
HUMANE SOCIETY UNIVERSITY

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Beyond Mary Ellen Wilson: 
The Necessity for Collaboration between Social Workers and Animal Welfare Personnel

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Child protection services grew out of the early animal welfare movement.

Mary Ellen Wilson serves as a poster-child for child welfare organizations.

Her memory inspires the inner-connectedness of the animal welfare and child welfare fields.

(Watkins, 1990)
In the 1870’s Mary-Ellen Wilson suffered years of physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her foster parents (Ascione, 2005).

No child protection agencies were in existence.

Etta Wheeler, a female church representative who was familiar with Wilson’s plight, sought the help of Henry Bergh, the founder of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA).

Bergh was reluctant to risk his organization, whose original purpose was to ensure the health of livestock and workhorses, on a non-animal.

Wheeler convinced Bergh that Wilson’s case deserved attention because Wilson was “a member of the animal kingdom” (Watkins, 1990; American Humane Association).

By 1919, there were 247 state and local humane societies that focused on children or animals (Ascione, 2005).
Myth:

“Social workers care about people. If you want to help animals, then you probably don’t care enough about people to be a good social worker.”

Reality:

The patterns, rituals, and objects of the social work profession establish a normative framework of care that resides within a false dichotomy between care for humans and care for animals.
Pets are an important part of most American families

- 62% of households in the United States have at least one pet (American Pet Product Association).

- Household animals are more likely to be referred to as a “companion animal” or “family member” than a “pet” (Carlisle-Frank and Flanagan, 2006).

**Pets offer:**

- Emotional support
- Companionship
- Increased socialization for the elderly
- Improved health (lower depression, increase in exercise)
A profound relationship exists between interpersonal violence and animal abuse in household settings.

- Abuse of pets is concurrent in more than 60% of households where domestic violence or child abuse is present (Arkow and Ascione, 1999).

- Oftentimes, a victim of abuse or cruelty is unable to adequately defend him or herself, which is evident in cases of violence targeted toward both people and animals.

- Abuse toward animals is often used to intimidate children and partners, or to maintain a “leader-follower” relationship (Arkow and Ascione, 1999).
The connection between interpersonal abuse and animal abuse is an issue that pertains to social workers and animal welfare personnel.
Animal abuse is included in Lenore Walker’s violence-focused “power and control” wheel, a cornerstone of domestic violence related social work (Randour, 2011).

Batterers who abuse their pets are more controlling and use more dangerous forms of violence, including sexual violence, marital rape, emotional violence and stalking, than batterers who do not (Simmons & Lehmann, 2007).
ABUSE OF CHILDREN

INTIMIDATION
Instilling fear through looks, actions, gestures, property destruction
- Using adult size
- Yelling
- Being violent to other parent, pets, etc.

USING INSTITUTIONS
Threatening punishment with/by God, courts, police, school, juvenile detention, foster homes, relatives, psych wards.

USING ADULT PRIVILEGE
Treating children as servants
- Punishing, bossing, always winning
- Denying input in visitation and custody decisions
- Interrupting.

ISOLATION
Controlling access to peers/adults, siblings, other parent, grandparents.

THREATS
Threatening abandonment, suicide, physical harm, confinement, or harm to other loved ones.

EMOTIONAL ABUSE
Put downs, name calling
- Using children as confidants
- Using children to get or give information to other parent
- Being inconsistent
- Shaming children.

ECONOMIC ABUSE
Withholding basic needs, using money to control behavior
- Squandering family money
- Withholding child support
- Using children as an economic bargaining chip in divorce.

VIOLENCE
COMMITTING INCEST
SEXUAL TOUCHING/KISSING
SEXUALIZING CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOR
PINCHING
HITTING
KICKING
PUSHING
TWISTING ARMS
CHOKING
VIOLENCE
Animal abuse is included in Lenore Walker’s violence-focused “power and control” wheel, a cornerstone of domestic violence related social work (Randour, 2011).

