse may also become animal abusers themselves, imitating the violence they have seen or experienced. A study conducted in 1995 noted that 32% of the pet-owning victims of domestic abuse reported that one or more of their children had hurt or killed a pet. Similarly, a 1983 study noted that children were reported to be abusive to animals in more than a third of a sample of pet-owning families referred to New Jersey's Division of Youth and Family Services for suspected child abuse.

It is essential for those who respond to family violence to be alert to this connection. Professionals in domestic violence intervention, law enforcement, child protection, human and veterinary medicine, education, and animal care and control should get to know their counterparts in other professions and work together to establish strategies for a coordinated response to these needs.

In fact, professionals who help families in crisis are increasingly recognizing the role that animals play in the dynamics of family violence. Many law enforcement agencies are training officers who respond to domestic violence calls to be alert for signs that a situation is life-threatening. These include situations where the batterer has threatened suicide, is displaying a firearm, or has hurt or killed a family pet.

In addition, local domestic violence shelters and animal protection organizations have begun partnering to develop "safe havens" for the pets of domestic violence victims because many victims delay leaving the abusive batterer out of fear for their pets' safety. All too often, batterers punish victims for leaving by abusing or killing the pets. Yet, with the help of over 100 safe haven programs currently operating around the United States, many domestic violence victims no longer have to choose between their safety and their pets.

The First Strike® campaign can help in the process of bringing professionals together from a variety of agencies. We facilitate workshops and provide educational materials specifically for various professionals working to prevent family violence. For more information, please call our First Strike toll free line at 1-888-213-0956.

References

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