Chapter 3

Emerging Research on Animal Abuse as a Risk Factor for Intimate Partner Violence

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This item, “abusing pet,” also happened to me. He would throw a cat that my
children adored against the door. He often says to me, “When you talk to me,
you’d better remember how cruel I am. I can beat you up till you collapse
should you make me angry.”

— Yoshihama, 2005, p. 1243

Mary J. shot her husband as he entered their trailer, in fact blew the top of his
head off. Why? Not because he hit her. He did. Not because he was mean to
the children. He was. Not because he had isolated her from family and friends
in a small trailer miles from anything. He had. No, she killed him because he
told her he was going to bring home another puppy for her to hold down while
he had intercourse with the animal.

— Quinlisk, 1999, p. 171
There may be deep personal and philosophical differences among activists in these movements devoted to ending animal abuse, child abuse, and woman abuse. But we are profoundly interconnected.

— Grant, 1999, p. 167

INTRODUCTION

Examining the relation between animal abuse and violence toward women perpetrated by their intimate adult partners is not a recent phenomenon. From the artistic social commentaries of the British artist Hogarth in the 1700s (Shesgreen, 1973, plates 77–79) to the clinical analysis by psychiatrist Pinel (1809), our attention has been called to the potential overlap between violence toward women and the abuse of animals. Literary voices have also joined in this call. In the introduction to her anthology, Women in the Trees, Koppelman (1996) observes: “There is no question that in the short stories women have been writing in this country, at least since 1839, women have been telling the world that it is wrong, unacceptable, evil, ugly, and shameful for men to abuse women and/or children” (p. xxv). Animal abuse appears in a number of the stories collected in this anthology. In some cases, animal abuse is discussed as an aside or a metaphor (e.g., in “Tony’s Wife,” Koppelman, 1996, p. 49). In others, it is an integral element of the story’s theme (“A Jury of Her Peers,” Koppelman, 1996, p. 76).

The professional literature on animal abuse and intimate partner violence has a shorter history, one that began with numerous anecdotal reports in the pioneering and now classic books by Pizzey (1974), Walker (1984, 1989), Gelles and Straus (1988), and Browne (1997). Pet abuse is listed in the Power and Control Wheel (Shepard & Pence, 1999, p. 275). Renzetti (1992) asked about this behavior in her study of lesbians in violent relationships, and a number of researchers have included pet abuse in their inventories of intimate violence (e.g., Dutton, 1992; Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2003; Jacobsen & Gottman, 1998; McCloskey & Lichter, 2003) and child maltreatment (e.g., Sternberg et al., 2004). In the last instance, grasping the incidence and significance of pet abuse is difficult because pet abuse is usually included as but one example of more general categories of child abuse or intimate violence (e.g., intimidation or psychological/emotional abuse).

In this chapter, I provide a review of the research literature on this topic that has emerged over the past decade, literature that focuses on the direct examination of the incidence of animal abuse in the context of intimate partner violence. (A more general treatment of animal abuse may be found in Ascione, 2005b, and Ascione, 2007). Collectively, the studies I review confirm that pet abuse by intimate partners is a common experience for women who are battered. If children are present, they are often exposed to pet abuse—an experience that may compromise their physical and mental health. Family pets may become pawns in a sometimes deadly form of coercion and terrorizing used by some batterers. And women’s concerns about the welfare of their pets may be an obstacle to fleeing violent partners and may affect women's decision making about staying with, leaving, and/or returning to batterers. Women's welfare, children’s welfare, and animal welfare are, therefore, intertwined.
Beginnings

Let me begin by sharing how I, a developmental psychologist trained to focus on socialization processes, arrived at the study of pet abuse and intimate partner violence. The prelude to my focus on animal abuse and intimate partner violence was a number of years studying children’s development of kindness toward and caring for animals: a development that is clearly related to the quality of children’s family environments. Given my interest in children’s remarkable capacity for empathizing with and forming intense attachments to their pets, it is ironic that I have now spent over a decade of my professional life examining children’s cruelty to and abuse of animals.

Because a comprehensive developmental analysis requires that we understand both normative and pathological processes, in the late 1980s, I set aside my research on children’s empathy toward and nurturance of animals to concentrate on questions about how and why some children abuse animals. The form of abuse in which I was interested is the kind that transcends the occasional, and usually innocent, harm young children inflict on some members of the animal kingdom. As a working definition of animal abuse, I offer the following: nonaccidental socially unacceptable behavior that causes pain, suffering, injury, or distress to and/or the death of an animal.

