

# Childhood Cruelty to Cats, Dogs and Other Animals

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Animal cruelty can refer to a wide range of behaviors. Plucking wings off of grasshoppers and sticking pins in toads might be considered as cruelties, but these are rather common childhood behaviors of limited clinical significance. Repetitive purposeless killing or injuring cats or dogs should be considered a more serious behavioral symptom. Cats and dogs are generally regarded as intelligent animals which provide people with companionship. Cats and dogs are not far removed from man on the phylogenetic scale. Many people would consider their pets as family members; one can often observe signs of reciprocal bonding between people and their pet cats or dogs, so while cruelties of many animals can be symptomatic of seriously abnormal aggression, this should be especially and consistently true of cruelties involving these two popular and widely adored pets.

## Animal Cruelty and Assaultiveness

Some investigators suggested an association between the triad of enuresis, firesetting and cruelty to animals<sup>1-4</sup> or two thirds of this triad<sup>5</sup> and aggressive behaviors against people. Others did not confirm this association.<sup>6-7</sup> The results of several studies indicated that other childhood factors may be more clearly associated with assaultiveness.<sup>7-9</sup>

If triadic elements are inquired about in obtaining a psychiatric history, perhaps each element should not be given equal weight in the assessment of abnormal aggression. Many children who show persistent enuresis do not manifest abnormal aggression.<sup>10-11</sup> The deliberate, repetitive infliction of injury on animals, especially pet animals, seems a priori to be a more specific sign of abnormal aggression in comparison with enuresis which can be due to many causes unrelated to hostility or sadism.

Margaret Mead suggested that animal cruelty in childhood may signify the development of an impulsive, assaultive character disorder.<sup>12</sup> In a study by Tapia,<sup>13</sup> children who were cruel to animals showed other aggressive behaviors, such as destructiveness, bullying, fighting, stealing and temper tantrums. In our study of cruelty to cats or dogs,<sup>14</sup> childhood temper tantrums, destructive or assaultive outbursts, fights and truancy were reported by over 60% of the subjects.

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## Parental Influences on Animal Cruelty and Other Aggressive Behaviors

The high level of aggression in youths who injure pet animals may, in many cases, be due to physical aggressions which they were subjected to at the hands of a parent. Over 60% of subjects in our study had a history of brutal punishments by a father figure; over 60% were brutally punished by a mother figure.<sup>14</sup> Tapia found that one of the most common factors was a chaotic home and aggressive parental models.<sup>13</sup> Parental brutality may predispose a child to various aggressive behaviors, including animal cruelty and assaults.

There are, however, some methodological problems in confirming this hypothesis. Hard research data, such as behaviors directly observed by the investigator, are unobtainable on moral grounds. To allow assaults, animal cruelty or parental brutality in a clinical research setting would be cruel in itself. Cross validation would make historical data harder, but this tends to exclude information of which only the subject may be aware. It is conceivable that many parents are unaware of a child's cruelties to animals or assaults away from home.

Studies in other, related areas of investigation support the hypothesis that severe parental punishments can foster aggression in children. Fantasy measures of aggression have consistently shown a positive relationship with severity of punishments. Hollenberg and Sperry<sup>15</sup> found that severe parental punishment was associated with a greater amount of aggression in doll play. Sears and others<sup>16</sup> found that punishment for aggression, as reported by mothers, showed a positive association with aggressive doll play.

There is also considerable evidence from research that severe parental punishment increases the likelihood that a child will aggress against others.<sup>17-18</sup> Studies by the Gluecks<sup>17</sup> and by Bandura and Walters<sup>18</sup> indicated that the parents of delinquent youth make greater use of physical punishments. Sears<sup>16</sup> found a positive correlation between severity of punishment and overt aggression in boys and a curvilinear relationship in girls. Eron and others<sup>19</sup> demonstrated a positive association between severity of punishments as reported by parents and the extent to which children were judged to be aggressive by their classroom peers. Though other factors may affect this relationship,<sup>20</sup> enhanced aggressiveness can be a function of severity of physical punishment.<sup>21</sup> According to social learning concepts, **modelling** is an important mechanism which mediates the effects of punishments by **socializing agents** upon the child's aggression in interactions with his peers, in play with dolls and perhaps in play with dogs and cats.

Psychiatric literature provides a body of evidence that excessive parental punishment is associated with abnormal aggression. Duncan and others at the Mayo Clinic<sup>22</sup> and Sattin and others at the Menninger Clinic<sup>23</sup> provided early clinical studies of "motiveless" murderers who were sub-

jected to remorseless physical brutality by their parents. Shervert Frazier<sup>24</sup> reported a study of 31 nonpsychotic murderers and noted that 18 of these, both single and multiple murderers, had a history of both marked parental deprivation and remorseless physical brutality by a parent.

