

**BRIDGING THE GAP:  
Educating decision makers about the connections  
between human violence and animal cruelty**

“Has anyone ever tried to make you do something you didn’t want to do by threatening to hurt your pet ? Have you ever seen anyone hurt an animal or a pet? Tell me what happened. “

This is the kind of questioning conversation that child therapists have with their young clients whom the therapist suspects may be traumatized by what they have witnessed in their homes when adults inflict harm to the child’s pet or other animals. Not infrequently, these behaviors are seen in the context of domestic violence as well as in connection with documented child abuse and neglect.

But there is a noticeable gap in the training or education that those in the field of child protection receive about the connections between human violence and animal abuse and neglect. Judges across the country who handle child abuse and neglect cases, child protection and law enforcement agencies are a few of the groups that could benefit from cross-training and cross-reporting through inter-agency partnerships.

Knowledge of these associations can be of inestimable value in assessing whether children will be safe if they remain at home or in determining whether it will be safe for them to return home if they have been removed. We look at acts of violence by youth and to youth as being important in these assessments. We should do no less with acts of cruelty to animals.

**Background**

In the past few years, there has been increasing attention paid to animals in the domestic violence context. The literature supports the fact that victims of domestic violence often will not leave their homes for fear that their animals will be harmed, just as many would not leave their pets during Hurricane Katrina. Some state legislatures have responded by legislation that includes pets in restraining orders.

But the professional training for judges, the ongoing training for child protection social workers and investigators and the education of child therapists, rarely includes education and training materials on these links between animal abuse and child abuse. Assessments of risks in the home when a report of child abuse or neglect is made seldom mention whether animals are in the home or if they are, in what condition they were found.

It is not that studies on these issues have not been done. There is a world of well-documented research on the links between human violence and animal cruelty that offer rich material for training and education. Theories such as the 'graduation hypothesis', a widely held hypothesis that cruelty to animals by children was an accurate predictor of violence to humans by those children when they became adults, have been largely shown to be without empirical basis, although some might still disagree that there is no correlation. But there is demonstrated basis for a correspondingly high incidence of abuse of family pets where children in the home have been alleged to have been abused or neglected. Several authors cited below have written about the 'red flags' of animal abuse that should warn professionals

who work in the child protection field. This research makes a compelling argument for cross-reporting between child protection and animal protection agencies.

### **Significance**

The disconnect between what is known about the links between animal cruelty and human violence and an understanding of those links by judges and others is evident. Training and education is essential for those involved in all aspects of child protection work in courts and homes and in decisions based on what is in the best interest of the child. Judges must be informed as to what goes on in the home with respect to how animals are treated in the home. How witnessing violence in the home impacts children, whether done to human family members or family pets becomes important information for the judge to have.

Relying on judges to make correct decisions means ensuring that they are aware and knowledgeable of all child protection issues. Understanding that acts of serious violence to animals may be associated with grim acts of violence to humans is a crucial step in this process or if not violence to child what is the trauma of witnessing the violence? It is hoped that as judges are trained in this area, they will use the information about animal cruelty/human violence links in their written decisions so as to educate the attorneys on the cases as well as the appellate courts in the event that a case gets appealed.

### **Example of one judicial training session**

In May 2011 in Worcester, Massachusetts, a group of forty-one (41) Juvenile Judges received specialized training in the human violence/animal cruelty links. Juvenile Judges in Massachusetts hear only cases involving abuse and neglect and

delinquency as well as a few other matters. Judges in the Massachusetts Juvenile Court apply to that court department and generally remain there for the entirety of their judicial careers.

The training began with a twenty-minute lecture about what the issues are, the current state of knowledge about the topic, how it is relevant to their daily work, the existing state of the law in Massachusetts related to this topic.

Several weeks before the training, the judges had received an article entitled “Using a ‘Jury of her Peers’ to Teach about the Connection between Domestic Violence and Animal Abuse” by Carolyn Forell and were asked to read it in preparation for a discussion at the training conference. It was explained to the judges that the ‘graduation hypothesis’ which was accepted as fact for a long time has largely been discredited. This hypothesis held that children who abuse animals go on to abuse or harm adults as they grow up themselves, but researchers have now found that the violence is often co-occurring or may be reversed, that is, that harming animals may follow the abuse to humans.

