



Animal Cruelty Information For Social Workers

Is animal cruelty linked to family violence?

The Family and Whanau Violence Legislation Bill 2016 recognises animal cruelty occurring in the context of family violence as a form of psychological abuse. Animals living in the home or on the property are frequently targeted by perpetrators in their efforts to control their partner and their children, through threats of violence and increasing acts of cruelty.

Countries providing a coordinated interagency response – such as Australia, Canada, Britain, and America – have demonstrated a significant increase in early intervention to vulnerable children and families. The collaboration between child protection services and animal welfare agencies confirms that animals were abused in 88 % of homes where child abuse was present*.

*Kairys, Johnson & Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect, 2002

Is animal cruelty recognised as an indicator of a mental health condition?

Cruelty to animals entered The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in the revised third edition (American Psychiatric Association, 1987) as a criterion for conduct disorder. Initial psychiatric interest in animal cruelty began in the 1960s when the psychiatrist John MacDonald identified animal cruelty as an indicator of potential inter-personal human violence.

Why is screening for animal cruelty important?

It is well documented that animal cruelty is a sign of serious psychological distress and that the child or adolescent is experiencing significant violence or has an emerging undiagnosed mental health condition. A body of research recognises the multiple factors that contribute to potential youthful animal cruelty including (but not limited to):

- > Child sexual, physical and emotional abuse
- > Family violence
- > Developmental delays or learning difficulties
- > Bullying
- > Undiagnosed mental health/ behavioural problems
- > Post-traumatic stress disorder
- > Poverty
- > Family, community and cultural beliefs
- > Peer pressure
- > Substance use
- > Disrupted attachment
- > Parent/child relationship problems

Can the family pet be of comfort to an abused child or adult victim?

Yes. Children living with violence in the home may develop an intense relationship with an animal, often this relationship provides much-needed comfort and security to the child. A consistent relationship with the animal has been demonstrated to reduce the negative impact of trauma on the non-abusing parent and the children.

How do perpetrators of family violence employ animal cruelty?

Due to the deterioration in family relationships, the animals in the home are at risk of continued abuse when the women and children leave the violent relationship. New Zealand Research* identified a number of ways in which animal cruelty was employed by perpetrators. Animal cruelty fell into two chronological categories – cruelty to animals within and during the relationship, and cruelty to animals after leaving the relationship. Due to the normalisation of violence in the family home, the pet may be at risk of continued abuse when the children and the non-abusive parents have reached safety. Women frequently return to the home and relationship because of their concerns for the welfare of an animal, and this places women and children at significantly increased risk of abuse.

*Roguski, 2012

How should I report suspected animal cruelty?

Social workers, mental health professionals, and community workers are often the first people to identify animal cruelty.

If you know or suspect that an animal is being neglected or abused, report your information immediately to the local SPCA or Police.

Social workers conducting home visits may witness cases of animal cruelty or gross neglect; women refuge social workers may hear reports of animal cruelty from families living in the refuge.

Please report instances in relation to the failure to provide appropriate care for an animal this may include inadequate food, water, veterinary treatment or shelter. The Animal Welfare Act 1999 defines physical, health and behavioural needs of animals. The SPCA investigates breaches of these needs, which include:

- > Proper and sufficient food and water
- > Adequate shelter
- > Opportunity to display normal patterns of behaviour
- > Physical handling in a manner which minimises the likelihood of unreasonable and unnecessary pain or distress
- > Protection from, and rapid diagnosis of, any significant injury or disease

Reporting animal cruelty to the SPCA

Our Inspectors require reasonable grounds to suspect that an animal cruelty offence has been committed. It is essential you provide contact details so they can confirm the facts and gather more information. Your contact details remain strictly confidential and are protected

in accordance with the Privacy Act. It would be helpful if you could also gather the following information before calling us:

- > Description of the animal(s) involved
- > Details of the condition of the animal and why you believe there has been cruelty or neglect
- > Precise address/description of where the animal(s) are
- > Name and address of the person you believe may be responsible for the cruelty and neglect
- > Name, address and contact details of any other witnesses who may be able to help

Is animal cruelty a crime?

The SPCA is authorised under the Animal Welfare Act 1999 to protect all animals from abuse, neglect, and abandonment. We are the only charity with the legal powers to help animals in need, and bring animal offenders to justice. However, our legal powers are limited and some situations that may appear distressing are actually not against the law. We can only investigate and take action in those cases whereby people have breached the Animal Welfare Act. You can find more information about the Animal Welfare Act on our website.

What questions could my agency add to risk assessment materials to help assess animal cruelty?

Questions similar to those inquiring about human violence should be standard. They should include at least the following:

- > Are there any animals in the home?
- > Has anyone in the household ever hit, kicked, punched, beaten, or thrown an animal or threatened to do so?
- > Are you worried about your pet, are they safe?
- > If the animal is left behind, is there someone who will provide food, water, and basic care?

Animals are often overlooked in the intake assessment. The way an animal is treated can indicate a lot about how family members treat each other. Intake social workers do not need to identify specific acts of animal cruelty but should be able to determine if any animals are in danger.

Do SPCA investigators report child abuse and other forms of violence in a community?

Yes. A current memorandum of understanding (MOU) between RNZSPCA and the Ministry for Children, Oranga Tamariki recognises animal cruelty as an established form of family violence. The MOU encourages cross-reporting of child and animal abuse between agencies in line with the government initiated Integrated Safety Response to family violence.

Cross-reporting and interagency collaboration

Initiating a cross-reporting and cross-training agreement between agencies can increase the number of animal cruelty and human violence reports investigated. Agencies can also help each other by maintaining informal relationships. An interagency approach to case management will better serve all of those who need help.