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Lisa Anne Zilney
Montclair State University, zilneyl@montclair.edu

Christina Risley-Curtiss
Arizona State University, risley.curtiss@asu.edu

Rebecca Hornung
Arizona State University

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Animal-Human Relationships in Child Protective Services: Getting a Baseline

Christina Risley-Curtiss
Arizona State University

Lisa Anne Zilney
Montclair State University

Rebecca Hornung
Arizona State University

Inclusion of certain aspects of animal-human relationships (AHR), such as animal abuse and animal-assisted interventions, can enhance child welfare practice and there are resources available to promote such inclusion. However, there is little knowledge of whether this is being accomplished. This study sought to fill this gap by conducting a national survey of state public child welfare agencies to examine AHR in child protective services practice, their assessment tools, and cross-reporting policies.

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In America, 63% of households have companion animals (American Pet Products Association [APPA], 2007), and more than 70% of U.S. households with minor children have companion animals (APPA, 2006), thus making child protective services (CPS) workers likely to encounter families with animals. Operating from a strengths-, ecological-, and/or family-centered perspective suggests that the presence of companion animals, and their meaning for relevant family members, should be taken into consideration in doing professional CPS work. Animal and child welfare experts have advocated for the inclusion of animals, especially assessment for animal abuse, in child welfare practice (e.g., Arkow, 2007; Boat, 1999; Garbarino, 1999; Risley-Curtiss, 2009; Zilney & Zilney, 2005), and guidelines for doing so have been developed (see Arkow, 2003; Randour & Davidson, 2008). Currently the extent of this integration is unknown. This study's purpose was to examine the extent that animal-human relationships (AHR) are included in CPS practice by surveying state public child welfare agencies regarding (1) inquiry of animals in the home; (2) assessment for animal abuse; (3) knowledge of the co-occurrence of animal abuse, child maltreatment, and intimate partner violence (IPV); (4) the existence of cross-reporting of abuse; and (5) information on animal-assisted interventions (AAIs) in the training of CPS workers, their assessment tools, and policies.

Literature Review

Animals as Family

Popular media polls, as well academic research, show that the overwhelming majority of humans with companion animals consider them family members. For example, in a study by Risley-Curtiss, Holley, and Wolf (2006) more than 97% of participants said a "pet is a member of my family" (p. 262). Through these familial relationships, companion animals often become sources of social support and can reduce reactivity to stressful situations (Allen, Blascovich, & Mendes, 2002). Since companion animals seem to be sensitive to family moods they may also mirror family tension and critical situations (Cain,



1983; Levinson, 1997), which is potentially relevant in terms of serving as a possible indicator for social workers conducting in-home assessments. Children are especially drawn to animals, and they report confiding their secrets, fears, and angers to their pets (Melson, 2001), with abused children more likely to do so than nonabused children (Robin, ten Bensel, Quigley, & Anderson, 1984). For many children in chaotic homes with interparental conflict, companion animals may be their only friends and may help buffer against maladjustment (Risley-Curtiss, Holley, Cruickshank, Porcelli, Rhoads, Bacchus, Nyakoe, & Murphy, 2006; Strand, 2004). Because animals reflect family functioning, it is possible that animal behavior may serve as a potential indicator for CPS workers to explore family issues as they conduct assessments.

Animal Abuse and Family Violence

One disadvantage of being considered family is that animals are also victims of family violence. A growing body of research supports a correlation between animal abuse and other forms of family violence. In two studies of IPV clients, Quinlisk (1999) found that of those with companion animals, 79% and 72% said there was animal abuse present, including kicking, punching, mutilation, and killing. More than two-thirds of 100 women seeking safety in domestic violence (DV) shelters reported their companion animals being threatened or killed by their partner (Ascione, 2005). In another study of 427 abused women across 11 geographically dispersed U.S. cities, threat or actual abuse of an animal was one of five partner characteristics that was statistically significant when compared to a control group of nonabused women (Walton-Moss, Manganello, Frye, & Campbell, 2005).

