

Child and Animal Maltreatment: Intersections, Challenges and Opportunities When Intervening with Maltreating Families

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Keywords: animal abuse, child abuse, child maltreatment, at-risk families, pets

A young orange, male tabby cat jumped onto my lap during my home visit. He gave small head-bumps into my hand as I petted him, the vibrations of his purrs reverberating through the small kitchen. Surprised, the client noted, “He likes you.”

“The feeling is mutual,” I replied. Continuing to pet the cat, I asked, “Does he have a name?”

Making eye contact, she responded, “The kids call him Tiger. I want to get him fixed and get a flea collar for him.” We talked about where she could find low-cost options for neutering, and I asked a few questions about fleas: Did the children complain of any bites? Had she seen fleas on the children?

Talking about Tiger was not idle chit chat. This discussion encouraged the client to talk about the challenges that she was facing, which had led to the call to child welfare about marked developmental delays in her children and to my home visit. From our conversation about Tiger, I obtained several useful pieces of information. The cat had been named, signifying an attachment to the cat by her children. The client was concerned for the animal’s health and the health of her children. There was an absence of the smell of ammonia, which told me the cat had a litter box somewhere in the house. Although unaltered

and a little thin, the cat seemed to be healthy and friendly, suggesting that he was being fed and not being abused. The client seemed to have an awareness of her children’s emotional attachment to the cat. As the animal was young, and I had not been in this home before, I did not know if this was a home with a revolving number of young animals, which can be a warning sign for a dysfunctional home (DeViney et al., 1983; Loar & Colman, 2004). When discussing Tiger, this was something that I could ask about—the presence of other or previous pets. Although still guarded with me, she let our conversation about Tiger open a small window of conversation.

“What do pets have to do with investigating child abuse?” asked my puzzled student when I inquired about the animals in the families that he was working with in his role as a caseworker supervisor. This is a common response from students and child welfare professionals when I talk to them about the importance of asking about pets in the home. The division between child and animal welfare is recent. We do not need to go very far back in history to see a time when child and animal welfare protection intersected. In the nineteenth century, the founding members of many societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals were involved in the abolition of slavery, education, and housing reforms as well as the protection of children (Hoy-Gerlach et al., 2019). Societies for the protection of animals predated those

concerned with children, and these societies were the precursors to child welfare organizations in Australia, America, and Great Britain, impacting the creation of child protection laws (Lebow & Cherney, 2015; Ryan, 2014). It is only in the last century that the oversight and protection of animals and of children have become separate systems.

As a child welfare professional, you have probably worked with families who have pets in the home. Based upon the 2018 General Social Survey, approximately 63.8% of households with children report having at least one companion animal in the home (Applebaum et al., 2020). Moreover, pet ownership did not differ by family income (Applebaum et al., 2020). Living with an animal confers emotional and physical benefits for the adults, such as less depression (Peacock et al., 2012), improved immune functioning (Charnetski et al., 2004), adherence to medical regimes (Herrald et al., 2002), less social isolation (Irvine, 2013), and greater social capital (Wood et al., 2005). For children, pets are a source of emotional support and are associated with social competence, self-esteem, and prosocial behavior (Covert et al., 1985; Van Houtte & Jarvis, 1995). The presence of therapy animals was also found to reduce fear and anxiety for children in highly stressful situations (Vincent et al., 2020).

Returning to the question posed by the student, “What do pets have to do with child abuse?” we know that animal abuse and neglect do not occur in a vacuum but as a part of a pattern of dangerous behavior that jeopardizes both animals and humans (Ascione et al., 2007; McDonald et al., 2015). Lawmakers are recognizing this connection. The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) passed a resolution stating that animal cruelty is a crime of violence and that judges are in a leadership position to adjudicate cases in a manner that effectively promotes the safety and wellbeing of people and their pets (NCJFCJ, 2019).

A legislative approach to the problem of co-occurrence of human and animal maltreatment led to the introduction of a bill in the House of Representatives that would amend the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) to include data on

animal abuse within the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS). In their request to the Health and Human Services Appropriation Committee, the sponsors wrote the following:

In light of the acknowledged close relationship between child maltreatment and animal abuse, and the exposure to animal abuse considered an Adverse Childhood Event (ACE), the committee encourages HHS to explore the feasibility of including a category of animal abuse to caregiver characteristics and environmental factors that may place the child at risk for maltreatment. (National Link Coalition, 2020)

Additionally, New York has several bills in committee that would permit mandated reporters of suspected child abuse to report suspected animal cruelty if the act were committed by a person also suspected of child abuse and maltreatment. They have also amended the definition of child endangerment to include animal cruelty in the presence of a child and to strengthen penalties for existing animal cruelty charges when committed in the presence of a child (National Link Coalition, 2020). On January 6th, 2020, the Ohio Governor signed a bill into law requiring that social service professionals and animal welfare professionals and humane officers cross-report child abuse and animal abuse (Sara P. Carruthers News, 2020).

Now that child protection laws are recognizing this intersection, how should child welfare respond? We believe that expanding the lens of the child welfare practice model to include animals is not only congruent with the history of the profession but also complements the work in three ways: (1) helping to identify maltreatment and violence in the home, (2) engaging and building a collaborative relationship with children and adults, and (3) identifying helpful community resources and interventions to create and support protective factors and reduce risk for both species.

Provide Information in Assessing Safety of the Children and Animals and Future Risk

The relationship between humans and animals in the

home can mirror the health and safety of the people in the family (Hoffer et al., 2018). Although families struggling with violence are as likely to have animals in the home as other families, one key difference is the age of the animals (Loar & Colman, 2004). Homes with older, healthy animals suggest that the adults have been able to care for the animals over time and there is a commitment to their welfare. However, a home with two or more young animals could be a sign of a family dysfunction. Loar (2014) writes that “turnover of puppies and kittens is a warning signal suggesting a family where ties are transient and attachments fleeting” (p. 138). Seeing animals in the home who are ill, malnourished, and in need of veterinary care is a risk indicator of human abuse or neglect (Arkow, 2020).

