

## *The Next Step: Exploring the Link Between Violence to People and Animals*

**B**ack in 1894, humanitarians touched briefly on something big: That year at the American Humane National Conference, someone remarked, “The man who was cruel to his beast would be unkind to his wife and child.” Although the remark was a simplistic observation, it revealed that, even then, people were beginning to have a sense of the connection between acts of cruelty to animals and acts of cruelty to children and other people.

In recent years, American Humane has worked to further ground this concept, and we’ve learned some frightening facts:

⌘ In one study, 88% of 57 families being treated for incidents of child abuse also abused animals. In two thirds of the cases, the abusive parent had killed or injured the animals to control a child. In one third of the cases, the children had abused the animals, using them as scapegoats for their anger (Deviney, Dickert, & Lockwood, 1983).

⌘ In a study of 28 incarcerated sexual-homicide perpetrators, researchers found that 36% had abused animals in childhood, and 46% had in adolescence (Ressler, Burgess, & Douglas, 1988).

⌘ One study using a sample of 64 men revealed that 46% of convicted rapists and 30% of convicted child molesters admitted to being cruel to animals during their childhood or

adolescence (Tingle, Barnard, Robbins, Newman, & Hutchinson, 1986).

⌘ Of 38 women seeking shelter in one safehouse, 74% reported having a pet, and 71% reported that their pets had been threatened or harmed – one third of the time by children (Ascione, 1998).

⌘ In 1997, researchers found that 85% of staff at domestic violence shelters said that women talk about incidents of pet abuse; 63% said children talk about these incidents; and 83% have personally observed the coexistence of domestic violence and pet abuse. The researchers found that only 27% had intake questions about pets (Ascione, Weber, & Wood, 1997).

And there are the individual cases: There’s 12-year-old Eric Smith who strangled his neighbor’s cat with a garden hose. One year later, he murdered four-year-old Derrick Robie. As a child, Jeffrey Dahmer impaled frogs and



*More and more research has revealed that acts of cruelty to animals often lead to acts of cruelty to children and other people.*

cats and decapitated a dog. As an adult, he killed and dismembered 17 people. Young Brenda Spencer abused dogs and cats by setting their tails on fire. When she grew up, she ultimately fired 40 shots at San Diego school children, killing two and wounding nine. Finally, David Berkowitz, as a youth, killed a number of his neighbor's pets. As an adult, he became New York's "Son of Sam" murderer.

### **Establishing the Link, Breaking the Chain**

Every year in the United States, more than one million children become victims of abuse or neglect. At the same time, thousands of pets suffer malicious cruelty, often within the same cycle of family violence. In 1991, American Humane gathered 30 experts from diverse fields at the Summit on Violence to Children and Animals in Denver, Colorado. The mission of this national leadership forum was to identify issues and symptoms of child and animal abuse, set an agenda for change, and define steps for collaborative community programs.

Following that Summit, American Humane's Washington, D.C., office began highlighting the issue of the Link to legislators. At the time, most congressional staff members viewed animal abuse, if they thought of it at all, as something distasteful and unfortunate, and cases of animal cruelty were minimized (Vinal, 1999). But American Humane staff effectively lobbied members of Congress, convincing them with chilling real-life stories and vivid statistics that there was indeed a connection between animal abuse and future violence.

On the heels of the Summit in Denver, American Humane held a conference in Herndon, Virginia, entitled "Protecting Children



*To end the suffering of abused animals, American Humane has fought to make animal cruelty a felony in 36 states and the District of Columbia.*

and Animals: Agenda for a Non-Violent Future." Among the attendees were animal protection professionals, lawyers, pediatricians, nurses, theologians, teachers, psychologists, reporters, veterinarians, prosecutors, social workers, and researchers. All of them came to share their perceptions and experiences with the Link and address four key areas: research, education, programming, and treatment.

### **Seeing Results**

The work began to pay off. In 1994, Rep. Tom Lantos (D-CA) introduced the first congressional resolution officially recognizing the Link between animal abuse and human violence, including child abuse, youth violence, and domestic violence. American Humane soon began working with the state legislatures to advocate for change. In 1994, American Humane lobbied for and testified on behalf of legislation in Maryland that mandated stronger penalties for those who perpetrate serious levels



*American Humane launched its Campaign Against Violence to call public attention and awareness to animal cruelty and the Link.*

of animal abuse. Similar efforts soon followed in Colorado, Connecticut, and California.

Since 1994, American Humane staff and members have given more than 100 presentations on the Link to professional and public audiences throughout the United States, Ireland, the Czech Republic, New Zealand, and Switzerland. In addition, American Humane has published or written more than 35 documents and articles on the Link, including articles, veterinarians' guides, social worker and animal welfare cross-training initiatives, and handbooks.

In 1997, American Humane filed a formal petition with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services requesting further research on the issue. According to an 1999 article in *Protecting Children*, in the petition, American Humane argued that it is vitally important for child welfare professionals to take animal abuse seriously and to recognize it as a possible indicator of serious family dysfunction, including

child maltreatment and domestic violence.

