



# Understanding the links

child abuse, animal abuse  
and domestic violence

*Information for professionals*

**NSPCC**   
Cruelty to children must stop. **FULL STOP.**

"We put a pet to sleep which had been neglected by its owners. Later those same people were jailed for neglecting a child. Could we have made a difference?"

The Links Group has undertaken the development and distribution of this leaflet.

The group includes representatives from:

- Association of Chief Police Officers
- Blue Cross
- British Small Animals Veterinary Association (BSAVA)
- British Veterinary Association (BVA)
- Dogs Trust
- Intervet UK Ltd
- National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC)
- Paws for Kids
- Peoples Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA)
- Refuge
- Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA)
- Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SSPCA)
- Women's Aid Federation of England
- The Young Abusers Project
- British Veterinary Nurse Association



**BVNA**





## Introduction

There is increasing research and clinical evidence which suggests that there are sometimes inter-relationships, commonly referred to as 'links', between the abuse of children, vulnerable adults and animals. A better understanding of these links can help to protect victims, both human and animal, and promote their welfare.

### What are the definitions?

This leaflet is for professionals working with children, families or animals. Its purpose is to:

Draw attention to an issue which has until recently been neglected in policy and professional practice.

Outline current knowledge of the links.

Explain what action to take if professionals have concerns about the abuse of children or animals.

Suggest ways in which the links could be incorporated into working practices.

"He held my daughters' pets out of the upstairs window, and threatened to drop them if we did not return home".

“Mummy shouted at us all the time. She made us leave our dog on its own when we went away. The dog was dead when we came back. I miss him so much”.

Definitions of abuse are rarely straightforward. They can vary over time and be affected by cultural and societal norms. However, definitions are a useful starting point.

**Child abuse** is when someone causes significant harm to a child or young person under 18 years of age. Significant harm occurs when a child’s physical, emotional, or mental health or development is impaired as a consequence of abuse or neglect. The abuser is usually someone more powerful than the child or young person. Often it is an adult but it can be other children such as brothers, sisters or friends.

There are particular sources of stress within families that may affect the capacity of parents to respond to their child’s needs, including the child’s need for protection. Research indicates that such sources of stress may include the following: poverty, domestic violence, the mental illness of a parent or carer, or where there is drug and alcohol misuse. (1)

**Animal abuse** is the intentional harm of an animal. It includes, but is not limited to, willful neglect, inflicting injury, pain or distress, or malicious killing of animals.

**Domestic violence** is a pattern of behaviour which is characterised by the exercise of control and the misuse of power by one person, usually a man, over another, usually a woman, within the context of a current or former intimate relationship.

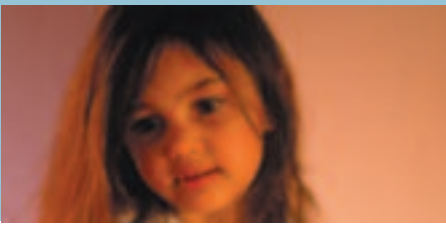
The abuse can be: physical, sexual, emotional and financial and it can include making a person socially isolated. Children and young people can suffer as a consequence of domestic violence occurring within their household. They may experience direct physical, sexual or emotional abuse, and/or the abusive impact of witnessing or being aware of abuse to a parent, who is usually their mother.

#### Four categories of child abuse are:

- 1 Physical: includes hitting, shaking, poisoning, burning or drowning.
- 2 Emotional: persistent ill treatment of a child which affects their emotional development: for example, making a child feel worthless, unloved or inadequate.
- 3 Sexual: involves forcing or enticing a child to take part in sexual activities; for example, inappropriate touching, rape, buggery, exposure to indecent images, or encouraging sexualised behaviour.
- 4 Neglect: persistent failure to meet the physical and/or psychological needs of a child; for example, failing to provide adequate food, warmth, shelter, clothing, emotional care or medical treatment. It also includes failing to provide adequate supervision and protection from physical danger which includes leaving a young child “home alone”.

#### Three categories of animal abuse are:

- 1 Physical abuse: includes kicking, punching, throwing, burning, microwaving, drowning, asphyxiation, and the administration of drugs or poisons.
- 2 Sexual: any use of an animal for sexual gratification.
- 3 Neglect: a failure to provide adequate food, water, shelter, companionship or veterinary attention.