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“With the exception of the American Humane Association, attention to child abuse and animal abuse exists under separate agencies, professions and funding sources” (Risley-Curtiss et al., 2010).
Increased collaboration between social workers and animal welfare personnel will enhance their respective fields while also ameliorating issues that pertain to interpersonal violence and animal abuse.

Plausible Outcomes

- Increase reporting of abuse or neglect for people and animals
- Strengthen personal practice (as social worker or animal welfare personnel)
- Diminish cycles of violence
Increasing Reporting by Social Workers and Animal Welfare Personnel
Increased Reporting by Social Workers and Animal Personnel

- As a result of CAPTA (Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, 1974), every state has mandated child abuse and neglect reporting laws.

- Most states also have laws that protect those who report instances of domestic violence or elder abuse.

- Veterinarians are currently the only mandated reporters of animal abuse. Veterinarians are mandated to report in less than 17 states.

- For specific details on which states require or permit cross-reporting, please visit the National Link Coalition website - nationallinkcoalition.org/.

(Risley-Curtiss et al, 2010; Animal Law Coalition, 2009; Randour, 2011).
• Pets, and how they are cared for, provide insight into a home and family.

• “Social workers and humane officers are in a position to share information and help each other to reduce violence in the home” (LaCroix, 1999)

• **Cross-reporting**: Multi-disciplinary approach to reporting animal abuse and child abuse. Social workers are trained to recognize animal abuse and animal welfare personnel are trained to recognize child abuse (LaCroix, 1999).
  • expands pool of trained personnel
  • enhances early detection of violence
  • improves success of interventions
Increased Reporting by Social Workers and Animal Personnel

- Animal welfare personnel are often the first responders to families that experience violence in the home.

- **Training** animal welfare personnel to better recognize child abuse or neglect when responding to incidents in a home can result in earlier reporting and better documentation of the situation (Boat et al., 2008).

- Schambon v Kentucky (1991)
  1) Animal control was contacted regarding animal hoarding and neglect
  2) Four children were removed due to unsanitary living conditions
  3) Subsequent disclosure of sexual and physical abuse
  4) Termination of parental rights (American Humane Association)
Zilney and Zilney (2005) discuss cross-reporting among Canadian child welfare workers and animal welfare workers:

- Children and family service workers completed surveys of households in which animals were present. 157 surveys noted concerns regarding the safety and well-being of animals, but only 16 of those cases were reported to animal control.

- Humane Society workers completed surveys of households in which children were present. 94 surveys noted instances of potential child neglect or abuse, but only 10 of those cases were referred to children and family services (Randour, 2011).
Conflicts of interest between animal welfare organizations and human welfare organizations—as well as the stress of ever-growing caseloads and the resulting potential for false-reporting—may make cross-disciplinary coalitions of animal welfare personnel and social workers intimidating or difficult to maintain (Faver et al., 2008).

Cross-reporting and collaboration can help pool resources (Arkow, 2003).
Concern for animal abuse issues can help strengthen policies and programs in various realms of abuse (Randour, 2011).

It can also bring together representatives from various professions, which increases necessary lobby power.
Acknowledging the reciprocal relationship between humans and animals can strengthen your personal practice.
Animal welfare professionals are most often instructed to focus on the wellbeing of an animal but not the behaviors of the family that the animal lives with.
While section 6.04 of the National Association of Social Workers code of ethics states, "Social workers should act to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or class ..."

the term “group” refers solely to humans.

Despite the integral role of household pets in the American family structure, for the most part, many Social Work schools have not undergone the paradigm shift to include animal welfare in their training.
Risley-Curtiss conducted study of 1,649 social workers who worked primarily with children and families. 81% of these social workers had heard about the link between child abuse and animal abuse, but 70.2% did not include questions about animals in their intake assessments (Risley-Curtiss, 2010).
• People who have pets in their home often enjoy talking about their pets.

• **Asking questions about animals** in a therapeutic or administrative setting can increase a client’s comfort and willingness for open communication.
  • A client is more likely to respond openly to a question about their pet than to a question about recent abuse (Faver, Strand and Ascione, 2008).