Also in 1997, American Humane launched its Campaign Against Violence, a public awareness program focused on the Link. The campaign included a series of public service announcements, parents' guides, advertisements in newspapers and magazines, brochures, and posters.

### **School Shootings Trigger Greater Awareness**

American Humane continued to educate lawmakers and the public about the crucial Link between animal cruelty and human violence, but it was the tragic school shootings throughout the country that brought the point home. Research on the young gunmen revealed that almost every one of the boys involved in the school attacks in Mississippi, Arkansas, Oregon, and Colorado was known to have abused and killed animals prior to committing the terrifying crimes (Vinal, 1999). In response to this, American Humane helped organize a congressional briefing entitled "Interpersonal violence and animal cruelty." Sponsored by the bipartisan Congressional Children's Caucus, Congressional Friends of Animals, and Congressional Women's Caucus, the briefing brought together people from different disciplines to talk about the cycle of violence and how we can no longer ignore the role that animal abuse plays in dysfunctional families. In this cycle of violence, adults who abuse the family pets then abuse the spouse or children in the family, and the children who witness the abuse learn that violence is a way to vent their anger or gain a sense of control in their lives to not feel powerless and unsafe. Pet abuse is also one way perpetrators may use to "control"

human members in the family.

The briefing generated much interest in Washington, DC. And since then many laws that enforce greater penalties for people who abuse animals have been created. For example, in Colorado, HB 1237 makes first-time egregious animal abuse cases a felony and requires perpetrators to seek professional counseling. Colorado's previous laws treated torture, maiming, or killing of pets as only a misdemeanor. Today, 36 states plus the District of Columbia provide for felony convictions for certain types of animal abuse.

American Humane went on to work with the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Justice to insert language in a guidebook for schools throughout the country. The "Guide to Safe Schools" identifies cruelty to animals as one of the early warning signs of potential violence by youths. The book offers parents, administrators, teachers, and students valuable information on what to look for in troubled students before violence erupts.

American Humane also developed a 12-week humane education curriculum that pairs children, who are considered to be "at-risk" due to emotional and behavioral concerns, with shelter animals. The goal of the program is to instill in children self esteem and social interaction skills, while training the dogs so that they can be adopted into loving homes.

### Ongoing Efforts

In 1998, American Humane designed and implemented the first National Resource Center on the Link Between Violence to People and Animals. As this national center, American Humane has continued to raise awareness and promote more research on the Link. It also

provides resource materials and support, through publications and the Internet, to professionals and citizens working on local community efforts.

American Humane continues to educate the public, in addition to legislators. The summer of 2002 saw an influx of headlines nationwide about animal abuse. Items such as "Missouri man charged with burning seven-week-old kitten on barbecue grill" and "Iowa City man charged with puppy abuse" ran rampant in publications across the country. American Humane took these events as an opportunity to be proactive and issued an editorial to newspapers and magazines nationwide. This piece – which was sent to more than 500 organizations – was designed to not only tell people about the Link but also empower them to know the signs to watch for.

In the editorial, Carol Harper, American Humane's director of systems and community programs, provided tangible things that the public can do to break the cycle of violence in their communities, including:

⊕ Taking animal and child abuse seriously and immediately reporting instances to the local humane society or child welfare agency.

⊕ Educating others and encouraging judges, animal control officers,



*In 1998, American Humane designed and implemented a resource center for information about the Link.*

doctors, social workers, teachers, media, and ministers to familiarize themselves with the Link between child and animal abuse and future crimes of violence.

⌘ Practicing positive parenting styles by reinforcing nonviolent problem-solving, compassion, and self-control and avoiding corporal punishment.

⌘ Serving as an example and instilling compassion and humane values in young people by valuing people, animals, and the environment.

⌘ Questioning the glorification of violence in sports, media, and entertainment.

⌘ Breaking the cycle of violence in their own lives by seeking professional counseling if animal or child abuse has been a part of their history.

⌘ Voting on issues that improve the quality of life for people and animals.

⌘ Being active in the community by volunteering or contributing to organizations that protect children and animals.

In another forward step for the Link, a film company recently approached American Humane for information for a documentary being produced for the Discovery Channel's Animal Planet. The film will explore the criminal research that led to the discovery of the "Red Flag" – the commonality among killers of having committed animal abuse prior to acts of violence against people. American Humane was asked to be the animal welfare expert regarding this alarming connection.

## Today's Pioneers

Today, when we look back at the beginning of the child and animal welfare movement, we study the history of the first Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the first Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. We look back on Mary Ellen and the establishment of child protection legislation in the United States. The Link is the next step. Although professional and public awareness of this issue is relatively new, the Link has become a monumental crusade of the Association. And some day, future humanitarians will note the ground-breaking revelations about this violent association that we've made today. ⌘

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