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Reports of animal abuse in child protection referrals: A study of cases from one South Australian service

Key Practitioner Messages

- There is a well-established link between animal- and human-directed violence.
- Reports of animal abuse in child protection referrals may indicate more severe cases of child abuse.
- Cross-reporting of abuse is important, both in the context of child protection and animal welfare.

Keywords: child protection, animal abuse, cross-reporting, assessment

Introduction

Histories of both child protection and animal welfare are closely entwined. In countries such as the USA, early animal welfare laws were used to advocate for the development of laws to protect the rights of children (Hall, 1999). In Australia, where the present paper is focused, organisations focused on the welfare of animals were established in the late 1800s (RSPCA Australia, nd) in a similar time frame as those focused on the welfare of children (Australian Institute of Family Studies [AIFS], 2015). Subsequently, Australian legislation aimed at protecting both animals and children was developed in the 1970s and 80s (AIFS, 2015). Yet despite these shared histories, current child protection practice in Australia is to a large degree treated as separate to the protection of animals.

The separation of child and animal welfare is a concern given that research has consistently demonstrated their intersection. Often referred to as ‘The Link’, research has found that the abuse of children and the abuse of animals often co-occur, and that the abuse of animals can indicate the likely increased severity of abuse directed towards children (Becker & French, 2004). Furthermore, research suggests that children exposed or subjected to violence may be more likely to perpetuate violence themselves, including violence directed towards animals, and that this may occur as a ‘cry for help’ (Bright *et al.*, 2018). This would suggest the importance of a concerted focus on the link between animal- and human-directed violence as they occur in the context of child abuse (National Link Coalition, nd).

The study reported in the present paper investigates psychosocial assessment practices relating to potential animal welfare concerns within child protection cases seen by one South Australian service. Specifically, this paper focuses on instances of potential animal abuse mentioned in the context of child protection referrals. In South Australia, mandatory reporting guidelines include mention of animals as a potential indicator of child abuse (Department for Child Protection, 2018). The guidelines specifically direct those undertaking assessments to ask about animal cruelty, animal neglect (including in terms of the presence of animal faeces in the house), and give the example of sexual contact with an animal as a form of serious sexualised behaviour in young people. More broadly, the domestic violence sector in South Australia (and Australia in general) has increasingly recognised that the threat to animals constituted by domestic violence is a key issue, as evidenced by the increased availability of shelters for animals to

accompany humans leaving domestic violence (Taylor & Fraser, 2019). Yet while a focus on animals (and children as similarly affected by domestic violence) is a welcome development, a similar focus on animals in the context of child protection remains undeveloped in the Australian context compared to other countries (e.g., Randour *et al.*, 2019; Stewart, 2019), specifically in terms of acting upon animal abuse reported in child abuse notifications.

As such, while the abuse of animals is recognised in South Australian child protection practice as a risk factor for children, thus far this has not extended to cross-reporting guidelines or legislation. Cross reporting refers to the sharing of notifications and outcomes across sectors, such that the mention of animal abuse in a child protection notification would automatically be transferred to either the police or to an animal welfare organisation, and likewise the mention of child protection concerns in an animal welfare notification would be automatically transferred to child protection agencies (Long *et al.*, 2007; Zilney & Zilney, 2005). Cross-reporting of animal abuse, however, is not mandatory in South Australia, and there are legitimate concerns about its implementation including lack of training and resources (Bunting *et al.*, 2010). While mandatory notification laws exist in South Australia in terms of the suspected abuse of children, these only apply to individuals designated as mandatory notifiers. For example, police officers are required to notify child protection concerns raised in the context of an animal abuse notification, but animal welfare staff are not mandatory notifiers and thus are not required to report child protection concerns raised in the context of a report of animal abuse. These gaps in cross-reporting practices constitute a risk both for children and for animals.

Method

Design

In this mixed-methods study we selected 40 cases from one child protection service based within a metropolitan public hospital in South Australia, and analysed their psychosocial reports using quantitative and qualitative methods. Ethics approval for this study was granted by the South Adelaide Clinical Human Research Ethics Committee. Team members located outside of the child protection service were only granted access to limited and confidentialised data summaries and text extracts.

Sample selection

Comprehensive administrative data for the 5780 referrals made to the child protection service in the five years from 1st January 2012 to 31st December 2016 were extracted from the service's in-house client database. SPSS V25.0 was used to construct and prepare a data file for sample selection. The 1055 referrals for which a written psychosocial report had been produced, according to the administrative information within the data file, formed the sampling frame. Each referral represented one child referred at one point in time.

Through an iterative process involving keyword searches and visual inspection of referral data, we developed a set of 152 search terms to identify referrals that mentioned animals while excluding incidental usage such as 'acting like an animal' and 'CAT scan' and mention of non-pet rodents in the context of squalor. The final set of search

terms flagged 42 referrals comprising 20 Cases, where a Case was defined as a group of children from the same family referred at the same time. The child protection service produces a single psychosocial report concerning all children in a Case.