• Children are less likely to censor information about their pets than information about themselves. When talking about their pets, children may inadvertently give information about personal abuse or neglect (Boat et al., 2008).
An assessment of pet wellbeing can serve as an additional measure for social workers to identify dangerous or neglectful home environments.
Diminishing Cycles of Violence
• Children who experience or witness abuse may imitate that violence by hurting pets or animals (Faver, Strand & Ascione, 2008).

• Individuals who witness animal cruelty as a child are 8 times more likely to become perpetrators (DeGue & DeLillo, 2009).
“It is now understood that childhood cruelty to animals is an important predictor of later antisocial and aggressive acts and that children showing these behaviors, without intervention, are at risk for enduring disorders in conduct and mental health” (Becker & French, 2004).
Relevance to Social Work:

Cruelty to animals has been a criterion (and/or symptom) of conduct disorder in the **Diagnostic and Statistical Manuel** of Mental Disorders since 1987 (American Psychiatric Association).
“Animal abuse has received insufficient attention as one of a number of ‘red flags’, warning signs, or sentinel behaviors that could help identify youth at risk for perpetuating interpersonal violence” (Ascione, 2001; Randour, 2011).

As of 2011, 28 states have laws that permit or mandate counseling for perpetrators adjudicated for animal cruelty (Randour, 2011).

Coalitions between social workers and animal welfare specialists should be created to establish programs that “interrupt the cycle of violence” for children or adults who abuse animals (Faver, Strand, Ascione, 2008).
From Presentation to Practice: A Toolkit for Increased Collaboration
Ways to Address the “Link” in Your Social Work Practice

- Demonstrate a willingness to address grief among women and children in regard to recent separation from, or loss of, a beloved companion animal.

- Recognize that strong emotional attachments to pets can be used as a weapon by batterers.

- Ask questions about pets during intake interviews and risk assessments.

- Help victims maintain possession of their pets during custody battles.

- Remind clients that pet documentation (licenses, veterinary bills, adoption papers, etc.) should only be in the client’s name and must be up to date to receive particular services (free veterinary care and temporary shelter stays).

- Develop relationships with animal care and control agencies to help provide resources to clients.

- Create a list of pet-friendly domestic violence shelters in your region.

(Arkow & Ascione, 1999)
Ways to Address the “Link” in Your Animal Welfare Practice

• Remember that child welfare services can only intervene when a child is at risk. Reports should therefore be centered on the child/children at risk and the incident that led to the report (Boat et al., 2008).

• Maintain confidential records and workplace alert procedures at your shelter. Batterers may try to find boarded pets as a means of retaliation or coercion to their victims (Ascione, 1999).

• Hire social workers at animal welfare agencies! Human actions and mentalities are a major component of animal welfare.
Additional Pathways to Collaboration

• Animal control professionals can also look to social workers for training that teaches pet owners to be more responsible in situations that are not bad enough for animal control to remove a pet from the home.

• Create a “link” coalition in your area! A multidisciplinary “link” coalition can bring professionals from a variety of helping and human service professions together as a means to help humans and animals in need (Phil Arkow, 2003).

• Help establish Safe Pet Programs such as “Safe Havens” for abuse victims who do not know where to take their companion animal(s). Victims may be more willing to leave an abusive environment if they are able to provide shelter for their companion animals. All the while, animal welfare personnel can rest assured that an animal is out of harm’s way (Faver, Strand, Ascione, 2008).
Today’s Takeaways

• Collaboration between social workers and animal welfare personnel could lead to:
  
  • Increased numbers of reports of animal abuse and interpersonal abuse
  
  • More efficient professional practice through the inclusion of and acknowledgment of the central role that animals play in the lives of humans and that humans play in the lives of animals
  
  • Diminished cycles of violence


Randour, M.L. (2011). What every clinician should know about the link between pet abuse and family violence. American Psychological Association: *Continuing Education in Society*


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