Merz-Perez and Heide (2004) suggest that perpetuating cruelty to animals can be an indicator of those who are at personal risk of being a victim of violence. For instance, children who have been physically or sexually abused are more likely than nonabused children to abuse animals (Ascione, 2005). DeViney, Dickert, and Lockwood (1983) found that in a study of 53 child-abusing families, animal abuse/neglect had occurred in 60% of the families; in 26% of the



families, children had abused their companion animals. In 88% of the families in which physical abuse was substantiated, animal abuse was also found. This was compared to animal abuse in 34% of families with no physical abuse.

The most recent research suggests that witnessing or perpetrating animal abuse as a child may be “a red flag indicative of family violence in the home” (DeGue & DiLillo, 2009, p. 1036).

In a sample of 860 college students, researchers examined the co-occurrence of either witnessing or perpetrating animal abuse, child abuse, and exposure to IPV, as well as the occurrence of animal abuse by children exposed to family violence. Almost 50% of the participants reported exposure to at least one form of family violence as a child and almost 23% reported exposure to animal abuse. In examining the overlap between the two, the findings suggest that animal abuse may turn out to be “a more reliable marker for other forms of family violence than vice versa” (DeGue & DiLillo, 2009, p. 1050). Thus, the discovery of animal abuse in a home would suggest that CPS workers need to assess for child maltreatment and IPV to obtain a comprehensive picture of the family.

Animal-Assisted Interventions

Because of the powerful connections that humans can have with animals, animals may also be positive adjuncts in treatment of abused children. Often referred to as “pet therapy,” AAI has many different definitions and labels. AAI includes Delta Society’s defined animal-assisted activities (AAAs) and animal-assisted therapy (AAT). AAAs provide opportunities for enriching quality of life through recreational, educational, motivational, and/or therapeutic benefits. AAAs do not include specific treatment goals and content is spontaneous, such as animals visiting patients in hospitals.

AAT, on the other hand, is goal-directed and managed by a health/human service professional. It has specific measurable intervention goals and objectives for individual clients and is delivered by or under the direction of a professional within their scope of practice (Kruger & Serpell, 2006). Levinson (1997) was the first professional clinician in the United States to “formally introduce and document



the way that companion animals could hasten the development of rapport between therapist and patient thereby increasing the likelihood of patient motivation” (p. vii). Levinson (1997) published his seminal book *Pet-Oriented Child Psychotherapy* in 1969 describing how the inclusion of animals could be helpful in a variety of therapeutic settings (e.g., in assessment and family therapy). While rigorous research on AAT is still in its infancy, there is evidence that the presence of animals in therapy can accelerate the development of rapport and meaningful interactions between the client and therapist (Kruger & Serpell, 2006). Practice wisdom and anecdotal evidence also suggest that animals can enhance therapeutic environments such as residential treatment facilities and foster homes. These are all factors that could potentially benefit the treatment of maltreated children and their caregivers.

Animals and Public Child Welfare

Animal and child protection have historic connections dating to the late 1800s when animal and child rescue/abuse programs often resided within the same humane agency (Unti, 2008). Formed in 1877, the American Humane Association (AHA) houses both child and animal welfare divisions and recently added a third division on animal-human interactions devoted to bridging the other two (Arkow, 1999). Over time, however, with the exception of the AHA, attention to both issues faded and when interest resumed in the latter 1900s it did so, for the most part, under separate agencies, professions, and funding sources.

While child welfare practice could benefit from incorporating many aspects of AHR (Arkow, 2007; Loar & Colman, 2004; Risley-Curtiss, 2009), the most commonly discussed relationship is animal abuse and its connections to child maltreatment and DV (e.g., Boat, Loar, & Phillips, 2008; Hall, 1999; Humphrey, 2002; Silverstein, Ascione, & Kaufmann, 2004). The Latham Foundation, the AHA, and the Humane Society (HS) of the United States are three organizations that have long promoted interdisciplinary collaboration between animal welfare, child welfare, and DV professionals. The AHA held two invitational national conferences in the early 1990s





that united leaders in CPS, animal welfare, and family violence (Arkow, 1999). In 1995, the Latham Foundation published a guide to multidisciplinary interventions for child and animal protection and DV agencies and revised this guide in 2003 (Arkow, 2003). Most recently Randour and Davidson (2008), in cooperation with the AHA and several other organizations, published and distributed *A Common Bond: Maltreated Children and Animals in the Home—Guidelines for Practice and Policy*. This guide provides child welfare agencies with specific recommendations for including questions about the care and treatment of animals; treating children who have themselves abused or been exposed to animal abuse; including AAI in the treatment of maltreated children; and modifying law and policy to include the co-occurrence of animal abuse and other forms of family violence.