The 20 Cases with animals mentioned in their referrals formed Sample A for our study. For comparison purposes, an additional 20 Cases where animals were not mentioned in the referral were selected at random from the remaining 1013 referrals using SPSS V25.0. These formed Sample B for our study.

Materials

The psychosocial reports for all selected 40 Cases were collated in electronic format and manually reviewed to highlight text that either 1) spoke about animal mistreatment of any kind, 2) spoke about human-human violence, or 3) mentioned links between animal- and human-directed violence. Blocks of text deemed relevant to the study, covering the referral, all highlighted text, and the concluding opinion and recommendations, were extracted and confidentialised for further analysis.

Confidentialisation involved assigning a sequential ID number to each Case, replacing all names of people, places and agencies with generic terms (such as 'child 1's maternal grandmother', 'child 1's primary school') and generalising ages and dates to year only.

An Excel spreadsheet was constructed to support quantitative coding of content from the psychosocial reports and collation of case characteristics and outcomes.

Analytic approach

Quantitative coding of the animal- or human-directed violence information found in the psychosocial reports for each Case was undertaken by two on-site coders and reviewed

and amended by the second author. Characteristics and outcomes for each Case were derived from the SPSS data file.

The confidentialised text extracts from Sample A were subjected to a conventional content analysis, following the guidelines outlined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). This involved 1) repeated readings of the data corpus, 2) developing codes by highlighting key words that capture frequently occurring concepts, 3) reducing codes in order to minimise overlaps, 4) examining codes for patterned responses, in order to group codes into categories, and 5) examining categories to determine whether or not they accurately reflect the data corpus. As noted by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), a limitation of conventional content analysis is that it does not use member checking or inter-rater reliability. Given the nature of the data, member checking was moot for the present study. In terms of inter-rater reliability, Hsieh and Shannon note that all analyses are subjective, and thus should be viewed as offering one interpretation derived by the researcher. Nonetheless, the content analysis undertaken by the first author was reviewed and confirmed by the third author.

Results

Sample Characteristics

Referrals for Sample A (referrals that mentioned animals) and Sample B (referrals that did not mention animals) involved in total 96 children, 60 per cent of whom were female and around half of whom were aged under six years at the time of referral – see Table 1. Emotional abuse and neglect were the two most common forms of suspected maltreatment, recorded for around three-quarters of children in each Sample. However,

physical abuse and sexual abuse were around twice as likely to be suspected in children whose referral had mentioned animals (Sample A) than in those whose referral had not mentioned animals (Sample B). Specifically, physical abuse was suspected in 39 per cent of cases which mentioned animals at referral, compared with 18 per cent of cases where animals had not been mentioned at referral. Similarly, sexual abuse was suspected in 24 per cent of cases with animals mentioned at referral, but only in 13 per cent of cases without mention of animals at referral.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Presence of Animal-related Content in Psychosocial Reports

The majority (80%) of the psychosocial reports arising from referrals mentioning animals (Sample A) demonstrated some enquiry about or consideration of animal–human interaction. Half (50%) of the Sample A reports specifically cited alleged animal abuse – see Table 2. Reports which failed to include information about animals despite this being present in the referral information were either: cases where the referral mentioned animals only in the context of domestic squalor; a case where animals were allegedly used to deter home visits; and a case where the referral cited animal cruelty allegations against an adult but this was not explored in the psychosocial report.

In cases where animals had *not* been mentioned at referral (Sample B), there was little evidence that this aspect of the child's environment had been considered in the psychosocial assessment. Only one-quarter (25%) of the psychosocial reports written for these cases reported any enquiry about or incidental mention of animals in the home.

The report for one of these cases described alleged animal abuse by the child which had not been mentioned in the referral.

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Content Analysis

From the conventional content analysis, four categories were developed. The largest category, comprised of eight referrals, made reference to animal neglect. This primarily pertained to animal faeces evident throughout the house and property, creating an unhygienic living environment for both animals and children. An example of this was ‘the home deteriorated again to a level where dirty nappies, animal faeces and urine were found on the floors’ (Case A19). The second most common category, comprised of six referrals, made reference to the abuse of animals by children. Examples include reports of a child alleged to have drowned animals (Case A10), and a child whose mother noted ‘I catch him going to be cruel to animals’, who further said animals in the house were ‘wary of [the child's] moods and hid near her when worried he might hurt them’ (Case A15). The next most common category, comprised of five referrals, made reference to the abuse of animals by adults. Examples include reports of the male partner of a mother having a history of animal abuse, the male partner of a mother admitting that ‘he had engaged in sexual acts with dogs, chickens and quails including penetration and masturbation of the listed animals’ (Case A06), and a father who ‘threatened to kill the cat if she or her brother disclose any abuse’ (Case A11). The least common category, comprised of four referrals, made reference to animals in such a way that it was unclear as to whether or not an animal was harmed. Examples include a fish

tank being smashed and a wild animal bought and kept in captivity as a business venture.