I set as my first task, a search of the literature for case studies and prevalence or incidence data on animal abuse and quickly discovered that developmental psychology (as well as sociology, criminology, psychiatry, family sciences) had virtually ignored this topic. I did find an occasional reference to animal abuse in clinical case studies and research reports as well as a series of studies in forensic psychiatry. But there were no sources that suggested how common animal abuse was except for research conducted with incarcerated, violent adult criminals.

Because animal abuse is a low-base rate behavior in normative samples (based on data derived from Achenbach’s, 1991, Child Behavior Checklist), I judged that I would initially need to focus my attention on environments in which the base rate would be higher. I assumed that environments in which abuse of and violence toward humans were common would be a place to start.

A first step was to devise an assessment instrument to measure cruelty to animals or animal abuse to operationally define this poorly defined and understood phenomenon. Together with Thompson and Black, I field-tested the assessment with children and families whose lives had been touched by abuse and violence: young people in outpatient or residential treatment for emotional disorders, incarcerated adolescents, and children accompanying their mothers to domestic violence shelters (Ascione, Thompson, & Black, 1997).

The stories of animal abuse that emerged from our interviews with women who were battered were sometimes as horrific as any I had encountered in my reading of the clinical literature or media reports. In some cases, women reported that their children had abused animals. But what was more disturbing were their reports of their adult partners’ abuse of family pets. I assumed that domestic violence professionals would be familiar with this phenomenon and could, perhaps, provide me with prevalence or incidence data on animal abuse in the context of intimate partner violence.

To this end, Weber, Wood, and I surveyed domestic violence programs around the United States (details of the methodology and results can be found in Ascione, Weber,
& Wood, 1997). Although over 80 percent of the respondents (who were usually the shelter directors) reported that they had encountered women at their shelters who reported pet abuse by their partner, and though they believed that pet abuse and intimate partner violence often co-occur, only 27.1 percent reported that their shelters systematically queried women about pet abuse. Over 60 percent of the respondents also noted cases in which children who accompanied their mothers to shelters described animal abuse perpetrated by fathers, stepfathers, or mothers’ boyfriends. This confirmed my suspicion that pet abuse was another form of family violence to which children might be exposed. We had discovered an environment, families experiencing men’s violence toward their intimate partners, where animal abuse seemed common. But it became clear that neither prevalence nor incidence data were readily available. I also knew that humane societies rarely collected information on animal abuse cases specifically related to domestic violence. Even recent federal guidelines on the types of data to collect in intimate violence research (Salzman, Fanslow, McMahon, & Shelley, 1999) do not include questions about pet abuse. The most basic question I had—How often do women who are battered report that pets are threatened or abused?—did not, at that time, have an answer.

Assessing Pet Abuse in the Context of Intimate Partner Violence

In preparation for what, I believe, was the first published report of a study specifically designed to assess animal abuse in the context of intimate partner violence (Ascione, 1998), I developed a brief assessment of women’s experiences with animal abuse, an assessment that could be easily administered by domestic violence shelter staff to women clients (a more current, revised version of this assessment can be found in Ascione et al., 2007). The questions and my rationale for including them (based on anecdotal and clinical case reports I had encountered) were the following:

• *Do you now have a pet animal or animals?* Although pet ownership in the United States is highest in families with school-age children, I could not find any information in the literature on pet ownership among victims of intimate partner violence. Also, for pet abuse to occur, pets must be “available” to be abused. Assessing the incidence of pet abuse would need controls for pet ownership.

• *Have you had a pet animal or animals in the past twelve months?* Even though women might not currently have pets, they might have had them in the recent past. I had read reports of pets being killed by batterers and cases in which women abandoned pets rather than leave them behind as prey for batterers.

• *Has your partner ever hurt or killed one of your pets?* I assumed that “hurt” and “kill” would be more specific and less open to varying interpretations than “abuse” or “been cruel to.” This item was designed to assess serious forms of animal abuse.

• *Has your partner ever threatened to hurt or kill one of your pets?* Women
report that, especially after a history of experiencing physical violence, their partners’ verbal threats aimed at women or their children can be devastating. I wanted to know if these verbal forms of abuse ever targeted family pets.