## What are the links?

### The research evidence

Evidence of the links between child abuse, animal abuse and domestic violence is drawn mainly from studies in the USA, which relate to cases of serious abuse. There is a growing research base in the United Kingdom. Key findings include:

- If a child is cruel to animals this may be an indicator that serious neglect and abuse have been inflicted on the child (2/3). While recent research in the UK suggests that animal abuse by children is quite widespread, in a minority of more extreme cases it appears to be associated with abuse of the child, or subsequent abusive behaviour by the child. (4)
- Where serious animal abuse has occurred in a household there may be an increased likelihood that some other form of family violence is also occurring (5), and that any children present may also be at increased risk of abuse. (6)
- Acts of animal abuse may in some circumstances be used to coerce, control and intimidate women and children to remain in, or be silent about, their abusive situation (7/8). The threat or actual abuse of a pet can prevent women leaving situations of domestic violence. (9)
- Sustained childhood cruelty to animals has been linked to an increased likelihood of violent offending behaviour against humans in adulthood. (10)

- Where an animal has been abused there may in some circumstances be an increased likelihood that the adults and children in the household will have been bitten or attacked by the abused pet. (11)
- If a child exhibits extreme aggressive or sexualised behaviour toward animals this may in some cases be associated with later abuse of other children or vulnerable adults unless the behaviour is recognised and treated. (12/13)

From these and other studies it appears that animal abuse can be a part of a constellation of family violence, which can include child abuse and domestic violence. However, this does not imply that children who are cruel to animals necessarily go on to be violent adults and adults who harm animals are not necessarily also violent to their partners and/or children. Investigation and/or assessment are key to determining whether there are any links between these factors and the possible risks to the safety and welfare of children, adults and animals.

### Why is this issue important?

Abuse to children, vulnerable adults or animals can have damaging and devastating effects for both the victims, their families and wider society. Policy and practice based on knowledge of the links may enable professionals to intervene earlier in order to detect or prevent abuse to children, vulnerable adults and/or animals.

In order to achieve this it is essential that arrangements for co-operation and communication between the relevant statutory and voluntary organisations are developed or enhanced. Traditionally organisations that work with children or animals have been quite separate in the UK.

“The relationship of a child and its family to its family pets will tell you a great deal and should be included in any assessment of need”.

## How can knowledge of the possible links be used in day to day practice?

Here are some examples:

### **For professionals working with children and families**

- Incorporate questions and be observant about the care and treatment of family pets in assessments of children and their families. Research indicates that most agencies do not routinely include cruelty to animals as part of their assessment (14). Such information may provide useful data about family functioning and/or violence within the household. A questionnaire which professionals may find useful is available as an aid to the assessment process. (15)
- Incorporate questions about the behaviour of children or young people towards animals within assessments of children or young people who are harming others.
- Safety planning with victims of domestic violence should include planning for the safety of any children and animals in the household.
- While not making any assumptions, consider the possibility that children who are repeatedly harming animals may have been abused themselves or may be living in a climate of violence.
- Seek advice from the appropriate authorities (as listed within this leaflet) if animal abuse is apparent within a household.

- Raise awareness of this issue within local networks and projects as appropriate, for example, within Area Child Protection Committees/Local Children Safeguarding Boards and Domestic Violence Fora – in order to consider the implications for policy and practice including information sharing.
- Consider the potential therapeutic aspects of pet ownership/care for children who have experienced abuse or loss in their lives. (16)

### **For professionals working with animals**

- Report concerns about child abuse to an appropriate authority as listed in this leaflet and follow the guidance according to your professional body. You may also seek advice from an appropriate authority listed in the leaflet if you are unsure what to do or have queries.
- Discuss your concerns about animal abuse with your line manager or a senior colleague.
- Report suspected animal abuse to the appropriate animal protection organisation or the police, according to the advice of your professional body (e.g. Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons ‘Guide to Professional Conduct’) and the policy of your practice/organisation.
- Raise awareness of the possible links within local networks or associations in order to explore the implications for policy and working practices including information sharing.



## How are the links being taken into account within the UK?

Some practical examples of how the links are being acted upon in the UK are:

- Protocols for information sharing (known as cross-reporting) between the police, child and animal protection organisations are in operation in some areas; for example, in Tayside, Scotland.
- Conferences and seminars for professionals working with children or animals have been held in England and Scotland to explore the possible links and the potential implications for practice. (17)
- A research study concerning the identification of animal abuse has been completed (18); veterinary students are learning about its identification and the links with child abuse and other forms of family violence.
- Pet fostering schemes have been established in some areas, for example, 'Paws For Kids', to enable victims of domestic violence to leave home without fear of their animals being harmed.
- A research project in the North of England is underway, funded by NSPCC.
- A multi-agency group was formed in 2002, known as 'The Links Group'. Its aim is to raise awareness of the links and act as a network for the exchange of ideas and developments.

## What should I do if I suspect abuse is happening to children or animals?

Professionals may have concerns that abuse is happening to children and/or animals. In such circumstances it is best to discuss such concerns with an appropriate authority that can make further inquiries if it is thought necessary. Failure to do so may put a child and/or animal at risk of further harm.

### Can I share my concerns?

Yes. Professionals working with children or animals should ensure they are familiar with their professional and/or agency's protocols or procedures governing the disclosure of personal information to another agency in cases where abuse to children or animals is suspected.

