Animal Cruelty, Child Abuse and Domestic Violence: Links Between The Toxic Triad and Toxic Stress

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Take Away Messages

- Animal cruelty is embedded in many adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)
- Exposure to animal cruelty potentially intensifies the impact of adverse experiences
- Exposure to animal cruelty and/or children’s cruel behavior toward animals can be an early indicator that children are at risk to develop toxic stress
- Screen both for ACEs and animal-related experiences
  “If we don’t ask we will never know!”

Outline

- ACEs and Toxic Stress
- Animal cruelty as a “red flag” for adverse experiences
- Links among animal cruelty, child abuse/neglect and domestic violence
- The Childhood Trust Survey on Animal-Related Experiences
- The Childhood Trust Events Survey
- Resources and legislation
Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACES)

- The largest study of its kind ever done to examine the health and social effects of adverse childhood experiences over the lifespan
- 17,337 adults with Kaiser Permanente Health (1995-97)
- 14 year study
- Mean age: 57 years (50% male – 50% female)
- 75% white; 11% Latino; 7% Asian; 5% African American
- 75% attended college, most had jobs; all had insurance


Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire

- 10 items: Yes or No
- Accessed medical records

10 ACE Categories

ABUSE
- Emotional
- Physical
- Sexual

HOUSEHOLD DYSFUNCTION
- Mother Treated Violently
- Household Substance Abuse
- Household Mental Illness
- Parental Separation or Divorce
- Incarcerated Household Member

NEGLECT
- Emotional
- Physical
ACE Scores

Number of adverse childhood experiences were totaled

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<th>Prevalence</th>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>16%</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 or more</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
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- Almost 2/3 had at least one ACE
- 1 in 8 had 4 or more ACEs
- If the average pediatrician will see 2-4 children with an ACE score of 4 or more each day how many adults, adolescents and children will YOU see?

Adapted from Anda RF et al., 2006. Eur Arch Psychiatry Clin Neurosci 256:174-186.

Got the attention of the medical profession!

Dose response related to poor health outcomes

4+ ACES increased likelihood of developing:

- Chronic pulmonary lung disease by 390%
- Hepatitis: 240%
- Depression: 460%
- Suicide: 1,220%
- 6 ACES IV drug user: 4,600%

*Die 20 years earlier*

Toxic Stress “The Mediator”

Mini-Lecture

Think about the potential relevance of this information to advocacy work:

- Provides “hard data”
- Connects to medical systems
- Promotes primary prevention
- Protects through the courts
Allostasis and Allostatic Load

- **Allostasis**: process of achieving stability (homeostasis) through physiological or behavioral change. Every baby, child, adolescent and adult seeks allostasis.

- **Allostatic Load**: the wear and tear on the body which grows over time when the individual is exposed to repeated or chronic stress.

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**Why I Use Sex, Drugs and Drink a Lot! From Neurochemistry to Behavior**

**Heroin and alcohol** decrease firing of the locus coeruleus (brain stress activation center).

- **Nicotine and cocaine** stimulate dopamine release in the nucleus accumbens (reward center).

- **Sex** releases oxytocin, which mediates pair bonding and social attachment. It also decreases cortisol levels.

- **Cortisol** stimulates craving of high-sugar, high-fat foods.

_Nadine Brooke Hill_

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**So….. How is your allostatic load today? 😊**
Defining and Measuring Adversity/Stress

- Hugh individual variation
- Perception (subjective)
- Reaction (objective and physiological)
  - Positive Stress
  - Tolerable Stress
  - Toxic Stress

Social emotional buffers return us to baseline (allostasis)

Toxic Stress

- "Toxic Stress" results from exposure to chronic stressors for which there are not adequate buffers to reduce the toxicity of the stress hormones.
- Impacts brain development: self-regulation, social/emotional development, school and job performance, and health outcomes
- An ecobio developmental (EBD) approach

Attachment and Self-Regulation

- Note the changes in the young child when she can no longer get her mother’s attention
- What does she do to try to calm herself?
- What if a caregiver is unavailable or unable to help her recover?
Epigenetics/Ecobiodevelopmental

Ecology: environment/experience influences how the genetic blueprint is read and utilized

Epigenetics: life long / intergenerational changes in how the genetic program is turned ON or OFF

“Genes may load the gun, but the environment pulls the trigger”

Andrew Garner, M.D.