- *Have you ever hurt or killed one of your pets?* Women may admit that they sometimes hurt their children or may be violent toward batterers. I judged it important to determine whether women ever victimized their own pets.

- *Have any of your children ever hurt or killed one of your pets?* Because cruelty to animals is considered a symptom of externalizing disorders, and because I assumed that children might be exposed to pet abuse to the same degree as their exposure to domestic violence, some assessment of this behavior in children seemed warranted. I also wanted to tie this research to the more general and expanding research on children’s exposure to family violence.

- *Did concern over your pet’s welfare keep you from coming to this shelter sooner than now?* I was aware of anecdotal reports that women who wanted to leave violent partners sometimes faced the obstacle of what to do with their pets. My understanding was that domestic violence shelters, at that time, were unlikely to allow women to bring their pets to the shelter with them. Would women potentially jeopardize their own safety and that of their children due to worries about what might happen to their pets?

These questions or their variants have now been used in a dozen studies available in published or soon-to-be published resources (see Table 3.1). The studies have been conducted with samples of battered women from the United States, Canada, and Australia. Combining these studies, the voices of over 700 women who were victims of intimate partner violence have been heard.

In the next section, I provide an overview of the results of these studies—results that speak to questions about the incidence of pet abuse in families experiencing intimate partner violence. I also outline the limitations of this body of research and suggest a research agenda for future studies. Following this overview, I tie these results to related research on intimate partner violence and child mental health, and discuss program and policy issues raised by these findings.

**PET ABUSE AND INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE: WHAT RESEARCH TELLS US**

* [Bradley] hung a pet rabbit in the garage and summoned his wife. When she came with the baby on her shoulder, her husband began skinning the animal alive. Then he held the boy next to the screaming rabbit. “See how easy it would be?” Bradley said.

— Hunt, 1996, p. B3

Before examining the results of specific studies in Table 3.1, I want to note that all these studies either asked about pet ownership or selected potential participants
based on their current or past pet ownership. In addition, the majority of these studies enlisted participants from samples of women actually residing at a domestic violence shelter or emergency refuge. The exceptions were the studies by Faver and Strand.
Pet Ownership
The proportion of women who currently had pets or recently had pets in their homes was generally high and comparable to pet ownership statistics for U.S. families with children:

- Ascione (1998): 74 percent;
- Quinlisk (1999), Part 1: 86.1 percent;
- Quinlisk (1999), Part 2: 90.6 percent;
- Flynn (2000a): 40.2 percent;
- Daniell (2001): 85 percent;
- McIntosh (2001): 65 percent;
- Faver and Strand (2003): 82 percent;
- Carlisle-Frank, Frank, and Nielsen (2004): 70.8 percent; and

It is clear that pets are a common feature of these households and their presence makes them potential targets of abuse by human members of the family. Information about the presence of children in these homes was not gathered uniformly. Studies that did indicate the proportion of women with children provided figures that ranged from 34.9 percent to 91.2 percent.

Threats to Harm Pets and the Actual Hurting or Killing of Pets
Separate questions about whether batterers have threatened pets and whether they have actually hurt or killed pets yield four possible outcomes: cases in which pets were neither threatened nor harmed, cases in which pets were threatened but not harmed, cases in which pets were not threatened but were harmed, and cases in which pets were both threatened and harmed. As I note later in this chapter, this categorization may be important for understanding other variables related to the concerns of women who are battered. However, half of the studies in Table 3.1 did not ask threat/harm questions separately, making it impossible to provide data on each of the four categories across all studies.

A number of studies report that a minority of women, ranging from 11.8 percent
to 39.4 percent, indicated that their partners only threatened to harm family pets but did not follow through on the threats. More disturbing are the data on actual harming or killing of pets. Recall, these data are all based on the reports of women who are victims of battering and who owned pets. The percentages of women reporting pet abuse ranged from 25.6 percent in Flynn’s (2000a) study to 79.3 percent in Quinlisk’s (1999, Part 2). Computing a raw mean of these percentages (without weighting by sample size) yields a figure of 54.9 percent of women reporting pet abuse perpetrated by batterers. The incidence of animal abuse in these reports is alarmingly high and the victims may not always be restricted to pet animals: “he would take his anger out on the cows, twisting their tails until the bones snapped and they hung limp and bleeding, bashing them on their faces with a three-foot length of heavy pipe. Then he would come back to the kitchen and tell (his wife), ‘See, I didn’t hurt you this time.’” (Lembke, 1999, p. 234). As noted by Flynn (2000b), “controlling these women by hurting, terrorizing, and intimidating them was a primary purpose of males’ animal abuse” (p. 109).