It can seem daunting to report concerns to the appropriate authority. Fear of 'getting it wrong' or a need to maintain client confidentiality are factors which can affect our judgement. However, personal information can be disclosed lawfully and fairly if there is serious concern about the safety of a child or an animal. As professionals we may only have one small piece of information. However, when this is added to others a fuller picture emerges which may indicate that risks of abuse to children, animals or both are high - hence the importance of sharing concerns with the relevant authority. Harming children or animals are potentially prosecutable offences in the UK.

“As a new veterinary graduate I saw a client hit her child on the face. I didn’t know whom to contact so I did nothing. This has haunted me for 20 years”.



“Daddy was always drunk and angry. He used to kick the cat and hit mummy. He scares me”.

## Concerns about child abuse can be reported to:

### Children’s Social Services

Local authority social services departments (in England and Wales), or social work departments\* (in Scotland), or health and social service trusts (in Northern Ireland), have a responsibility to take action to protect children and promote their welfare. They can arrange for families to receive support. They also have a duty to inquire into concerns when a child may have been abused or may be at risk of abuse.

Their details are available in the telephone directory under the name of the local authority/council/board/social services department. Details are also available from local libraries, citizens advice bureaux and telephone helplines.

### NSPCC Child Protection Helplines

The NSPCC Child Protection Helpline is a free 24-hour service that provides counselling, information and advice to anyone concerned about a child at risk of abuse. You can choose whether or not to identify yourself. You can call any time on **0808 800 5000** or textphone, for people who are deaf or hard of hearing, on **0800 056 0566**.

Alternatively call:

**NSPCC Asian Child Protection Helpline**  
(Mon-Fri 11am-7pm)  
0800 096 7719

**NSPCC Cymru/Wales Child Protection Helpline**  
(Mon-Fri 10am-6pm) 0808 100 2524



Concerns about animal abuse can be reported to:

**Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA)**

Tel 0870 5555 999  
(24 hour line covering England and Wales)

**Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SSPCA)**

Tel: 0870 7377 722

**Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (USPCA)**

Tel: 08000 280010  
(24 hour line covering Northern Ireland)

**Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ISPCA)**

Tel: 003531 4977874  
(covering The Republic of Ireland)

Concerns about child abuse, animal abuse and domestic violence:

**Police**

In an emergency, call the police on 999.  
Otherwise contact your local station.

Advice concerning domestic violence:

If you, or somebody you know is experiencing (or has experienced) physical, emotional, or sexual violence in the home you can obtain support, help and information from:

**Northern Ireland Women's Aid Federation**  
(24 hours)

Tel: 028 9033 1818

**Scottish Women's Aid** (10am - 4pm)

Tel: 0131 475 2372

**Welsh Women's Aid**

Cardiff – Tel: 029 2039 0874

Aberystwyth – Tel: 01970 612748

Rhyl – Tel: 01745 334767

**Republic of Ireland National Network of Women's Refuges and Support Services**

Tel: 003539 0279078

**National Domestic Violence Helpline**

(24 hours)

Tel: 0808 200 0247

Additionally the following websites may be useful to you:

**CHILDREN 1<sup>ST</sup>** [www.children1st.org.uk](http://www.children1st.org.uk)

**Dogs Trust** (Pet fostering) [www.dogstrusthopeproject.org.uk](http://www.dogstrusthopeproject.org.uk)

**NSPCC inform** [www.nspcc.org.uk/inform](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/inform)

**Women's Aid Federation** [www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk)

**RSPCA** [www.rspca.org.uk](http://www.rspca.org.uk)

**RCVS** [www.rcvs.org.uk](http://www.rcvs.org.uk)

**PDSA** [www.pdsa.org.uk](http://www.pdsa.org.uk)

**Refuge** [www.refuge.org.uk](http://www.refuge.org.uk)

**SSPCA** [www.scottishspca.org/campaigns/firststrikescotland](http://www.scottishspca.org/campaigns/firststrikescotland)

**Paws for Kids** (Pet fostering) [www.pawsforkids.org.uk](http://www.pawsforkids.org.uk)

“My ex-partner threatened to kill all our animals if we left... He beat my son’s dog in a rage, she was only trying to protect us. I tried to stop him so he beat me instead”.

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"The kiddie next door often looks dirty and has sores on his face. He gets left alone in the evenings. The dog is usually tied up in the backyard; he looks scrawny and I've seen him being beaten with a chain".

"Animals and children have one thing in common - they're both easy to hurt. Maltreatment of animals in a family can sound a warning bell that children are also at risk. We need to recognise the links".



This leaflet is available to download in pdf format from [www.nspcc.org.uk/inform](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/inform)

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Weston House, 42 Curtain Road  
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Weston House 42 Curtain Road London EC2A 3NH

Tel: 020 7825 2500 Fax: 020 7825 2525

Email: [publications@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:publications@nspcc.org.uk) Web: [www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)

Photography by Paul Close - Child and dog models have been used in the photography  
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