If the adults cannot manage the needs of an animal, it calls into question their protective capacities for children. Some exotic pets, poisonous reptiles, and cock-fighting paraphernalia are also risk indicators, especially for young children with unsupervised access, and should be included in evaluations of the living environment. Moreover, if a child is engaging in abusing or torturing animals, this may be an indicator that the child has experienced abuse or has serious mental health issues that increase the likelihood of violence occurring in the home (Arkow, 2020; Pinillos, 2018).

Therefore, safety and risk assessments should include several questions about animals in the home; the number, age, and type; and the observation of health and hygiene of the pets (Loar, 2014). When looking at protective factors, assessments should include the parental responses to the pet(s) in the home and how bonded the child is to these pet(s). Pets can provide a source of solace and comfort to children in a violent home, and a relationship with a pet is a protective emotional factor that should be noted in an assessment. In addition, pets should be included in psychosocial assessments, assets mapping and ecomaps, and family team conferencing as members of the family (Hodgson & Darling, 2011).

Talking About Pets Can Help in Getting a “Foot in the Door” and Assist in Building a Collaborative Relationship With Parents and Children

It can be difficult to engage with clients due to anger and fear arising from a visit from child protective services. Getting a “foot in the door” rapport is critical to being able to assess safety and risk. As my “chit chat” about Tiger illustrated, by focusing our initial conversation on the cat, I was able to identify, and later verify, some important information about the functioning of the family, as well as the condition of the home. By offering some resources for Tiger, I quickly demonstrated that I was listening and willing to help the mother, even though trust would take time to be established. This opened a small window of opportunity to begin our work. Unfortunately, pets also can be used to threaten or coerce children into not disclosing when abuse and domestic violence occurring in the home. Observing children with their pet and engaging them in a conversation about the safety of the pet may elicit an unguarded and candid response more quickly than directly asking about their own abuse, neglect, or violence (Boat, 2010).

Reporting and Working Across Disciplines and Sharing Resources to Make Pets, Families, and Communities Safer and Stronger

This is a common scenario: child welfare is called in to find temporary placement for children whose parents overdosed and were hospitalized. Naturally, the primary concern of child welfare is the traumatized children, but the often children express concern about what might happen to the family pets. The pets cannot go with the children into temporary shelter. Similarly, those who work in victim advocacy know the difficult choice women make when they leave a violent relationship without their family pets. For hotline advocates and caseworkers, trying to find a place for the family pets during a crisis may be lowest on the list of priorities. As a result, the family pets can be sent to a shelter, become homeless, or be given to unscrupulous persons.

The good news is that animal welfare advocates are recognizing that they must widen their mission to address the root causes of why animals end up homeless or in shelters (Arrington & Markarian, 2018). A critical piece of this work is creating cross-system collaborations. One example is the Linkage Project in Maine, which enables alliances between individuals and groups involved in animal welfare, child protection, elder services, domestic violence prevention, and law enforcement (Linkage Project, n.d.). Animal Friends, a shelter-focused agency, has a social worker embedded in the community outreach team. Additionally, they provide pet food to over 30 food pantries and have worked informally with social service agencies to help clients access pet resources (Animal Friends, n.d.).

The first step in building coalitions and sharing resources is by cross-training child and older adult caseworkers to identify and report animal abuse and neglect and animal welfare workers to recognize and report human maltreatment. Additional training highlighting the impact of the human-animal bond will also be needed to create a shared understanding of the interconnectedness of human and animal systems. Gathering stakeholders from animal and human welfare organizations can be a first step in building interdisciplinary teams to coordinate resources to improve outcomes for families and their pets. Another method of building future interdisciplinary relationships and teams is to create field placements for MSW students at humane societies. Even if they do not go on to work in an animal-focused area (e.g., veterinary social work), they will have a deeper appreciation of the importance of animals in family life (Hoy-Gerlach et al., 2019). Finally, collaboration could even take the form of animal welfare professionals operating within human service agencies who can coordinate pet resources for families involved in human services systems.

Limitations

The COVID-19 pandemic has stretched the capacities of both animal and human protection systems, and the suggestions in this paper are reasonable but difficult to implement during a time of great need and limited resources. However, working in a pandemic has shown us how effective video communication can

be in engaging individuals and systems not typically able to come to in-person meetings or sessions. It is during such periods that we find creative ways of collaborating across systems and realize that systems rules are more malleable during times of crisis. At a time when animals and humans are experiencing the social and economic consequences of COVID, we have a window of opportunity to highlight the shared vulnerabilities and the effectiveness of addressing the needs collaboratively.

An unfortunate commonality for both child and animal welfare is that both areas have workers with high caseloads or care demands, and both struggle with high turnover of staff. Therefore, any cross-training will need to be ongoing, coached by champions from both human and animal organizations, and embedded into practice. This is not a “one and done” training but a standard curriculum that is part of the on-boarding training for both professions and that is reinforced in supervision and in data collection and monitoring.

Conclusion

Tiger remained with his family as different providers worked together to address the problems that had led to the referral to child welfare and to treat the developmental delays of the children. Tiger's health care needs were also met; he was neutered and received his vaccinations and flea collar. Most youth and families that we work with are likely to have at least one pet, and that pet can play a significant role in that family. You do not have to be an “animal person” to appreciate how working with both the “human” and “nonhuman” aspects in child welfare can create a healthier, safer, and more humane community.

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