But does animal abuse also occur in families not experiencing intimate partner violence? To date, only two studies have included comparison groups of women (each with over 100 participants) who reported that they had not experienced intimate partner violence. In Ascione et al. (2007), 5 percent of nonabused women reported pet abuse by their adult partner and in Volant et al., the comparable figure was 0 percent. In Ascione (1998) and Ascione et al. (2007), 7.1 percent and 11.1 percent of women, respectively, reported that they themselves had hurt or killed pets. These few cases were often described as accidental and did not have the coercive and terrorizing overtones of batterers’ animal abuse.

Children’s Exposure to and Perpetration of Animal Abuse

Six of the twelve studies in Table 3.1 provided information on maternal reports of children’s exposure to animal abuse in their homes. Reported child exposure ranged from 29 percent to 75 percent ($M = 55.75$ percent). In the only study that directly interviewed children, Ascione et al. 2007) reported that 92.6 percent of children said they were “sort of” or “very” upset by the animal abuse they witnessed. Seven of the twelve studies reported on children’s abuse of animals, with reports ranging from 10 percent to 57 percent ($M = 32.3$ percent). As I have noted elsewhere (Ascione, 2005b), parental reports of cruelty to animals in normative samples of school-age children are typically 10 percent or lower. Clearly, the rates of child-perpetrated animal abuse in violent homes are worrisome. However, it should be noted that in Ascione et al. (2007), 51 percent of children reported that they had tried to protect their pets from abuse.

Pet Welfare and Women’s Decisions About Staying With or Leaving Batterers

Recall that although most of the studies in Table 3.1 focused on women who had already left their partner and were residing in a shelter, some studies included women who might have still been with their intimate partner or had left their partners but not
entered a shelter. Thus, some women were asked whether their concern for their pets’ welfare had delayed their seeking shelter at a domestic violence refuge while others were asked whether this concern had affected their decision-making process about remaining with or leaving their intimate partners. Nine of the twelve studies included questions about this issue and between 18 percent and 48 percent ($M = 31$ percent) of women reported that their worries about their pets’ care and safety had either delayed their seeking shelter or influenced their decisions about staying with or leaving batterers.

Faver and Strand (2003) reported that such concern for pets’ welfare was seven times more likely for women whose pets had been threatened or abused and that women residing in rural communities were more likely to raise such concerns (41.2 percent) than urban women (16.7 percent). Carlisle-Frank et al. (2004) found that 65 percent of women whose pets had actually been abused reported delaying shelter entry over concern for their pets’ welfare. Ascione et al. (2007) also reported that such concerns were differentially expressed as a function of whether pets were threatened, actually harmed, or both. Delaying entering the shelter was reported by 14.3 percent of women whose pets had been neither threatened nor harmed, 16.7 percent of women whose pets had only been threatened, 15.8 percent of women whose pets had been harmed but not threatened, and 34.3 percent of women whose pets were both threatened and harmed.

**Limitations of the Research**

Despite variations in methodology, sample size and characteristics, and geographic location, the results of these twelve studies are remarkably consistent in reporting high pet ownership by women who are battered, alarming rates of animal abuse perpetrated by batterers, substantial rates of children’s exposure to pet abuse and perpetration of animal abuse, and verification that some women’s concerns for pet welfare affect their decision making regarding continuing their relationships with batterers.

Although these consistencies are remarkable, there is still room for improvements in methodology and approaches to data analysis for future research. As I noted earlier, separate questions about threats to animals and actual abuse of animals should be included in questionnaires developed for this area of study. We must also find ways to operationalize animal abuse so its forms (physical, sexual (see Ascione, 2005a), and psychological) and severity can be measured (much as we often use the revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS-R; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) for assessing intimate partner violence). Since most of the research to date has been conducted at domestic violence shelters, we need to explore these same issues with samples of women who are victims but who, for whatever reason, choose not to go to domestic violence shelters to seek safety. It would also be helpful to query batterers about pet abuse. Only one unpublished study has been reported on this topic (Ascione & Blakelock, 2003), and it was conducted with thirty-eight incarcerated men reporting pet presence during their intimately violent relationships; 55.3 percent of these men admitted engaging in pet abuse.

