

Self-Study Course

Animal Cruelty and Children 3.0 Hours Training Credit

July 2004

This self-study is based on the following sources:

Cruelty to Animals and Interpersonal Violence: Readings in Research and Application
Edited by Randall Lockwood and Frank R. Ascione, Purdue University Press, 1998.

Firesetting Children Risk Assessment and Treatment: George Sakehiem and Elizabeth Osborn, Child Welfare League of America, 1994.

Animal Abuse and Developmental Psychopathology: Recent Research, Programmatic and Therapeutic Issues and Challenges for the Future By Frank Ascione, Michael Kaufmann, and Susan Brooks in Handbook on Animal Assisted Therapy, 2000.

The American Human Association, First Strike Campaign. 2100 L. Street, NW Washington, DC 20037. Website at <http://www.hsus.org/>

Notes from Charter North Training on “Cruelty to Animals and Interpersonal Violence” Nov. 4, 1999 with Frank Ascione in Anchorage



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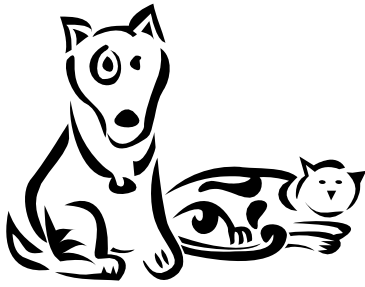
FOSTER PARENT COMPETENCIES

Animal Cruelty and Children Self Study Course (3.0 Hours)

This self-study module addresses the following competencies

- 1.0 Foster parent will know what is meant by cruelty to animals and understand the general dynamics of why children might be cruel to animals**

- 2.0 Foster parent will know several strategies to evaluate and address a child's cruelty to animals including referral for counseling and humane education.**



Animal Cruelty And Children

Part One: *Understanding Cruelty to Animals*

Children in our care can be touched by cruelty to animals in several ways. They may have witnessed cruelty to animals, either by a parent or adult who was hurting them, or as part of cruelty toward a parent, such as in the case of domestic violence. Children, themselves may also be perpetrators of violence and cruelty toward animals. What is a foster parent to think when a child in his or her care is cruel to the cat, or kicks a dog, or does physical harm to a farm pet? If a child shows this behavior, does it mean that he will grow up to be an abuser? How should the system intervene?

Definition of Animal Cruelty

For purposes of this self-study, we will focus on the generally accepted definition that animal cruelty *includes socially unacceptable behavior that intentionally causes unnecessary pain, suffering or distress to and/or the death of an animal.* Animal cruelty will be considered those acts that violate the social norm and are intentionally (not accidentally) inflicted.

This definition is important to remember as we try to determine how to deal with situations where children mistreat animals. Most children seem to go through a period where they do not understand fully what they are doing and may pull the cat's tail or poke the dog with a stick to make him yelp. Is this serious behavior? For most children, these are signs of not knowing your own strength and of testing your power over another animals. For some children, it is a result of being abused themselves and transferring feelings of rage and hurt to a less powerful animal. These are not necessarily precursors to violent behavior as an adult. Many children with mild conduct disorders show abnormal behaviors during adolescent, but discontinue these in adulthood. But animal cruelty, especially when seen with other indicators, may also be a sign that a child is heading down a disturbing path. It is critical that adults intervene whenever any child shows cruel behavior toward animals. Anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote, "One of the most dangerous things that can happen to a child is to kill or torture an animal and get away with it." Especially for our children who carry with them the experience of abuse and disrupted attachments, animal cruelty should be consistently confronted and addressed.

“Cruelty to animals is defined as socially unacceptable behavior that intentionally causes unnecessary pain, suffering, or distress to and/or the death of an animal.”

-- Frank Ascione. Ph.D.

