



Teaching Love
& Compassion

**END THE
CYCLE OF
VIOLENCE**

Animal Cruelty Information for Social Service Workers

What is animal cruelty?

Animal cruelty encompasses a range of behaviors harmful to animals, from neglect to malicious killing. Most cruelty investigated by humane officers is unintentional neglect that can be resolved through education. Intentional cruelty, or abuse, is knowingly depriving an animal of food, water, shelter, socialization, or veterinary care or maliciously torturing, maiming, mutilating, or killing an animal.

Is animal cruelty recognized as a sign of mental disorder?

Yes. In the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the American Psychiatric Association lists animal cruelty as one of the behaviors signaling conduct disorder. Clinical evidence indicates that animal cruelty is one of the symptoms usually seen at the earliest stages of conduct disorder, often by the age of eight.

What does animal cruelty indicate about family dynamics?

Researchers have discovered that a child's violence against animals often represents displaced hostility and aggression stemming from the family's neglect or abuse of the child. Animal cruelty committed by any member of a family, whether parent or child, often means child abuse occurs in that family. A 1983 survey of 57 pet-owning families under treatment by New Jersey's Division of Youth and Family Services for child abuse revealed that, in 88 percent of the families, at least one person had abused animals. In two-thirds of those cases, the abusive parent had injured or killed a pet; in the remaining cases, children were the animal abusers.

Can the family pet be of comfort to an abused child or adult victim?

Yes. However, in some cases the bond between victim and pet makes the pet a target. A child's silence may be bought with the threat to harm or destroy a pet or a spouse may refuse to leave an abusive situation for fear of risking a pet's safety.

How should I report suspected animal cruelty?

If you know or suspect that an animal is being neglected or abused, report your information immediately to the local animal welfare agency or police department. Social service field workers are often the first to see cases of animal cruelty or gross neglect; family shelter workers may hear reports of animal cruelty from the people they take in. Report possible animal cruelty if you see or learn of an animal who lacks adequate food, water, or proper shelter; appears particularly thin, dirty, or matted; is living in filth; is chained and cannot reach food, water, or shelter; has mange or hair loss; is scarred from apparent bite wounds; is frightened or shy or cowers when someone raises a hand; is reported to be abused by a family member; appears sick or injured; or appears to be in any danger. If you are in a home assessing a complaint of human violence and animals are present, notify the local animal welfare agency.

Do reports need to be filed in writing?

Most animal welfare agencies will take complaints by phone.

Is animal cruelty a crime?

In all 50 states, cruelty to animals is against the law. More than 40 states currently have laws making certain types of animal cruelty a felony offense. Some felony laws require psychiatric counseling for convicted abusers.

(continued)



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What questions could my agency add to risk assessment materials to help assess animal cruelty?

Questions similar to those inquiring about human violence should be standard. They should include at least the following:

1. Are there any animals in the home?
2. Has anyone in the household ever hit, kicked, punched, beaten, or thrown an animal or threatened to do so?
3. If the animal is left behind, is there someone who will provide food, water, and basic care?

Intake personnel do not need to identify specific acts of animal cruelty but should be able to determine if any animals are in danger. Probably the most important question is the first one, as animals are not always in plain view. Animals may be kept in the basement, a cage, the garage, a rear yard, or off-premises.

Are there mandated animal cruelty reporters besides humane investigators?

There are no laws that require social service workers to report animal cruelty, but professional boards and organizations are moving in that direction. Laws in four states require veterinarians to report animal cruelty. The American Veterinary Medical Association, in its Model Practice Act, states that it "considers it the responsibility of the veterinarian to report [animal cruelty] to the appropriate authorities." A precedent setting 1995 policy in San Diego requires the city's Department of Social Services and the Children's Services Bureau to report animal cruelty to the San Diego Department of Animal Control. All emergency responders, including humane investigators, should cross-report all forms of abuse.

Do humane investigators report child abuse and other forms of violence in a community?

Yes. Social service agencies confirm that humane investigators are accurate reporters of human violence.

How can social service and animal welfare agencies work together?

Initiating a cross-reporting and cross training agreement between agencies can increase the number of animal cruelty and human violence reports investigated. Agencies can also help each other by maintaining informal relationships. An interagency approach to case management will better serve all of those—both humans and animals—who need help.

If you would like more information, please contact Melanie Wagner, M.S. Ed, Director of Humane Education at (310)676-1149 Ext. 228 or via email at HumaneEducation@spcala.com.