Larger samples would also allow for more effective analyses of how demograph-
ic variables may be related to pet abuse (e.g., age, marital status, race/ethnicity, length of relationship, rural/urban residence, education level, and employment status). When pet abuse is reported, we need better information on how pet abuse is chronologically related to intimate partner violence. Is pet abuse a precursor to battering? Does it follow battering episodes? Are pet abuse and battering contemporaneous?

Sensitive methods need to be developed to ask children about their experiences with animal abuse, both as witnesses and as perpetrators (e.g., Dadds et al., 2004). We need more information about why some children who grow up in violent households become violent themselves, including striking out at pets, and why others seem to become more deeply attached to family pets. Five recent studies suggest that witnessing animal abuse (not necessarily in the context of domestic violence) in childhood is related to perpetration of animal abuse (Baldry, 2003, 2005; Henry, 2004a, 2004b; Hensley & Tallichet, 2005). Children may become involved in intimate violence incidents (Edelson, Mbilinyi, Beeman, & Hagemeister, 2003) and my research has shown that they may also try to intervene when pets are abused. The potential danger for these children is obvious and needs to be addressed.

Flynn (2000a) and Fitzgerald (2005) both presented data suggesting that child maltreatment was higher in homes in which pet abuse had occurred than in homes in which pet abuse was absent. However, both these studies had small sample sizes and the cell sizes for child maltreatment were still smaller. Studies are needed to directly assess whether pet abuse predicts increased risk for child maltreatment.

These and, no doubt, other refinements to conceptual and methodological challenges should emerge as research on this topic expands and matures.

**EMBEDDING ANIMAL ABUSE IN A BROADER CONTEXT**

In the previous section, I focused on studies specifically designed to address the issue of pet abuse in the context of intimate partner violence. In this section, I describe other research studies focused on domestic violence and/or child maltreatment that included some assessment of animal abuse. My purpose is to illustrate that animal abuse emerges as a significant issue in a variety of contexts.

Loring and Beaudoin (2000) interviewed 251 women who were victims of domestic violence and who had themselves committed illegal acts, often due to the coercion of their adult partner. The authors reported that 15.9 percent of the women indicated that their partner had actually hurt or killed pets. However, this question was asked of all women regardless of pet ownership. In a similar vein, Walton-Moss, Manganello, Frye, and Campbell (2005) compared 427 abused and 418 nonabused women on variables considered to be risk factors for intimate partner violence and associated injuries. Only 4 percent of the abused women had ever resided at a domestic violence shelter (Benita Walton-Moss, personal communication, December 16, 2005). A pet abuse question was included but was framed as “threat or actual abuse of pets” within the past year. The authors reported that pet abuse was indicated by 8.43 percent of abused women but only 0.48 percent of nonabused women. This was a highly significant difference yielding an adjusted odds ratio of 7.59. Again, pet ownership was not determined uniformly for all these participants (Jacqueline Campbell, personal communication, April 4, 2006).
Logan, Shannon, and Walker (2005) studied 450 rural and urban women who had obtained protective orders due to intimate partner violence. Threatened or actual harm to pets was reported by 36 percent of rural women and 19.6 percent of urban women. No information about shelter experiences or pet ownership was provided in this report. Thus, in all three of these studies, rates of reported pet abuse are likely to be underestimates. I should also note that most of the studies in Table 3.1 asked whether partners had “ever” hurt or killed pets, not just within the past year.

Becker, Stuewig, Herrera, & McCloskey (2004) studied 191 women who were battered (shelter residents and community volunteers) and 172 nonabused women and their children. They included a question about whether women’s partners “harmed or killed pets.” Pet abuse by adult partners was reported by 13.5 percent of the women (apparently, for the entire sample), but pet ownership was not determined. Children from violent homes were more likely to be cruel to animals (11.4 percent) than were children from nonviolent homes (5.3 percent). Children who were cruel to animals were also more likely to be diagnosed with conduct disorder (29 percent) than children who had not been cruel to animals (7.2 percent). Duncan, Thomas, and Miller (2005) reported on 100 boys in residential treatment for conduct disorder, half of whom had documented histories of cruelty to animals. Boys who were cruel to animals were more likely to have histories of being physically and/or sexually abused and to come from homes experiencing domestic violence. Similar results were reported by Ascione, Friedrich, Heath, and Hayashi (2003) with samples of sexually abused children and children who were psychiatric outpatients.