Despite these efforts there is limited research or information on child welfare practice and animal abuse. Zilney and Zilney (2005) conducted a study of cross-reporting between child welfare workers and HS workers in Canada. Both groups were specifically trained in cross-reporting using checklists designed for each agency and then followed for one year. During that time Family and Children's Services (FCS) investigators completed 747 checklists where animals were present, noted concerns regarding animals' well-being or behavior in 157 cases (21%), and reported only 16 cases (1.6%) to the HS. HS workers completed 94 checklists where children were present and made 10 (10.6%) referrals to FCS. The authors noted that a number of FCS workers thought cross-reporting was unimportant and were resistant to animal welfare concerns. They also noted that, in general, where supervisors supported the project, so did the caseworkers, and vice versa.

In another study where animal abuse is addressed within child welfare, Montminy-Danna (2007) conducted a series of surveys with family service and intake workers and juvenile probation officers employed by child welfare agencies. A five-question survey was sent to 500 workers. Of the 111 that were usable, 25 workers (22.5%) reported they had experience with cases involving animal abuse in the previous year, and 22 of these documented the abuse in the record.





The workers reported that because there were no laws or policies that mandated reporting animal cruelty, there were no requirements to ask about animal abuse.

Related research suggests that even if practitioners are aware of animal issues, they are not necessarily inquiring about these concerns. In a study of 203 psychologists, 94% believed animal abuse to be connected to other human behavioral disturbances, but only 14% assessed for such abuse (Nelson, 2002). A recent national study by Risley-Curtiss (2010) of 1,649 social work practitioners found that of those working in the area of children and families, 81% had read or heard about the link between child and animal abuse, 67.7% about DV and animal abuse, 97.6% about the positive impact of animals on adults, and 91.1% about the positive impact of animals on children. Despite this, 70.2% failed to include questions about animals in their intake assessments. Even fewer (19.4%) included animals as part of their interventions (i.e., referring to or doing AAIs). When practitioners did ask about animals, only 23% inquired about the presence of companion animals, and even fewer (17%) asked if anyone in the family had hurt an animal. Despite their exposure to information on AHR that would suggest direct relevance to child welfare work, practitioners failed to integrate this knowledge into practice.

Theoretical Models

Several theoretical models of practice that undergird human service practice support the inclusion of AHR in CPS work. These include ecological-systems theory, family-centered practice, and the strengths perspective (Arkow, 2007; Risley-Curtiss, 2009). Ecological-systems and family-centered approaches suggest viewing children and their families within the context of their environments and in constant reciprocal interaction with significant others. Given that animals are part of many clients' ecologies, asking about animals in the course of doing assessments is certainly appropriate. From a strengths perspective, positive AHR can be considered protective factors for children and parents in violent homes, and the potential for healing through relationships with animals can be incorporated through AAI.



Methodology

Participants and Procedure

Public child welfare agencies in all 50 states and the District of Columbia were invited to participate in a 23-item survey on the inclusion of AHR in CPS. Initially, master's of social work (MSW) students in their child welfare summer field placement attempted to identify and contact by phone or e-mail the person most suited to complete the survey, typically either the director of training for CPS or more often the staff member in charge of CPS core/preservice training. Follow-up calls and e-mails to ensure the highest response rate were done following the completion of the students' summer placement by the authors. Surveys were completed online via e-mail or over the phone. Approval had previously been obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board.