The Developing Brain

- The brain develops and organizes as a reflection of developmental experience
- The traumatized child’s experience can include:
  - fear
  - threat
  - pain
  - chaos
  - hunger
  - frustration

Birth – age 6 = greatest brain growth
Infants are all ears: startle response even in utero

Excessive stress can harm the developing brain

- Cortisol = the stress hormone

Fight or flight response to stress: positive energy burst, lower pain sensitivity

“The Attack of the Adrenals”: if stress hormones don’t know when to quit, they remain active, injuring and even killing cells in the hippocampus

The Attack of the Adrenals

- Prolonged stress hormones can make us learn less and remember less.
- Stress hormones may take 3 - 72 hours to normalize!
- Cause faster heart rate; decrease bone density, lower immunity, raise blood pressure

“Brain Health” and “Child Wellbeing”

- Cannot be educated if not healthy
- Cannot be healthy if not educated

Impact of Early Stress

Andrew Garner, M.D.

CHILDHOOD STRESS

Hyper-responsive stress response; calm/coping

Chronic “fight or flight;” cortisol / norepinephrine

Changes in Brain Architecture
Significant adversity in childhood is strongly associated with toxic stress, unhealthy lifestyles, and emotional, mental, behavioral and physical health problems decades later.

So... toxic stress mediates health outcomes. Why should we care?

Because toxic stress damages the human brain and we are constantly confronted with the manifestations of this damage in our professional settings.

The Toxic Triad: Animal Cruelty, Child Abuse and Domestic Violence
The Toxic Triad and Toxic Stress

- Animal cruelty is embedded in many adverse childhood experiences
- Exposure to animal cruelty potentially intensifies the impact of adverse experiences
- Exposure to animal cruelty and/or children’s cruel behavior toward animals can be an early indicator that children are at risk to develop “toxic stress”

ACE Categories with potential links to animal cruelty

ABUSE
- Emotional
- Physical
- Sexual

HOUSEHOLD DYSFUNCTION
- Mother Treated Violently
- Household Substance Abuse
- Household Mental Illness
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NEGLECT
- Emotional
- Physical

Additional ACEs for Children
Finkelhor, et.al, 2012

Peer Rejection
- No good friends
- Very overweight
- Physical disability
- Less masculine or feminine than others

School Performance
- Below-average grades
- Repeated a grade

Community Violence
Why should I obtain information about the child’s experiences with animals?

- 73% of families with children have pets
- A child is more likely to grow up with a pet than with a father who lives in the same home
- *Children share the same environment as their pets*

Pets are part of the family

- 83% refer to themselves as their pet’s mom or dad
- 59% celebrate their pet’s birthday
- 90% would not consider dating someone who wasn’t fond of their pet
- 52% believe their pet listens to them best

Historical links between violence to animals and violence to children

- **1874:** Mary Ellen
- **1877:** American Humane Association protects both animals and children
- **1962:** “Battered Child Syndrome” published – humane groups divested of child protection
- **Today:** Reconnecting: violence in *all* forms is the issue

Why should I obtain information about the child’s experiences with animals?

“*The behavior that harms the animal is the same behavior that harms the human.*”

Lynn Loar, Ph.D.
“One of the most dangerous things that can happen to a child is to kill or torture an animal and get away with it.”

Margaret Mead (1964)

DEAR ANN:

“My 5-year-old nephew is very cruel to animals. He choked a little rabbit to death and set fire to our cat. His parents think he’ll outgrow it. What do you think?”

**DSM Classification of Cruelty to Animals as a Symptom of Mental Disorder**

DSM III and earlier: Not mentioned

DSM III R (1988): Included under “Destruction Of Property” as diagnostic of Conduct Disorder

DSM IV (1994): Included under “Violence Against Others” as diagnostic of Conduct Disorder
**Conduct Disorder**

“. . . persistent pattern of conduct in which basic rights of others and major age-appropriate societal norms or rules are violated . . .