Adolescents, in inpatient psychiatric treatment, who have set fires are also more likely to engage in animal abuse (28 percent) than those who have not (7 percent; Moore, Thompson-Pope, & Whited, 1996). Dadds, Whiting, and Hawes (2006) recently reported that childhood cruelty to animals was associated with callous and unemotional traits suggestive of psychopathy.

I contend that the results of the twelve studies in Table 3.1, as well as the additional research I have just reviewed, make a compelling case for more systematic and focused research on animal abuse in the context of intimate partner violence. The effects on women victims, their children, and family pets may be more pervasive than we have imagined. These and other related issues are expanded on in a forthcoming book (Ascione, 2007).

NEW DIRECTIONS

Over the past decade, remarkable changes have occurred in societal and professional responses to the issue of animal abuse. The Animal Legal Defense Fund (www.aldf.org) reports that there are now forty-one states, the District of Columbia, and the Virgin Islands with felony-level statutes for certain forms of animal abuse. A recent report (Belluck, 2006) suggests that Maine may be the first state to enact a law that includes pets in protection orders. Prosecuting attorneys and other lawyers also appear to be taking animal abuse more seriously (Davidson, 1998; Phillips, 2004). Davidson, in fact, cites one court case in which a father who engaged in child abuse and domestic violence, as well as abuse of the family dog, had his parental rights terminated. Two reports have appeared that recommend asking questions about pet own-
ership and pet abuse when screening for domestic violence in pediatric settings (Siegel, Hill, Henderson, Ernst, & Boat, 1999; Siegel et al., 2003). The nursing profession also appears poised to attend to the significance of pet abuse (Muscari, 2004).

In the same ways that pediatricians and other physicians have acknowledged that child maltreatment and intimate partner violence are serious public health issues, the veterinary community is beginning to view pet abuse as an animal health issue that may sometimes be intricately related to human health. Munro and Thrusfield (Munro, 1996; Munro & Thrusfield, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2001d) have documented animal abuse cases brought to the attention of veterinarians in the United Kingdom and similar efforts have emerged in Australia (Green & Gullone, 2005). Lacroix (2006) reports that seven states in the United States now mandate veterinarians to report suspected animal abuse. The typical, underlying rationale for mandated reporting is not only the future welfare of animals at risk but the veterinary community’s acknowledgment that animal abuse may be a sentinel behavior or red flag for family violence (Green & Gullone, 2005).

The sentinel value of animal abuse is validated by the inclusion of cruelty to animals as one of the symptoms of antisocial behavior in childhood in the fourth edition, text revision of *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association, 2000) and recent work in forensic psychology and psychiatry (Haden & Scarpa, 2005). But it is also clear that mental health professionals may not yet be consistent in querying clients about this behavior. For example, in a survey of licensed psychologists in the United States, Nelson (2001) reported that the vast majority of respondents (94 percent) considered animal abuse to be potentially related to other mental health issues. Yet only 14 percent reported that they included questions about animal abuse when interviewing clients. When Bell (2001) surveyed child welfare and mental health agencies in the United Kingdom, she reported similar findings. Unless we routinely begin to ask questions about animal abuse in mental health settings, animal abuse will continue to be a poorly understood phenomenon (Ascione et al., 2007).

**FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE**

Let me end by returning to one of the critical findings reported in nine of the twelve studies in Table 3.1. Substantial minorities of women in shelters report that concern for the welfare of their pets resulted in their delaying shelter entry; likewise, victims of intimate partner violence report that worries about pet welfare affected their decision making about staying with, leaving, or returning to a violent partner. One case sets this issue in high relief.

My first day as a newly hired, freshly graduated, starry-eyed counselor at the local battered women’s shelter almost made me run home crying. Not because of the black eyes and bruises that shadowed the women’s faces. Not even because of the haunted looks in the small children’s eyes. No, I was prepared for that (as much as one can be); after all, I had seen worse at my best friend’s home. What I wasn’t prepared for were the pictures my first client brought to show me, apologetically, to explain why she had to return home. The pictures were of her “loving” husband cutting her beloved dog’s ears off with a pair of
garden shears. He had sent the ears along, too, but her mother thankfully neglected to forward them.