Measures and Analyses

The survey was structured using primarily close-ended questions. Of the questions, 10 logistical/demographic questions inquired as to who does the training (own agency staff, university staff, other) and the length of the core/preservice training in weeks. The remaining 13 questions asked about the inclusion of AHR in the core training. The survey asked respondents if in the CPS core training, information was provided regarding (1) the presence of animals in the home, (2) the types of relationships family members have with animals, (3) recognizing and assessing for animal abuse, (4) cross-reporting animal abuse, (5) the co-occurrence of animal abuse and child maltreatment, (6) the co-occurrence of animal abuse and DV, and (7) understanding the benefits of AAI (e.g., pet therapy). Additional survey items addressed the inclusion of questions related to animal abuse in safety and risk assessment tools, whether the agency participates in cross-reporting of animal abuse and child maltreatment, whether there are policies in place regarding cross-reporting, and whether AAI included in the services to families. Finally, respondents were asked if any of these topics were included in advanced training for CPS workers. Frequencies and percentages are used to report the results.



Results

The Sample

The District of Columbia and 45 states (referred to as “states”) chose to participate in the survey, representing a 90% response rate. Of these, 25 are totally state administered, 12 are locally administered/state supervised, and 9 are state administered/locally supervised. Of the states, 36 do not require CPS workers to have bachelor’s of social work (BSWs) or MSWs, 7 require a minimum of a BSW, 1 requires an MSW, 1 state has some jurisdictions that require a BSW and some that do not, and 1 state did not provide this information. Regarding the delivery of training, states are fairly equally divided with 16 using their own agency staff, 14 using university contract staff, and 16 using a combination of their agency staff, university contract staff, or some other staff. The length of core/preservice training ranged from 8 days to 16 weeks.

Information on AHR in Core Training

Three questions asked if core training content included asking whether families have animals, assessing for the types of relationships that families have with their animals, and ways for CPS workers to recognize and assess for animal abuse. Slightly more than a quarter of the states (12 of 46) provide training for CPS staff to inquire about whether families have animals. Almost 20% (9 of 46) include information on assessing the types of relationships family members have with animals, and a little more than 17% (8 of 46) include information about recognizing and assessing animal abuse. Two questions asked if core training included information about the co-occurrence of animal abuse and child maltreatment or DV. Almost 37% (17) of participating states include information on both the co-occurrence of animal abuse with child maltreatment and DV in their core training. Five states did not know if they included this information.

Safety and Risk Assessment Protocols

Two questions asked if there were questions about animal abuse in state safety assessment and risk assessment protocols. The majority of states (76% and 80% respectively) do not include such questions





in their safety or risk assessment protocols. Four states do include them in safety protocols and one state includes them in both safety and risk assessment protocols. Seven respondents did not know if they were included in safety protocols and six did not know if they were in their risk assessment tools.

Cross-Reporting

Three questions asked about cross-reporting of animal and child abuse: (1) Does it occur in their agency? (2) Were there specific policies related to cross-reporting? (3) Did core training include information on cross-reporting? Of states, 26% (12 of 46) reported that some cross-reporting occurs, 6.5% (3 of 46) states reported having some sort of policy in place, and 11% (6 of 46) include information on cross-reporting in training.

Animal-Assisted Interventions

Two questions asked about the positive inclusion of animals in CPS services and training: (1) Were AAIs included in services provided to CPS children? (2) Did core training include any information on the benefits of AAI? Of the respondents, 24% (11 of 46) reported the inclusion of AAIs provided to CPS children; eight did not know if this information was provided. Three states included information on the benefits of AAI in their training; one respondent did not know.

Advanced Training

Finally, based on the idea that these topics might not be included in core training but in later trainings, participants were asked if any of the aforementioned topics might be provided for CPS workers in advanced training. A little over 17% (8 of 46) said some of the information was provided in advanced training, 80% (37 of 46) responded that it was not, and one respondent did not know.