Examples of Animal Cruelty

Animal cruelty can show in many ways, including some examples taken from various newspaper and research reports:

- A 13-year-old put a firecracker in the rectum of a cat.
- A 19-year-old tied the tails of two cats together and watched them fight to the death.
- A violent father shot a litter of newborn kittens in front of his young son who wanted to keep them.
- Three boys doused a tiny dog with gasoline and set it on fire.
- Two 10-year-old boys killed a cat by inflicting blunt-force injuries.
- A 13-year-old boy shot a paintball gun at a neighbor's dog, injuring the animal
- An abusive husband did not let his wife let their dog in the house while the dog was having difficulty giving birth. The dog was forced to stay outside during a bitterly cold winter. She and her puppies froze to death.
- A foster family had a three-legged dog. A boy in their care would trip up the dog and make him fall over whenever he thought no one else was looking.
- An abused woman and her 2-year-old child were forced to watch her abusive husband skin a live rabbit in front of them as a warning what he would do if she ever try to leave him
- A veterinarian reported a case of sexually transmitted disease in a dog he was treating. It was later discovered that the owner of the dog was sexually abusing both his dog and his two daughters, who also had contracted venereal disease

ANIMAL ABUSE

Animals can be abused or hurt in the same ways that we define child abuse. These include:

Physical violence

Neglect

Emotional or verbal abuse

Sexual abuse or assault

How Animal Cruelty Fits on the Continuum of Interpersonal Violence

As you can see from the above examples, animal abuse can be found in all relationships. Animals can be abused in every way a child can. A pet can be physically, sexually, or emotionally abused or can be neglected. Researchers have found a connection between the occurrence of animal cruelty in a family and the occurrence of domestic violence and child abuse. Whenever domestic violence, pet abuse or child abuse occurs in a family, there is a higher chance that the other two will also be present.

Relationship to Domestic Violence

Pets can be a target of abuse by an abuser as a way to intimidate or threaten a victim or a child. In one study conducted at a Utah Women's shelter, 71% of the women with pets reported that their male partner had threatened to hurt or kill one of their pets. Actual harm or killing was reported by 57% of the women. In a Canadian study, 61% of 39 women who had been abused by their partners and were living in women's shelters in two communities said their pets had either been abused or killed by their partners. 48% said concern for the safety of their pets prevented them from leaving their abusive home sooner.

Three surveys of women's shelters in Wisconsin and Utah showed an average of 74% of women with pets reported that their animals had been threatened, injured or killed by their abuser. In a shelter study, one-third of the children of the women in shelter also exhibited signs of abusing pets. But an important part of the study showed that even more children (50%) tried to protect the animals from the abuser in the home. When children still show empathy and care for animals, the chance of helping them is improved.

Relationship To Child Abuse

- A study involved 57 families being treated for incidents of child abuse in New Jersey. Researchers found that in 88% of these families in the home, a pet had also been abused. In two-thirds of those cases, the abusive parent had injured or killed a pet. In the remainder, the child was the abuser. This abuse included beating, shooting, strangling, drowning and even disemboweling an animal.
- 83% of families in a British study with a history of animal abuse were identified by social service agencies as at risk for child abuse or neglect (Royal SPCA, Britain, 1981).
- 58% of sexual homicide perpetrators who were sexually abused as children recounted childhood animal cruelty (Dr. Patricia Schene "One By One Is Not the Only Way" *Advocate Fall/Winter 1993*).
- In another study, in homes where there was substantiated history of child abuse, 60% of the homes also had a history of maltreating pets. In homes that were found to be chronically cruel to their animals, 80% of homes had a mistreated child in their home.

Included in our definition of child abuse must be the deliberate exposure of children to cruelty to animals to frighten them. Anecdotally we know that animals have been abused by perpetrators 1) to frighten their partners; 2) as a threat of potential interpersonal attacks; and, 3) as a form of retaliation or punishment. This can be extremely traumatic to a child. Some children may witness animal abuse or threats of hurting pets as a way to keep quiet about sexual abuse. Others may witness abuse of animals as part of the coercion batterers use to keep women from leaving abusive situations.

Animal Cruelty as a Precursor to Future Violent Behavior

Researchers who study adult violent offenders have discovered a significant pattern of a history of childhood cruelty to animals. Cruelty to animals, especially when combined with incidents of firesetting and bullying, can be a warning signal of future violent behavior. *It is important to understand that all children who are cruel to animals do not grow up to be murderers!* But this

fact reminds us how important it is to take cruelty to animals seriously and not brush it off as a normal part of childhood.