**DSM IV**

- little empathy or concern for feelings, wishes or well-being of others
- misperceive intentions of others as hostile or threatening
- respond with “justified” aggression
- callous, lacking guilt or remorse

**Conduct Disorder (312.8)**

Aggression to people and animals

(1) often bullies, threatens, or intimidates
(2) often initiates fights
(3) has used a weapon that can cause serious physical harm to others
(4) has been physically cruel to people
(5) has been physically cruel to animals
   (earliest appearing symptom: mean onset 6.5 years)
(6) has stolen while confronting a victim
(7) has forced someone into sexual activity

Destruction of property
Deceitfulness or theft
Serious violations of rules (DSM IV)

**Motivations for Cruelty / Aggression to Animals**

- Curiosity / experimentation
- Inadvertent harm
- Peer reinforcement
- Mood modification
- Species prejudice
- Displaced hostility / punishment
- Imitating adult discipline
- Instrument of aggression / emotional abuse
- Frightening / coercing another
- Retaliation / revenge

(Adapted from Kellert and Felthous, 1985, Ascione, 1993)
Motivations for Cruelty / Aggression to Animals

- Rehearsal of violent behavior
- Rehearsal of suicidal behavior
- Posttraumatic reenactment
- Implement of self-injury
- Traumatic stress reaction
- Hurting to nurture
- Sexual pleasure

(adapted from Kellert and Felthous, 1985; Ascione, 1993)

Psychological tests ordered for
2 boys convicted of setting fire to cat
Charles (age 13) Adjudicated Delinquent for Cruelty to Animals

Count the ACEs!

Assess family’s ability to support treatment

Provide structure and supervision

M: "Mean, hard-headed baby"
  "Tore up his playpen"
  "Whipped a little too hard by father when drunk"

C: "My mom would get kind of scratched up"

Count the ACEs

Charles (Age 13)
Adjudicated delinquent for cruelty to animals

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Count the ACEs

M:
Substance abuser
Physically abused (husband hit her with beer bottle - damaged retina)

PTSD symptoms: nightmares, flashbacks, impaired memory, guilt, weight loss

F:
"Social drinker" - 3 DUI's
Never "beat her for no reason"
Charged 6x during 13 year marriage - dropped
Little specific information on son
Denies hurt kitten: "He's always loved animals"

ACEs???
Charles

Failed 6th grade

Larceny charge (stole teacher’s purse)

Impulsive, disobedient, hot-tempered

Inattentive, nightmares, sleeping less

Dissociative symptoms? Voice says, “Do it, do it”

James said:

“Me and Charles were at the bus stop and we were playing with the cat. And he said, “Let’s burn the cat.”

So we found some lighter fluid and I got some matches.

And we both tried to light it. When it was lit we ran.

And we didn’t know the cat was on fire....... we thought the cat was a stray.”

Charles and Empathy

How did cat look when running away?

“Like it was on fire.”

How did the cat sound?

“It made a high-pitched noise.”

How do you think the cat felt?

“I guess mad.”
What Questions Should I Ask?

The Childhood Trust Survey on Animal-Related Experiences (CTSARE)

10 Screening Questions

• Number of pets
• Favorite or special pet
• Pet as support or comfort
• Pet harmed, lost, worries about pet
• Seen someone hurt an animal
• Hurt an animal
• Been frightened or hurt by an animal

The Childhood Trust Survey on Animal-Related Experiences

Many pets: 12 dogs, several rabbits, hamsters, parakeet, turtles

Never had a cat because Father dislikes cats

* Two dogs were special and source of comfort

Denied ever seeing cruelty or being cruel

Recommendations

• Charles: Consider medication
  Group home / foster placement
  Probation to include community service at Humane Society - Caution here!

• Mother: Evaluation / treatment for depression, PTSD, and substance abuse

• Father: Treatment for substance abuse, battering

• Sister: Evaluate her
The Childhood Trust Events Survey

(includes the ACE items)

The McDonald Triad: Fact or Urban Legend?

J.M. McDonald “The Threat to Kill” (AJP 1963)

- Cruelty to animals, obsession with fire setting and persistent bedwetting linked to violent behaviors (homicidal and sexually predatory)

- Actually linked to parental neglect, brutality and abuse.

Risk Factors for Children Hurting Animals

Sexually Abused
Exposed to Domestic Violence
Physically Abused

All of these are Adverse Experiences
Social and Emotional Deficits in Maltreated Children

- Lower social competence
- Less able to recognize own emotional stress
- More difficulty in recognizing other’s emotions
- Less empathy for others

Physically Abused Children See Anger Where Others See Fear

Graphic by: Seth Pollak, courtesy PNAS

CHILD ABUSE
ANIMAL CRUELTY
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
Incidence of Animal Abuse in 53 Child-Abusing Families

- Animal abuse was reported in 88% of homes referred for physical abuse of children, compared with 34% of homes referred for neglect or children-at-risk.
- Animal abuse perpetrated by fathers (2/3) and children (1/3).
- Abusive households had more pets under 2 years of age and fewer over 2.