Discussion and Implications

It is important to note that because of the current economic crisis and cuts in state agency budgets that have impacted staff size and





workload, this survey was designed to be quick and easy to complete. Thus, the authors did not probe for details on content or amount of training regarding each topic. Also, since a number of states are locally administered, state trainers may not be aware of all that is included in the CPS training and procedures; this may also be true for state-administered agencies. Given this lack of detailed knowledge, as well as the personal experiences of the authors, it is suspected that more is being done in the area of AHR in public child welfare work than is revealed by these results. Nonetheless, this is the first national survey of its kind of which the authors are aware; thus, it provides a baseline of information regarding the integration of AHR into public child welfare work and therefore makes a significant contribution to the literature.

While it is apparent that child welfare agencies have more to do in integrating AHR into their practice, the baseline shows some promising results: 37% of states include information on the co-occurrence of different forms of family violence in core training for new CPS workers, over 25% of states train workers to ask if families have animals, and 20% train CPS workers to ask about the types of relationships families have with their animals. Additionally, 26% of states indicate some cross-reporting of animal abuse and 24% include AAI in services to children and families. This is a noteworthy beginning.

There were some interesting findings with regard to cross-reporting animal abuse. Of all 50 states, 11 have laws that *allow* cross-reporting of animal abuse by CPS workers and 6 *require* that CPS workers report animal abuse (Animal Law Coalition, 2009). Of the 11 states that allow cross-reporting, 9 participated in this study. Four of the six states that mandate CPS workers to report animal abuse participated in the study but only two (50%) of them indicated in the survey that they participated in cross-reporting, and only one had policies and training regarding cross-reporting. Three of five states whose laws say they may or shall report animal abuse indicated doing so, two states had policies regarding cross-reporting, and one state reported having training on cross-reporting, while one state respondent did not know. Interestingly, seven states that do not have laws regarding CPS cross-reporting animal abuse indicate that it is done





on a local basis and/or by individual workers of their own accord. Of those states, one included training on cross-reporting, five states had no policies, and two state respondents did not know if there were policies regarding cross-reporting. It appears that, in this sample, more states that do not have cross-reporting laws may engage in cross-reporting than states that do have such laws.

The finding that only five states include questions about animal abuse in their safety and risk assessment protocols suggests that most CPS workers who discover animal abuse do so by chance rather than through formal intake or assessment protocols. This is not surprising given that most states use standardized instruments for these assessments. Once an instrument is developed, especially by an outside agency, it can be difficult and expensive to change. In addition, the research on animal abuse as a risk factor for other forms of family violence is limited by small sample sizes and unclear definitions. The most current research is correcting for these limitations and support for the co-occurrence of animal abuse with other forms of family violence is substantial. It is recommended that as safety and risk assessment protocols are reviewed and revised that animal abuse be included to garner the most comprehensive view of family safety. Additionally, respondents discussed some of the barriers to including AHR in CPS. These included a lack of knowledge of AHR, time and staff, administrative initiated direction, and cross-reporting policy on the state level.

Future Considerations

A continuing barrier not mentioned in the survey is the issue of humancentric bias in many human service fields, among both staff and academics (Ascione, 2005; Melson, 2001; Risley-Curtiss, 2010; Wolf, 2000). This bias often takes the form of dismissing animals and their importance in the lives of humans despite a large interdisciplinary body of research demonstrating evidence to the contrary. More than 20 years ago, the journal *Social Work* published a review of the growing area of human-animal bonding and its implications for social work practice (Netting, Wilson, & New, 1987), yet a journal editor recently told one of the authors that a discussion of the role of





animals in public child welfare was “unconventional.” One does not have to personally value companion animals to acknowledge that others may and that exploring those relationships can add much to our understanding and treatment of children and families. Recognition that animals play a significant role in the lives of many people needs further attention in social work. This recognition is being conveyed to new scholars as growth in AHR content and courses continues in schools of social work and other human service disciplines. Hopefully this will translate into formalizing an increased openness to implementing AHR work into practice. For now, participation in this survey appeared to engender interest in integrating AHR into child protection work and the authors advocate strongly that when changes are made, the importance of animals and the nexus of animal cruelty and family violence for CPS be considered.

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Risley-Curtiss, Zilney, and Hornung

Child Welfare

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Child Welfare

Vol. 89, No. 4

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