Referral Outcomes

The Samples were pooled to compare the referral outcomes of cases with or without mention of animals within their psychosocial reports. Allegations of abuse were substantiated for every child within 18 (86%) of the 21 cases which had animals mentioned in their psychosocial reports, compared with 12 (64%) of the 19 cases where animals had not been mentioned in the psychosocial reports.

Discussion

Although the findings presented in this paper are brief and represent a small sample, they nonetheless illustrate two main points. First, child protection referrals which mention animals may prompt the assessing clinician to consider this aspect of the child's environment, however clinicians rarely enquire about animals in the home unless so prompted. Second, psychosocial assessment practices which include consideration of animals within the home may increase the likelihood that child abuse allegations are substantiated. This is consistent with the body of previous research demonstrating a clear link between animal- and human-directed violence (Becker & French, 2004; Currie, 2006; DeGue & DeLillo, 2009; Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2021; Taylor & Fraser, 2019). Specifically, in the context of child abuse, the existence of animal abuse is likely to indicate more significant abuse perpetrated against children (Becker & French, 2004), as illustrated by the higher percentage of physical and sexual abuse allegations in cases mentioning animals at referral.

Our findings highlight the importance of cross-reporting. Unfortunately, given the lack of policy guidelines and legislative requirements for cross-reporting in South Australia, this practice is currently dependent on the knowledge and motivation of individual staff members. Recognition of the co-occurrence of child and animal abuse would suggest the importance of legislating for, and having policies that address, mandatory reporting in both child protection and animal protection sectors. This would involve training for staff in both sectors about the link between animal- and human-directed abuse, and the establishment of reporting pathways for sharing information between sectors, so as to improve reporting and assessment practices.

Further, in terms of reporting and assessment, and as noted in the introduction to this paper, South Australian mandatory notification guidelines do include items pertaining to animals. These items, however, could be extended to provide more detail, and greater information could be provided to intake staff about the potential severity rating of referrals that include mention of animal abuse. Similarly, when it comes to psychosocial assessments, staff who undertake such assessments could be more clearly directed to further explore any mention of animal abuse in referrals (see, e.g. Long & Kulkarni, 2013). Examples of how to explore mentions of animal abuse are already readily available in the Australian domestic violence sector, with the Victorian Multi-Agency Risk Assessment and Management Framework being a positive example, however a scoping review of 25 such risk assessment documents found that only three include a focus on animal abuse (Forsdike *et al.*, 2017). This suggests the need for further

consideration of how best to ask about and assess for animal abuse in the context of child protection specifically.

While this paper focused on child protection notifications where animal abuse was mentioned, this does not mean that such referrals should be the sole focus. Rather, given the link between animal- and human-directed abuse, *any* child protection notification where it is noted that animals live in the home – even where animal abuse is not mentioned – should trigger consideration of the welfare of animals. The same is also true when animal abuse notifications are made: that this should trigger notification to child protection agencies when children are present in the household. Again, this highlights the importance of cross-reporting, so as to ensure the best possible outcomes for both children and animals.

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Table 1. Characteristics of Cases and children in each Sample

	Sample A		Sample B		ALL CASES	
	Cases (referral mentioned animals)		Cases (referral did not mention animals)			
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
<i>Case composition</i>						
No. Cases	20		20		40	
Single Child Case	8	40%	5	25%	13	33%
Two Child Case	5	25%	3	15%	8	20%
Three Child Case	5	25%	6	30%	11	28%
Four or more Child Case	2	10%	6	30%	8	20%
<i>Child characteristics at referral</i>						
No. of children referred	41		55		96	
Female	28	68%	30	55%	58	60%
Aged <6 years at referral	24	59%	27	49%	51	53%
Suspected neglect	30	73%	43	78%	73	76%
Suspected physical abuse	16	39%	10	18%	26	27%
Suspected sexual abuse	10	24%	7	13%	17	18%
Suspected emotional abuse	31	76%	40	73%	71	74%

Note: Children may have more than one suspected type of abuse and neglect recorded.

Table 2. Quantitative summary of animal related content in psychosocial reports

	Sample A (referral mentioned animals)		Sample B (referral did not mention animals)		TOTAL	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
No. Cases	20		20		40	
Cases with animals mentioned in psychosocial report	16	80%	5	25%	21	53%
Alleged abuse and/or neglect of animals ¹	10	50%	1	5%	11	28%
<i>Abuse by adult(s)</i>	4	20%	0	0%	4	10%
<i>Abuse by child(ren)</i>	4	20%	1	5%	5	13%
<i>Neglect</i>	6	30%	1	5%	7	18%
Animals mentioned in other contexts only ²	6	30%	4	20%	10	25%

Notes:

1. More than one type of abuse/neglect and more than one type of perpetrator may be mentioned in each Case, therefore the subcategories do not sum to the total number of Cases with alleged abuse/neglect.
2. Cases where no direct harm to animals could be ascertained, such as: positive mention of pets, mention of animals as bystanders, blame placed on an animal rather than a caregiver for causing an alleged injury to a child, caregiver inciting an animal to attack a person, caregiver threatening to harm pet in context of coercive control, or non-specific mention of pets in context of domestic squalor.