The judge leading the training session acknowledged to the judges how little they had been exposed to this body of knowledge and how critical it was to what they did every day. She expressed her astonishment that the word “animals” seldom, if ever, appeared in a report from a social worker, a court investigator or a therapist. The judge told a story about her experience several years ago when a twelve-year old boy named Kevin was in front of her, having run away repeatedly from his foster home to his home where his parents lived. He had been placed in foster care due to his drug-addicted parents’ inability to care for him. In response to the judge’s

questions about why he ran away, he said, “ I needed to make sure my dog was alright”. At that time, unaware of the links between animal abuse and human violence, the judge interpreted his response to mean that he just wanted to see his dog. Today, the judge explained that she would have had a much different response and asked Kevin different kinds of questions. She might have asked him whether he thought the dog was in any danger, was Kevin perhaps the only one who fed him, was the dog severely punished if he had a soiling accident in the house, had Kevin ever seen the dog being beaten or harmed.

The next portion of the training was devoted to problem-solving exercises, which were handed out in written form before the exercise. The problems were based on the type of situations judges would encounter in the courtroom. They included a question asking what would the judge do if an attorney representing the child told the judge about the child reporting that every time they got a new dog, it disappeared shortly after it did something wrong in the house. Another exercise asked what the judge should do if a court investigator’s report discloses that she watched the father in the home repeatedly kick the cat while she was interviewing the parents. Judges worked in small groups of three to discuss the problems posed in the exercises. A question and comment period followed and the discussion was lively and challenging.

The final part of the training was spent discussing with the judges what other groups of people in the court or related agencies could benefit from knowing more about the topic, as well as an explanation of the materials they had received in their packets. Other materials provided to the judges included a copy of a Massachusetts

case involving children having witnessed violence as a factor in determining custody; questionnaire by B. Boat as adapted by M.L.Randour; “Children and Animals: Exploring the Roots of Kindness” (Frank Ascione, 2005); “A Common Bond” (Mary Lou Randour and Howard Davidson); Juvenile and Family Justice TODAY (Spring 2010).

It was also important for the judges to be made aware of national and local grass-roots organizations who are working on these issues. One such grass-roots group named HAVEN (Human/Animal Violence Education Network) is located in Berkshire County, Massachusetts and is a collaborative effort between professionals, such as the district attorney’s office, the police departments, the animal control officers, the local humane society, domestic violence and sexual assault workers and the child protective agency. A HAVEN information sheet was also provided to the judges.

Though the evaluation forms proved to be revealing and extremely helpful for future trainings, by far the most valuable comments came in informal discussions with the judges after the training session. The comments included “provocative, outstanding, interesting, usually do not learn something completely new at these conferences, but this presentation was a first, something to think about in all of our cases.” Many judges cited cases involving animals that they would look at differently if confronted again with similar situations. One judge recalled a child who refused to be united with her mother because mother’s boyfriend threw the family cat out the window. Most of the comments confirmed the relative lack of

knowledge by the judges who appreciated having a heightened awareness of the issues.

The judges were assured that while knowing about the animal cruelty/abuse in the home may not be dispositive of the case, it would often be a valuable piece of the large puzzle that they have to put together while making the difficult decisions that are in the best interests of the child.

While future trainings would have to be adapted to the specific target audience, the feedback from the Juvenile Judges was overwhelmingly positive and there is every reason to continue targeting additional groups for training in this critical area. It is essential that groups be open to this training. Besides the need to train judges from different court departments, those from different disciplines must receive this training as well, such as social workers, child therapists, court investigators, domestic violence counselors, police departments, veterinarians, animal control officers. The goal would be that as these disparate groups become aware and knowledgeable about the connections between various kinds of animal abuse and cruelty and the link to human violence, the development of new policies would be based on the knowledge that too often when animals are abused, people are at risk as well.

One question worth contemplating is if we accept the fact that cruelty to animals in the home is not a new problem, why is so much being heard about it now. Why are people paying attention now? There are undoubtedly multiple answers but at least one theory would suggest that as animals are increasingly thought of as

members of the family and less as merely property, they are regarded differently.

The questions so far remain unanswered but worth some thought.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Martha P. Grace, J. D. retired in 2009 as Chief Justice of the Massachusetts Juvenile Court and anticipates receiving her M.S. in Animals and Public Policy from the Tufts Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine in November 2011.

Lorna Grande, D.V.M. is a practicing veterinarian, a faculty member at University of Massachusetts in Amherst, Massachusetts and coordinator of HAVEN.

### Appendix I

#### MATERIALS GIVEN TO JUDGES AT TRAINING SESSION

Ascione, Frank R. *Children and Animals: Exploring the Roots of Kindness and Cruelty*, Purdue University Press, West Lafayette, Indiana, (2005)

“Asking Children about their Relationships with Animals” from “Animal-Related Experiences” Inventory of Barbara Boat.

