

Children and Animals: A Clinician's View

Steven, a 14-year-old, was referred to me for treatment because he had committed a premeditated, violent, sexual crime against a child seven years his junior. During the assessment I asked his parents a question I have learned to ask over the years: "Does your child now, or has he ever, killed or tortured animals?"

The parents responded without hesitation, "Oh, my yes. You see, we always had a lot of cats, and they were always having kittens, and Steve used to kill one or two out of each litter—there were so many of them, we never thought much of it."

Although some parents deny and ignore such inhumane behavior, it never occurs in a vacuum. When children kill and torture animals, there is something massively wrong. Nonaccidental and calculated torture of pets is a vivid signal of a child's distress.

My concern with children's abuse of animals has increased over the years, since I first noticed that many physically or sexually abused children seemed to mimic their mistreatment on their companion animals. Apparently, children learn the insidious lessons of abuse: people who love them hurt them, and power and dominance are preferable to the victim's experience of helplessness and shame. When children are very young, only smaller children and pets are more vulnerable. Unfortunately, abused children may strike out against others, including their pets, unless someone stops them and gives them the help

they need.

An additional reason to be concerned about children hurting their companion animals is that such behavior may signify a child's preoccupation with death and dying. By hurting animals, some children may be rehearsing their own suicides.

I learned this from Miriam, a six-year-old who had been sexually abused severely. When I asked her to make a picture of herself, she drew a bleeding dog and herself in heaven (see accompanying picture). Miriam's drawing

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revealed the depth of her despair. Her mother later informed me that Miriam had recently begun slapping and choking her dog and had injured him with scissors. It was my hypothesis, confirmed during a hospital-based psychiatric evaluation, that the child was acutely suicidal.

Just as animals are vulnerable to troubled children, they also can nurture those children and help them heal. Adrianna, a seven-year-old, had been in eight foster homes. Neglected cruelly from the time she was born, she was rejected by peers because she spoke in

whispers and felt uncomfortable joining activities or sports. In treatment she was depressed, nonresponsive, and fearful.

I brought in my 12-year-old Sheltie, Puppy, and introduced her to Adrianna. As Puppy lay comfortably in a corner of the room, Adrianna could not take her eyes off the dog. She seemed afraid of the dog, but fascinated by her. I talked to Adrianna about Puppy. Adrianna kept her distance but colored in a picture of a dog in a book. She asked if Puppy would be back next time. I said she would.

The following session Adrianna lay on the floor with her face toward Puppy, smiling as Puppy slept. Again she colored the dog in the book, this time making a white spot, like Puppy's, on the dog's head.

The third session Adrianna took her finger and gently patted the white diamond on Puppy's head. The contact increased, and Adrianna gradually developed a relationship to Puppy, speaking to her, holding and rocking her, and bringing her treats. Because I was Puppy's friend, Adrianna eventually talked to me just as easily as she did to the dog. Puppy's presence had been invaluable as a way for Adrianna to decrease her fear and anxiety and to allow herself to take risks, express herself, and nurture another living being.

In addition to individual treatment, the creative exposure to animals in residential treatment settings also can provide opportunities to test relationships in safety. For example, some residential treatment centers provide children with a structured opportunity to develop a healthy relationship with horses by learning to feed, wash, ride, and care for them. Other therapeutic programs allow and encourage children's participation in raising vegetables that they later prepare and cook.

We are co-existing on a planet replete with life, and we are often in positions to help injured and vulnerable children, elders, physically and emotionally disabled individuals, and others by encouraging interconnectedness with nature and the vast array of living beings. In this exchange, life is enriched for all.

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