- In one American study, 118 out of 135 criminals, including robbers and rapists, admitted that when they were children, they had burned, hanged and stabbed domestic animals.
- 78% of 63 people charged with animal cruelty had also been charged with violence or threats of violence against people (Jim McIsaac, Winnipeg Police Services).
- 152 criminal subjects reported 373 acts involving undue harm to animals. 60% reported at least one or more acts of childhood cruelty toward animals. 41% reported 1 - 2 cruelties, 11% admitted 3 - 4 cruel acts towards animals and 8% indicated 5 or more animal cruelties during childhood. 25% of aggressive criminals reported 5 or more childhood cruelties compared to less than 6% of moderate and nonaggressive criminals. 3/4 of all aggressive criminal subjects reported excessive and repeated child abuse. (Kellert and Felthous "Childhood Cruelty Toward Animals Among Criminals and Non-Criminals", *Human Relations* Volume 38, No. 12, PP. 1113 - 1129).

The presence of firesetting, enuresis, and bullying or aggressive behaviors toward others are clear warning signals of a child that is developing patterns of anti-social behaviors. Several research studies have shown that there seems to be a high percentage of absent fathers or fathers who are alcoholic and physically abusive among children who show of cruelty to animals and many of these children continue to show violent behaviors towards others as they grow older. If any of these signs are present, it is doubly important that intervention is sought.

R.K. Reseller, A.W. Burgess and J.E. Douglas in *Sexual Homicide, Patterns and Motives* (1968) write:

The early expression of cruelty toward both animals and humans, we believe, sets the stage for future abusive behavior in two ways. First, the early violent acts are reinforced, since the murderers either are able to express rage without experiencing negative consequences or are impervious to any prohibitions against these actions. Second, impulsive and erratic behavior discourages friendships. The failure to make friends compounds earlier isolation from family members and interferes with the ability to resolve conflicts, to develop positive empathy, and to control impulses. Furthermore, there is no challenge to the offenders' beliefs that they are entitled to act the way they do.

Animal Cruelty in Children: Normal or Deviant?

Many people believe pranks or acts of violence against animals are a natural stage of a child's development. Is this true? Current knowledge suggests that many children go through a period of innocent cruelty in which they may injure or kill small animals in the process of testing their boundaries. With guidance, most children learn to empathize with and understand an animal's capacity to feel pain. Unfortunately, some children develop a pattern of cruelty that as they age becomes more intense and destructive. So it is important to take all acts of cruelty toward animals seriously.

In an interview with the head of the American Human Society, Alan Brantley of the Federal Bureau of Investigation Behavior Science Unit was asked what were the warning signs in a child or adolescent who has been found to be cruel to animals. He answered this way:

You have to look at the quality of the act and at the frequency and severity. If a child kicks the dog when somebody's been aggressive toward him, that's one issue, but if it's a daily thing or if he has a pattern of tormenting and physically torturing the family dog or cat, that's another. I would look to see if the pattern is escalating. I look at any type of abuse of an animal as serious to begin with, unless I have other information that might explain it. It should not be dismissed. I've seen it too often develop into something more severe. Some types of abuse, for example, against insects, seem to be fundamentally different. Our society doesn't consider insects attractive or worthy of affection. But our pets are friendly and affectionate and they often symbolically represent the qualities and characteristics of human beings. Violence against them indicates violence that may well escalate into violence against humans.

Younger children may hurt animals out of ignorance. They may not be aware of how they are hurting an animal. Kids may be curious about what happens when you pull on the cat's tail or shoot arrows at the dogs. The key for the child who hurts animals out of ignorance, curiosity or being too young is quick, firm intervention and education by a parent or adult. Children need to learn early to respect animals and treat them well. If a child's hurting of animals is not interrupted, it runs the risk of continuing or increasing.

Parental Intervention When A Child Is Cruel To Animals As A Result Of Ignorance Or Age Should Include:

- Swift intervention by the parent
- Education about treating the animal
- Increasing empathy on the child's part for the animals



Why Might Child Hurt an Animal?

There may be many other reasons why a child might be cruel to animals. Frank Ascione has proposed several motivations for animal abuse by children that are either developmentally or environmentally related. These motivations include:

Curiosity/Exploration: Some children may be hurting animals or curious and not really understanding that they are hurting a child.

Peer Reinforcement: Some times kids are goaded into hurting an animal as part of peer pressure or a ritual to be accepted into a group, such as a gang.

Modification of Mood: Some children get a pleasurable response from hurting animals, and do it out of boredom. These kids get their “kicks” out of hurting animals and may experience an elevation in mood, similar to using drugs.

Fear/Coercion: Children may be forced into doing something to an animal by an adult or older sibling. Often these children are very confused and feel very guilty for what they have done.