Incidence of Animal Abuse in 53 Child-Abusing Families

- Pets had injured a family member in 69% of animal abusive households vs. 6% in non-abusive households.
- Family members were 11 times more likely to be bitten.

Dog Bites

• Definition: Bite is medically-attended or reported to animal control or law enforcement

(Canine Aggression Task Force, JAVMA, 128, 11, June 2001)

Dog Bites: Impact / Year

• 334,000 people: emergency departments
• 466,000 people: other medical settings
• 6,000 hospitalized
• $1 billion in homeowners liability claims
• $102.4 million emergency visits claims

(Canine Aggression Task Force, JAVMA, 128, 11, June 1, 2001)
Dog Bites and Children

- 50% victims are children under age 12
- 70% fatal attacks involve children
- Dog bites are 3rd leading cause of ER injury admissions in children - after bike and baseball/softball injuries

Canine Aggression Task Force, JAVMA, 128, 11, June 1, 2001

Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center

Dog bites to children:

During a 4 year period there were more than 2500 admissions to Emergency.

- A young boy after a dog attack.
Raising Awareness- Forever!
“Aargh! someone call 911. I’m being mauled by a troll!”

Pediatric Dog Bite Victims: A Need for a Continuum of Care

- 34 children and their families
- Assessed ongoing needs 1 month post ED visit for dog bite
- 70% at least 1 new concerning behavior in child
- 85% parents endorsed concerns about their own reactions

- Majority endorsed interventions to help children with post-bite fears, education on dog bite prevention and offering additional supportive services in the ED

Boat, Dixon, Pearl, Thieken and Bucher (2012) Clinical Pediatrics
Wish List When Children Are Treated For Dog Bites

- Consider screening for abuse or neglect
- Follow up to assess trauma/stress reactions in child and caregiver
- Provide options for follow up interventions including:
  - Therapeutic
  - Legal
  - Dog safety
  - Dog training

Protecting Children By Protecting Animals:

A Community Response

S.B. No. 121  January 2003

- Ohio Revised Code
- Cruelty to companion animals: cats and dogs
- 1st conviction: first degree misdemeanor
- 2nd conviction: fifth degree felony
- Humane agents are mandated reporters of child abuse and neglect
- Other investigators are responsible for reporting animal abuse and neglect
Suggestions

• Request and incorporate your county humane agent’s or animal control officer’s observations

• Put your county humane agent or animal control officer on your multi-disciplinary team

• Take your county humane agent or animal control officer to lunch!
Battered Women and Battered Animals
Harming animals:
- perpetuates context of terror
- demonstrates power
- warns "you may be next"
- eliminates source of support or comfort
- provides incentive for woman to stay
- reinforces that there is no safe place

- Surveyed 111 pet-owning domestic violence victims at 21 shelters across Ontario.
- Nearly 50% of respondents reported partner had threatened, abused or killed family pet.
- 43% said concern over pets' welfare prevented them from leaving sooner.

Cincinnati YWCA Battered Women’s Shelter Telephone Interview
- Children?
- Any pets?
- Pets need to get out of your home?
- Need place for pets to stay while you are in shelter? (The SPCA will shelter your pets.)
**Lethality Assessment**
3 top indicators that a woman will be killed by her batterer

- Homicide or suicide gestures / threats
- Access to weapons
- Threat to mutilate or kill pets

**Why are batterers considered more dangerous if they abuse pets?**

- Because they are more likely to use physical, sexual, and emotional violence and stalking
- We must address this issue in treatment and safety planning


**Domestic Violence, Animal Abuse and Custody/Visitation**

- Verbally abusive, drinks heavily, busted doors with fists, threatened to kill her pet
- Former GF’s son age 9: name calling, hits in face, lifted boy’s dog over his head and slammed it to the floor in front of boy
- Wants custody and unsupervised visitation with his 2 y/o daughter!
**Exposure to Battering Lowers IQs in Young Children**

- Children age 5 who were exposed to high levels of domestic violence had IQs that were, on average, **8 points lower** than unexposed children.

- Consider this: Chronic lead exposure decreases children’s IQs on average **3 or 4 points**.

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**Exposure to animal cruelty harms children’s health and society’s wellbeing**

- Child, like pet, is expendable
- Lose confidence that adults can protect them
- Physical harm OK in allegedly loving relationships
- Seek power by inflicting pain and suffering
- Desensitization/decreased empathy
- Destructive behavior

**AND … adds to toxic stress resulting in a changed brain, unhealthy lifestyle and subsequent poor health.**
Wisconsin therapy dog "Mr. Bubbles"

Solutions?
Many reasons for optimism!