*Custody of Vaughn* 422 Mass.590, 664 N.E.2<sup>nd</sup> 434 (1996).

Forell, Carolyn. *Using Jury of Her Peers” to Teach About the Connection Between Domestic Violence and Animal Abuse*. *Animal Law Review*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2008).

[www.havennetwork.org](http://www.havennetwork.org) HAVEN fact sheet.

Ramsey, Sherry, Mary Lou Randour, Nancy Blaney and Maya Gupta. *Protecting Domestic Violence Victims by Protecting Their Pets*. TODAY (Publication of NCJFCJ), Spring 2010.pp. 16-20.

Randour, Mary Lou with Howard Davidson. *The Common Bond: Maltreated Children and Animals in the Home. Guidelines for Practice and Policy*. American Humane and Humane Society of the United States, (2008).

### Appendix II

#### Asking Children about their Relationship with Animals:

- Have you or your family ever had any pets? What happened to them?
- Do you have a pet or pets now?

- Have you ever lost a pet you really cared about? What happened?
- Has your pet ever been hurt?
- Have you ever felt afraid for your pet or worried about bad things happening to your pet?
- Has anybody ever tried to make you do something you didn't want to do by threatening to hurt your pet? What happened?
- Have you ever seen someone hurt an animal or pet? Tell me what happened.
- Have you ever hurt an animal or pet? Tell me what happened.
- Have you ever been frightened or hurt by an animal or pet? Describe what happened.
- What happens when your family pet misbehaves?
- Have you ever been punished for something your pet did, like getting into the trash?
- Or has your pet ever been punished for something you did, like not doing the dishes when you were told to?

\*Source: "Animal-Related Experiences" Inventory by Barbara Boat, Ph.D. and AniCare Child: An Approach for the Assessment and Treatment of Childhood Animal Abuse, by Mary Lou Randour, Ph.D., Susan Krinsk, LMHC, and Joanne Wolf, M.A.

### **Appendix III**

#### **ADDITIONAL READINGS**

[www.awionline.org](http://www.awionline.org) See link to Animals and Family Violence  
[www.havennetwork.org](http://www.havennetwork.org)

Arluke, Arnold, Jack Levin, Carter Luke and Frank Ascione. *The Relationship Of Animal Abuse to Violence and Other Forms of Antisocial Behavior*. J. Interpersonal Violence, Vol. 14, No.9, (1999.)

Arluke, Arnold. *Just a Dog: Understanding Animal Cruelty and Ourselves*. Temple University Press, Philadelphia, PA. (2006).

Ascione, Frank R. *Animal Abuse and Youth Violence* OJJDP Juvenile Justice Sept. 2001.

Becker, F. and French, L. *Making the Links: Child abuse, animal cruelty and domestic violence*. Child Abuse Review, Vol. 13: 399-414 (2004).

Boat, Barbara. Abuse of children and abuse of animals: Using the links to inform child protection and assessment. In F.R. Ascione and P. Arkow (Eds.), *Child abuse, domestic violence and animal abuse: Linking the circles of compassion for prevention and intervention*. (pp.83-100). West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1999).

Carlisle-Frank, Pamela and Tom Flanagan. *Silent Victims: Recognizing and Stopping Abuse of the Family Pet*. University Press of America, Lanham, Maryland, (2006).

DeGue, Sarah and David DiLillo. *Is Animal Cruelty a "Red Flag" for Family*

- Violence ? J. Interpersonal Violence*, Vol.24, No. 6, (2009)
- Favre, David. *Integrating animal interests into our legal system*. *Animal Law*, vol.10, 87-98 (2004).
- Linzey, Andrew, ed. *The Link between Animal Abuse and Human Violence*, Sussex Academic Press, Brighton, England, (2009).
- Merz-Perez, Linda and Kathleen M. Heide. *Animal Cruelty: Pathway to Violence Against People*. AltaMira Press, Walnut Creek, California, (2004).
- Randour, Mary Lou, Susan Krinsky and Joanne L. Wolf. *AniCare Child: An Assessment and Treatment Approach for Childhood Animal Abuse*. Sponsors: DDAF and PSYETA, (1999).
- Thompson, Kelly L. and Eleonora Gullone. *An Investigation into the Association between Witnessing of Animal Abuse and Adolescents' Behavior toward Animals*. *Society and Animals* 14:3 , 221-243(2006).