

Older kids who abuse animals much more likely to have been abused themselves

July 17 2018

Older children who abuse animals are two to three times as likely to have been abused themselves as kids that don't display this type of behaviour, highlights a review of the available evidence published online in the *Archives of Disease in Childhood*.

But girls are far less likely to indulge in this activity than boys, the evidence shows. And when they do, [child abuse](#) may be even more likely in these cases.

Animal [abuse](#) by children is common, with up to 44 percent of kids likely to do this at some point during their childhood, although the true prevalence may be higher because parents and children may be unaware or unwilling to report it, say the review authors.

While much of this behaviour in younger children can be attributed to exploring the world around them, in children aged 10 and above, it may very well reflect abuse in the family, and should prompt concerns about these children's welfare, they caution.

And previous research suggests that this association may strengthen the older the child is, with the odds of cruelty to [animals](#) being indicative of [physical abuse](#) around three times as likely in 5 year olds, rising to five times as likely among 12 year olds.

Children who witness violence between their parents are also around three times as likely to abuse animals, the published research suggests.

And there does seem to be a gender difference.

"Reports of girls abusing animals are less prevalent than boys, and there is some suggestion that girls who do report that they abuse animals are more likely to be part of a wider abuse," note the review authors.

But the picture is complicated as the term 'animal abuse' encompasses a wide variety of different behaviours and motivations, they point out.

"Differences of opinion exist on what constitutes abuse to an animal, and which animals should be included inside the definition. For example, should it be restricted to just large vertebrate companion animals, such as dogs and cats, or include smaller animals, such as rodents or birds, or even insects," they query.

Further research is needed to find out which patterns and types of animal abuse are more indicative of wider abuse to the child and family, they say.

"It has been suggested that abuse to a companion animal (ie a family pet such as a dog or a cat) is more likely to be indicative of a wider family abuse—companion animals are often the subject of abuse as a means to establish power and control within a [family](#)," they write.

They provide a useful mnemonic to help health and social care professionals ask questions that might uncover whether a pet has been abused.

"Asking about a history of animal abuse in a safeguarding history should be commonplace and information sharing between veterinary and child services should be promoted to protect vulnerable [children](#) and animals," they suggest.

More information: Children who abuse animals: when should you be concerned about child abuse? A review of the literature, *Archives of Disease in Childhood* (2018). [DOI: 10.1136/archdischild-2018-313751](https://doi.org/10.1136/archdischild-2018-313751)

Provided by British Medical Journal

Citation: Older kids who abuse animals much more likely to have been abused themselves (2018, July 17) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-07-older-kids-abuse-animals-abused.html>

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