Amazing Resource!
- The National Resource Center on the Link between Animal Abuse and Human Violence
- 2500+ members in 50 states and 40 countries… and growing! Free membership.
- Publish monthly LINK-Letter.
- Encourage local LINK coalitions.
- Trainings for professional and public groups.
- www.nationallinkcoalition.org
How Are We Responding to The Link?

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

• “Pet Protection Orders”: 28 states, Puerto Rico and Washington DC allow courts to include animals in domestic violence/stalking protection-from-abuse orders.

• Federal bill would extend these provisions—and make federal $ available for pet-friendly shelters.

Legislation

• **New York**: A-706 would include animal cruelty in the presence of a child as an element in endangering a child’s welfare, and within the definition of a neglected or maltreated child.

• **Oregon Law**: increases the punishment for animal neglect in the first degree to a maximum of 5 years imprisonment and/or a $125,000 fine for repeat offenders, offenses involving 10 or more animals, or neglect that occurs in the presence of a minor child.
How Are We Responding to The Link?

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

- 900 shelters have “Safe Haven” referrals: foster care with local animal groups.
- Safety Planning: get all pet documentation/receipts in woman’s name. Have pets and supplies ready to go at a moment’s notice.

Sheltering Animals & Families Together (SAF-T)™

Domestic Violence Shelter that houses pets

- Shelter for Abused Women and Children in Naples, Florida

Canine resident at the shelter

Housing for pets at the shelter
What Do Police Need to Know?

**Key Statistics:**
- History of animal abuse found in 21% of dogs that attacked and killed people.
- 35% of search warrants for animal abuse or dog fighting resulted in seizures of narcotics or guns.
- 82% of animal abuse or dog fighting offenders had prior arrests for battery.

What Do Police Need to Know?
- Recognize animal abuse as a serious crime
- All 50 states now have felony-level cruelty laws (compared with only 5 in 1990)
- FBI will now include animal cruelty on Uniform Crime Report checklists that 18,000 local law enforcement agencies use to tabulate crime statistics
- Veterinary forensics now available.

How Are We Responding to The Link?

**VETERINARY MEDICINE**
- Policies and laws to allow veterinarians to report suspected animal and child abuse with immunity from civil and criminal liability.
- Training to distinguish animal abuse from accidental injury.
- Veterinary Social Work to integrate animal and human welfare issues.
- “Animal C.S.I.”: Training in Veterinary Forensics to better prepare evidence for prosecution.
How Are We Responding to The Link?

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT
• Community Link Coalitions.
• Prosecutors and police officers specifically assigned to animal cruelty cases.
• Interdisciplinary anti-cruelty task forces led by prosecutors.

Still needed…

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<th>PERMISSIVE CROSS-REPORTING</th>
<th>MANDATORY CROSS-REPORTING</th>
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<td>Child protection MAY report animal abuse</td>
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Good News!
Academy on Violence and Abuse
• Mission: to advance health education and research on the recognition, treatment and prevention of the health effects of violence and abuse across the lifespan.
• Vision: the prevention of violence and abuse, as well as its identification and care, is fully integrated into the delivery of quality healthcare.

People of all ages are safer and healthier.

www.avahealth.org/
Two Helpful Tools

- The Childhood Trust Survey on Animal-Related Experiences (CTSARE)
- The Childhood Trust Events Survey (CTES)

Childhood Exposure to Animal Cruelty is...

- an adverse experience that can contribute to toxic stress
- a potential intensifier of adverse experiences

Remember

“The behavior that harms the animal is the same behavior that harms the human.”

Lynn Loar, Ph.D.
Never Say “Never”!

Barbara Walling Boat, Ph.D.

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Courtroom canine
Prosecutor bringing therapy dog to help child witnesses, victims during trials
Panelists Discussing The Link

• Traci Foley, MSW, Social Service/Children’s Services Supervisor
• Chris Tunnell, County Prosecuting Attorney
• Sandra Horvath, Esq., Director of Legislative/Legal Affairs, Ohio Voters for Companion Animals (OVCA)
• Cindy Hudnut, Director, Safe Haven Domestic Violence Shelter
• David Ross, Associate Director, Mental Health and Recovery Board of Ashland County