Identification with the Aggressor: Some children who are physically or sexually abused identify with the person hurting them, and may in turn hurt a family pet in order to feel power. If the aggressor is hurting an animal, the child may also hurt the pet in order to gain approval or identification with the aggressor.

Post Traumatic Play: Children who have been abused or witnessed violence or trauma may in turn act out what they saw or act out their feelings on pets.

Not all of these motivations will lead to a lifelong pattern of animal cruelty. Animal abuse is rarely ever the only symptom of a child’s disturbance. Harming an animal is a sign that something is wrong. Effective intervention has to address these underlying issues if the causes are to stop. Frank Ascione says, “Animal cruelty is not a harmless venting of emotional in a healthy individual. It is a warning sign.”

Animal Cruelty and Its Relationship to Conduct Disorder

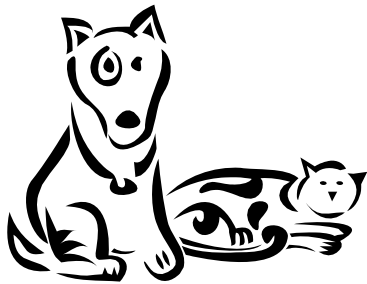
Children who are cruel to animals are more like children who are aggressive towards other people than like children who are destructive to property. For a child to abuse an animal, he must suppress his feelings of empathy because animals respond by showing fear, pleading, weeping and yelping in pain. For a child to be persistently cruel to animals is a warning sign of a pattern of violent and aggressive behavior with no remorse. Animal cruelty is a major characteristic of a possible diagnosis of *conduct disorder*.

Conduct disorder is a repetitive and persistent pattern of behavior in which the basic rights of others or major age appropriate societal norms or rules are violated. It is a diagnosis listed in the DSM IV and the behaviors considered under conduct disorders include aggressive conduct that causes or threatens physical harm to other people or animal, non aggressive conduct that causes property loss or damage, deceitful or theft, and serious violations of rules. Cruelty to animals is one of a list of behaviors that may contribute to a diagnosis of conduct disorder. Conduct disorders are of two types—child onset (meaning the behavior start prior to age 10) and adolescent onset (behaviors started after 10 years of age.) Especially lacking in children diagnosed with conduct disorders is little empathy and little concern for the feelings wishes and well being of others. If a child is diagnosed with conduct disorder, he needs to show signs in more than just the one category of animal abuse. Milder forms of conduct disorders tend to improve over time. More severe forms (those that require hospitalization or day hospital treatment) are more likely to be prolonged. Without treatment or

A conduct disorder is a repetitive and persistent pattern of behavior in which the basic rights of others or major age appropriate societal norms or rules are violated.

intervention, the severe forms can lead to illegal or criminal activity and may be a precursor to anti-social activity in adults. The younger the child when diagnosed, the higher the risk of anti-social personality disorders and substance related disorders developing during his or her lifetime.

Just because a child is cruel to animals does not mean he has a conduct disorder. But it is a major warning sign, especially when other destructive behaviors such as firesetting or bullying are also occurring. There seems to be a particular cluster of warning signals of severe disturbance in a child which is often referred to as “a behavioral triad.” Many violent criminals have a history that includes early cruelty to animals, firesetting and enuresis (or bedwetting beyond the normal developmental expectancy.) Another warning signal is the presence of bullying or aggression toward other people. When all of these behaviors are present in a child, it is imperative that we understand that something is desperately wrong for the child and he need intervention to help him deal with his problems and prevent future problems. This is especially important when a child has also experienced physical or sexual abuse, has a history of an absent or estranged father, or whose father is a violent alcoholic. These are all compounding factors, raising the risk that a child will also grow up to be violent.



Animal Cruelty And Children

Part Two: *Intervention with Children Who Hurt Animals*

What can foster homes do to address cruelty to animals? It is important that foster parents take both a proactive and reactive approach to behavior problems such as cruelty to animals. First, structure your household so provide supervision, rules and guidance to encourage children to do well. Then, if problems occur, intervene swiftly and firmly.