In suggesting that parental brutality or severe punishments increases the probability of aggressive behaviors<sup>16-19,25-27</sup> including animal cruelty in the child and abnormal aggression later in adulthood, there is a risk of being too reductionistic, of overlooking other interacting factors. Severe parental punishments may inhibit some aggressive behaviors while facilitating others through drive arousing and modelling effects<sup>21</sup> or through infliction of cerebral trauma by head blows. Other factors, such as intelligence quotient of the child or social class of his parents, may also influence the relationship between parental punishments and the child's aggressive behaviors.<sup>20</sup> The combination of parental brutality and absence of a stable and emotionally available father figure may increase the likelihood of a boy showing cruelty to dogs or cats more than one of these factors alone.<sup>14</sup>

Another mechanism whereby a child may develop a pattern of animal cruelty is that through severe punishments a parent may increase the child's aggression in general, but by tacitly approving animal cruelty, the parent assures that the child's excessive aggression will be expressed in this way. Eason and Steinhilber<sup>28</sup> reported clinical studies of eight boys who manifested murderous aggression. They found histories of physical illness, sibling rivalry, parental seductiveness and parental brutality. According to the authors, eight boys had acted violently "With permission and approval." Two cases which illustrated parental permission to act violently involved animal cruelty. One boy (who had had a history of frequent brutal beatings by his father) "shot up" the family farm house and killed several chickens. His mother did not punish him for this. Another boy's grandmother, who was his adoptive mother, described with pleasure his aggressive behaviors, which included killing birds with a whip or with firecrackers. Her first husband was described as a "brutal sadist." Some cases of childhood animal cruelty may represent "superego lacunae," defects resultant from implicit parental permission to violate cultural norms.

Animal cruelty is a conduct disorder which is associated with the male sex. In Tapia's study,<sup>10</sup> all 18 children who had been cruel to animals were males. There are scattered case reports in the psychiatric literature of females who were cruel to animals. In one study,<sup>27</sup> a group of female offenders convicted of assaultive crimes was compared with a group which lacked any record of charges of aggressive crimes. The two historical items which were most clearly associated with the assaultive female group were physically injurious punishments by a father figure and cruelty to animals. If animal cruelty is a sign of abnormal aggression in boys, it likely has comparable significance in girls, even though both animal cruelty and dangerous assaultiveness are found less frequently in females. Boys consistently receive harsher and more frequent physical punishment than girls.<sup>29-31</sup> If

severe punishments increase the likelihood of assaults and animal cruelty, differential punishment of boys may help to explain the increased incidence of these and other aggressive behaviors among males.

### **Why Cats?**

Different animal species probably evoke differential psychological and behavioral responses. From interviews with patients and research subjects, it is the author's impression that frogs and toads frequently fall prey to childhood cruelties because of their availability and ease of abuse. Cruelties to cats or dogs, in contrast, require more effort, so psychological determinants are of greater importance in the victimization of these animals. Since cats and dogs are defined by society as "good animals," psychological factors in torturing them are apt to be deviant or abnormal. Some individuals who have been cruel to cats or dogs give a limited explanation or justification of their conduct such as "Cats are sneaky" or "Dogs raise havoc with the livestock." Most express an intense hatred of cats or dogs, but offer virtually no self-insight into their animosity.

This leaves one to hypothesize about which psychological mechanisms are commonly operative. One possible mechanism is the child's projection of reciprocal hostility, maliciousness or destructiveness onto the animal. Cats and dogs, though beloved by many, are especially suited for sadistic projections because they are creatures equipped with the tools and instincts of predation.

Cats, more so than dogs, seem to educe a child's sadistic projections and cruel behaviors. In our study,<sup>14</sup> five out of six subjects who tortured dogs also tortured cats, whereas most who tortured cats denied cruelty to dogs (12 out of 17). The number who tortured cats was nearly triple the number who tortured dogs. Although one must be cautious about generalizing from a single study, it should be of little surprise if cruelty to cats proves to be the more common pattern.

In comparison with dogs, cats may be seen as more sadistic predators because they "play" with their murine victims before killing them. They are seen as wanton murderers because they kill harmless little birds. Another explanation for cat hatred is that a creature which is partly known, but largely unknown is more suitable for projection of unknown contents from the unconscious. The swift moving dorsal fin of a shark is terrifying because one can only imagine the extent of the predator beneath the water's surface or beneath one's level of awareness. Wild wolves are frightening because they are unseen denizens of the dark woods or of one's unconscious. Snakes are frightening, not just because of their sexual and destructive symbolism, but because one usually catches a glimpse of only one portion of the long slithering body. Cats are quieter than dogs. Their lines are smoother, less discernible. Their personalities are more inscrutable; their behaviors, less predictable. The legendary black cat can be especially hard to see in dim light, and in darkness one may see only the reflecting glow of cat's eyes.

## Conclusion

Repetitive childhood cruelty to animals, especially cats or dogs, can represent a serious conduct disorder associated with abnormal aggression. Animal cruelty can occur in association with other aggressive behaviors, such as dangerous assaults at a later age. Severe parental punishments may increase the probability of animal cruelties, assaults and other aggressive behaviors. Just as one cannot predict assaults on people from a history of animal cruelty, one cannot predict either of these behaviors from a history of parental brutality, but animal cruelty can often be understood in the context of parental rearing patterns such as punishments. Cruelty is an important item to inquire about in the assessment of abnormal aggression: a thorough history of this behavior can serve as a diagnostic window for viewing other dimensions of aggression.

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