As I started ranting about calling the police and animal shelter, my client calmed me down and with tears in her eyes, explained that in her county there was no humane society, and that the local sheriff was her husband’s cousin, and that if she went home she could take care of the dog and the other animals on the farm and thank you very much for all the help but couldn’t I please understand that it was best that she just go back? I felt horrified and helpless because I had no answers for her in my rattled brain. She returned home and we never heard from her again. Her face and those pictures still turn up in my nightmares. (Quinlisk, 1999, p. 168)

Flynn (2000b) has presented the voices of abused women who describe their attachments to their pets and the significant roles pets may play as comforters and protectors. Children in homes plagued by intimate partner violence also describe how pets can be a source of comfort and can provide a sense of safety in an otherwise dangerous environment. Thus, it is understandable that concerns about pets’ welfare might affect women’s decisions about staying with or leaving batterers. Domestic violence shelters do not typically provide for women and children to bring their pets along. Entering a domestic violence shelter may mean parting with the family pets, pets who may have become an important psychological buffer to the trauma of family violence.

Thankfully, awareness of this issue is now acknowledged and a number of programs exist to shelter the pets of domestic violence victims in cases in which victims have had to flee from batterers and can no longer remain in their own homes (e.g., Kogan, McConnell, Shoenfeld-Tacher, & Jansen-Lock, 2004). There are no data of which I am aware that indicate the number of such programs available in the United States, or any studies evaluating the impact of such programs on victims of intimate partner violence.

In the late 1990s, as my work on animal abuse and domestic violence garnered some national attention, I would occasionally receive a phone call or email message from a domestic violence or animal welfare agency requesting advice on how to establish and operate such pet-sheltering programs. Here I was, a child psychologist with virtually no applied or practical experience in this area, being asked to play the role of expert and adviser. I was embarrassed by my inability to be of help but also alarmed that there appeared to be a knowledge vacuum about this issue: Why else would people be turning to me for advice?

It was clear that these agencies were seeking a resource to provide guidance on pet-sheltering programs. But such a resource did not, apparently, exist. So, with funding from the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, I interviewed forty-one domestic violence and animal welfare agencies across the United States that were currently operating or had just begun operating pet shelter programs for domestic violence victims. The product of these interviews and my analyses of agency responses was Safe Havens for Pets (Ascione, 2000). The original grant included printing a few hundred copies of the book for free distribution to interested agencies. As the project came to completion, the foundation increased my funding (which had never happened to me before and probably never will again) so that 3,000 copies could be printed and made available, at no cost, to any domestic violence, animal welfare, child welfare, or law
enforcement agency that wanted a copy. Within a couple of years, all 3,000 were distributed and, thanks to Andrew Vachss, a PDF version can now be accessed by going to the following website: http://www.vachss.com/guest_dispatches/safe_havens.html.

The book was an attempt to summarize the collective wisdom of agencies that had identified pet-sheltering issues as a potential obstacle to seeking safety for some women who are battered and had taken steps to eliminate this obstacle. A variety of issues are addressed in the book (I invite the reader to download a copy), including the following:

1. How do you establish a collaborative arrangement between domestic violence and animal welfare agencies?
2. What policies and procedures need to be in place for a pet-sheltering program to operate effectively?
3. Where should pets be housed? How long can they be sheltered?
4. How do you address cases in which ownership of the pet is in dispute (is the pet the woman’s or the batterer’s)?
5. What procedures help ensure confidentiality (e.g., where the pets are located and who is responsible for their care)?
6. How can visiting pets by women and children be arranged so that confidentiality and safety are insured?
7. How are such programs monitored and their effectiveness evaluated?

Because I still receive requests for this book, I hope that the accumulated research on the significance of animal abuse in cases of intimate partner violence, as well as the direct experiences of domestic violence and animal welfare professionals, prompts the expansion of pet-sheltering programs to all communities serving victims of battering. Pet abuse is neither the only nor perhaps the most severe trauma some women and children experience in the context of intimate partner violence. But it may be sufficiently significant to prevent or delay victims seeking safety. If women and children can rest assured that their beloved animals are safe, the healing process will be enhanced.

Endnotes

1 Currie (2006) has replicated these results with community samples. Cruelty to animals was reported for 17 percent of children exposed to domestic violence; for children not exposed, the percentage was 7 percent.

2 Vermont and New York have since passed similar legislation.

References


in adult domestic violence: Results from a four-city telephone survey. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 18*, 18–32.