1. **Observe a child with animals and address issues as they arise.** You may or may not know if a child has a history of abusing animals. So observe all the children placed in your home. If you have pets or animals in your home, observe how a child interacts with animals. Is he fearful or loving or drawn to the animals? How does he hold the animals? Does he respond to your remarks “to be gentle”? When a child is angry with you, does he get angry and kick the dog? A foster parent may be the first to spot trouble, but to do so, *she needs to keep her eyes open!*
2. **House rules against damage or cruelty should include animals.** Every family should set up some basic house rules. House rules are guidelines meant to keep everyone safe in the family. Your rule of “No hitting” should also include “No harming of the pets or animals in the home.” Make this clear to children that part of the rule.

3. For children newly placed in your home or for children that have a history of hurting animals, **provide close supervision around pets** and other children. The presence of an adult can inhibit inappropriate behavior. When you observe a child hurting an animal, intervene each and every time. Talk to a child about what he did. Focus on establishing empathy for the animal.
4. **Seek counseling when pattern continues**, especially if there is the presence of other behaviors such as firesetting, enuresis, bullying, history of physical abuse, or alcohol abuse by a father figure.
5. **Document animal cruelty and get in child's file.** If this behavior becomes a pattern, it is a warning signal for possible future violent behavior. Children often move from placement to placement, so it is important to try to keep a record of such incidence. This can be as simple as writing up a letter or some notes and giving it to the social to read and put in the child's file.
6. **Don't let child think you value the pet more than him.** Deal with situations firmly and kindly. Avoid giving more value to the animal's well being than to the child. When you say "how dare you hurt my poor sweet dog!" you let the child know that you value your dog more than you value the child. It will never be okay to hurt animals, but children who are cruel to animals often are hurting badly inside. When you push a child way or seek only to punish him, you miss a chance to listen to how a child is feeling. You also give power and attention to the act of hurting the animal, so the child gets angry at you instead of looking at his action and may focus his energy at getting revenge instead of focusing on consequence. Sometimes after talking with a child about his behavior, a foster parent or probation office will give a consequence of helping in pet shelters or having a special duty of either feeding or walking a pet. These consequences can be helpful, but they demand good supervision to help a child learn skills of empathy and prevent future pet abuse.
7. It is again important to emphasize that animal abuse is a symptom of underlying disturbance. Throughout your care for a child, **emphasize the expression of feelings** (both good and bad) and especially the expression of feelings of anger and of caring and empathy. Point out how other people are feelings and how our actions impact other to promote empathy. Children with conduct disorders often interpret other's actions as being aggressive even when they are not (such as feeling a barking dog as yelling at him or a child who accidentally bumps into him at lunch time as trying to pick a fight.) These children need help in recognizing social cues and in understanding other people.

Humane Education With Children

Another approach to take with children who seem to be hurting animals out of curiosity, ignorance, or indifference is an approach called *humane education*. Humane education basically is providing opportunities to teach children to care about animals and to become more in empathetic touch of what they feel and what they need. Humane education can be taught in schools, but it is more effective when parents take the time to educate children about caring for animals. The message is about kindness, compassion, sharing, and responsibility, and it is as important a message for children who don't misuse animals as for those that do.



For young children, humane education may encompass debunking the many myths that surround animals (e.g., cats have nine lives), bite prevention lessons, and illustrating the similarities among the needs of all animals, including humans. For older children, humane education may also include the sense of responsibility we have towards pets in our care and relating how we treat animals to how they act towards us. Pets and animals can be used in many therapeutic and education ways to teach children about themselves and to teach care and responsibility.

Treatment for Children Who Show Animal Cruelty

How a child is treated for animal cruelty depends on age of child, severity of abuse, reasons for abuse, empathetic response in child, and other signs of distress or disturbance. Frank Ascione recommends that animal abuse by young people be addressed like any of the other serious symptoms of conduct disorder. Comprehensive and developmentally sensitive assessment is critical to help determine the context of the abuse, its seriousness, and the child's culpability. Certainly we would intervene with a child who is young and unaware that the way he plays with the cat is causing her pain differently than the adolescent who is dousing the cat with gas and trying to light it on fire.

Frank Ascione, a researcher specializing in the link between human violence and cruelty to animals, has devised an assessment for use with children which determines the motivation of the cruelty to animals by through a series of questions to children and their caretakers. The questions try to determine the severity of the abuse, the frequency, the duration, how recent the abuse was, the child's attempts to keep the abuse secret, whether the child acted alone, and how remorseful the child was about the abuse. (*The Cruelty to Animal Assessment Instrument* by Frank Ascione at Utah State University.) It can also be used with children who have witnessed the abuse of animals but did not participate to help determine the level of trauma to children. Sample questions include:

- *Sometimes kids and grownups treat pet animals in ways that are not good or in way that are mean. Can you remember a time when you were mean to a pet animal or hurt a pet animal?*
- *What sort of animals was it?*
- *What did you do that was mean?*
- *How many times did you do this?*
- *Can you think of a reason why you did this?*

- *What did the pet animal do?*
- *How did this make you feel?*
- *Did you tell anyone about what you did?*

Ascione also suggests intervening into child cruelty similar to program for dealing with childhood firesetting. Curiosity fires setters will often respond to educational intervention and stricter parent supervision. Children who are cruel to animals may similarly respond to humane education and increased supervision. Pathological fire setters require more intensive therapy looking at the psychological factors involved in continuing the behavior. Children who have a pattern of being cruel to animals, often show other behaviors as well.

CASE STUDY

Working directly with pets can be beneficial for a child to both help express feelings and to teach empathy for animals. In this case summary, Dr. Frank Ascione shares a story of his work with Calvin. The presenting issue was cruelty to animals, but his therapeutic work focused on dealing with Calvin's abandonment by his mother, his father's absence, and his internal rage against a world that didn't want him.

Dr. Ascione worked with a nine-year-old named Calvin for two years when he was referred after hitting a baby calf at the treatment ranch so hard it had a seizure. Calvin was admitted with a diagnosis of conduct disorder and chronic depression. He had suffered from early deprivation and neglect and his mother had a history of drug abuse. His father was in prison. He had a hard time with relationships and seemed angry and acting out most the time. He was verbally abusive to animals, cursing and talking how he wanted to kill or mutilate the animals. During the next year, Dr. Ascione moved from just walking around the farm with Calvin, allowing him to express his feelings and naming his rage to actually being in the same room with several animals. He was allowed to walk the ferret around the farm and to help feed the horses. Calvin seemed to attach to an orphaned and abandoned rooster, as if sensing some of his own abandonment issues. With another animal, a guinea pig named Erika, he was gradually able to see how his feelings of rage and tension would cause her to move away or how his feelings of acceptance and warmth would cause her to come closer.

During this time, Calvin had several relapses. One was during a visit to his foster mother where after he stomped a kitten to death. This was a week before his first social worker was to leave. His feelings of abandonment and rejection were being projected onto all of his relationships.

Over many more months, Dr. Ascione worked with Calvin to get him to verbalize his feelings of anger and rejection. As his outward expressions of anger increased, his aggression toward animals was noticeably decreasing. Dr. Ascione used animals to reflect the feelings that Calvin was feeling, thus developing more empathy between Calvin and the animals. He could no longer objectify them as just things to hurt. Toward the end of the therapy, a parrot named Peaches who he had grown fond of bit him on the finger. Calvin cried because he hurt, but did not try to harm Peaches.

How One Community Dealt with Animal Cruelty in Children

In Lexington, Kentucky, officials noticed an alarming increase in the number of reports of children being cruel to animals. A desire to reach these kids before more animals or people got hurt prompted the Lexington juvenile justice and humane society to join forces in a diversion program for children who are cruel to animals. Under the diversion new program, children are held accountable for their actions, and are given psychological treatment and education about animals. They might have to make a donation to an animal shelter or provide food for animals. They also might face other penalties, which vary from case to case. Children in the program also attend a two-hour workshop on proper treatment of animals. Officials with Youth Services, a juvenile justice agency, monitor each child for at least six months. A court worker will telephone the child every two weeks and will talk to parents to verify school attendance and participation in counseling.

MAIN POINTS OF THIS SELF-STUDY

Animal abuse is part of the continuum of domestic violence and child abuse. Where there is one, there is a higher chance of the other.

Cruelty to animal is rarely an isolated behavior. It is usually a symptom of other problems or disturbances.

Cruelty to animals falls on a continuum from ignorance and curiosity to a chronic pattern of violence. Cruelty to animals can also be a characteristic of a diagnosis of conduct disorder.

Cruelty to animals must be dealt swiftly and openly. Parents should not assume that the behavior is normal and the child will grow out of it.

Pets and animals can also be therapeutic and healing for children when children are taught compassion and empathy. Pets can provide a healing presence for children who have been abused or who feel lonely.

