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Listening to children's voices in relation to animal cruelty

This briefing accompanies the seventh in a series of reflective workshops organised by **caar** at the University of Edinburgh. It focuses on what we mean by cruelty, why we should engage with children directly, and how we might create the conditions most conducive to active listening. Drawing on findings from our recent qualitative research with children participating in the 'Animal Guardians' programme, we consider how best to engage with children who have harmed animals.

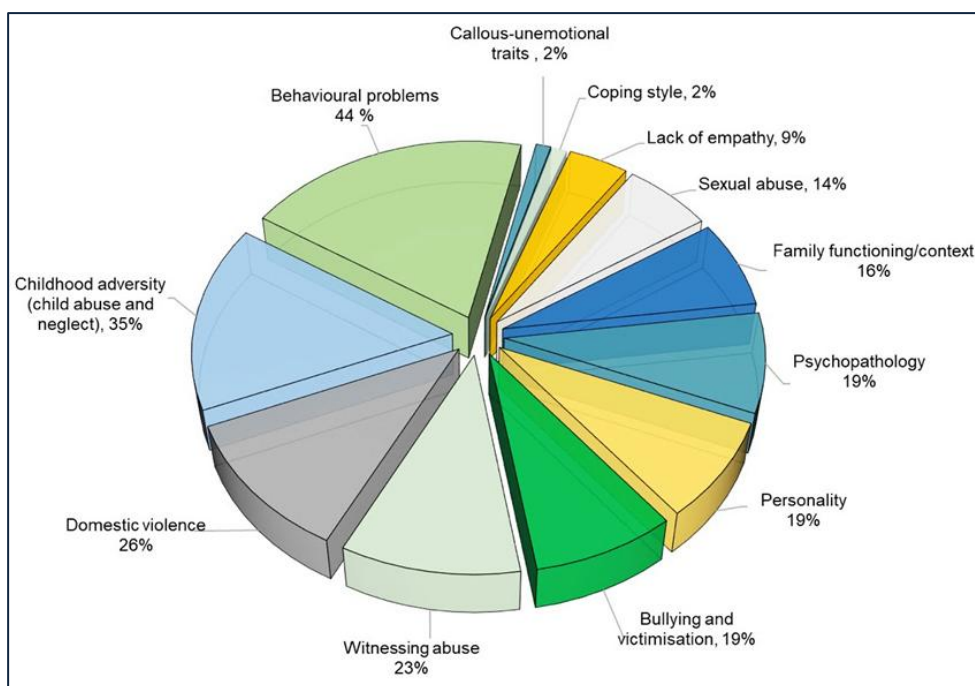


Background

It is only recently that researchers and practitioners have become aware of the complexities associated with animal cruelty. Children can harm an animal accidentally as a result of exploratory play activities, a lack of knowledge of an animal's welfare needs, or an inability to correctly identify animal behavioural signals (Muldoon, Williams & Lawrence, 2016). Our educational intervention research has revealed that programmes such as the Scottish SPCA's 'Prevention through Education' are effective in enhancing knowledge of animal welfare and sentience, thereby decreasing the risk of unintentional cruelty and neglect (Hawkins, Williams & Scottish SPCA, 2017). However, harm can be caused intentionally through behaviours directed at the animal or through deliberate neglect. Ascione (1993) defines this form of cruelty as "socially unacceptable behavior that intentionally causes unnecessary pain, suffering, or distress to and/or death of an animal" (p.228).

Childhood cruelty is an under-researched area, perhaps as a result of the sensitivity of the topic or lack of recognition of the significance of child-animal relationships. However, our review of existing research (Hawkins, Hawkins & Williams, 2017) suggests that cruelty behaviour can begin as early as age 3, with 6 years of age being the average age of onset. Figure 1 shows the psychological risk factors identified by existing research studies. Importantly, this underscores the potential significance of adversity in the lives of children who harm animals. We know from recent research (Hackett & Uprichard, 2007; McDonald et al., 2015, McEwan et al., 2014) and changes to legislation (Domestic Abuse Act [Scotland], 2019) that animal cruelty is common

Figure 1: Psychological risk factors for animal cruelty in terms of percentage of studies reporting the risks



in families where domestic violence is present. However, we know very little about children's experiences and perspectives. Their voices are largely absent from the literature on childhood animal cruelty.

What do we mean by 'listening' to children's voices and how can this be achieved?

If cruelty is associated with other psychosocial risk factors, then it is crucial that we hear directly from children and listen attentively to what they share with us. This is important from a research perspective, to gain in-depth understanding of children's experiences and to identify ways of intervening effectively. Yet it is even more imperative from a safeguarding perspective that practitioners are able to 'tune in' and engage with children in ways that allow them to share their concerns. In effect, we need to create a listening culture, an environment "in which listening to individual experiences and views is identified as a core feature of the setting's approach and ethos" (National Children's Bureau, 2009, p. 1). This is what many researchers try to achieve with their qualitative studies and various approaches and techniques are employed to build trust, from being clear about why we are there, to exercises that build rapport and provide children with opportunities to contribute in different ways. Children have different ways of expressing themselves and the methods need to capture these.

There is a significant literature on how we might best hear and represent children's voices (through interviews, group discussions, observation, or participatory methods). There are benefits and drawbacks to every method and the researcher (the same applies to practitioners) needs to recognise and continually reflect on their own influence in the process of engaging with children (the process of reflexivity). It is also important that the notion of 'voice' is understood not as an individual property but as a product of social interaction (Komulainen, 2007). Children's views are formed and expressed in the context of engaging with others.

Being a 'good listener', in any context, is not as straightforward as it sounds. It happens when there are concerted efforts by the listener to engage in an active process of communication involving hearing, interpreting and constructing meanings. It has been described as involving all the senses and is not limited to the spoken word (NCB, 2009).

"Listening is an active verb, which involves giving an interpretation, giving meaning to the message, and value to those who are being listened to" (Rinaldi, 2001, cited by Clark, McQuail & Moss, 2003).

There are various techniques to ensure we listen to the best of our ability and these are likely to be particularly important where sensitive issues are being explored. These include showing interest and giving our full attention, using a compassionate/encouraging tone. Moments of silence should be respected and the listener should pay attention and respond to body language, checking that they have understood correctly by reflecting back what the person has said. The listener should give the impression of 'unlimited time' (Finn, 2011), be non-judgemental and set aside their own agendas.

'Animal Guardians': listening to children who have harmed animals

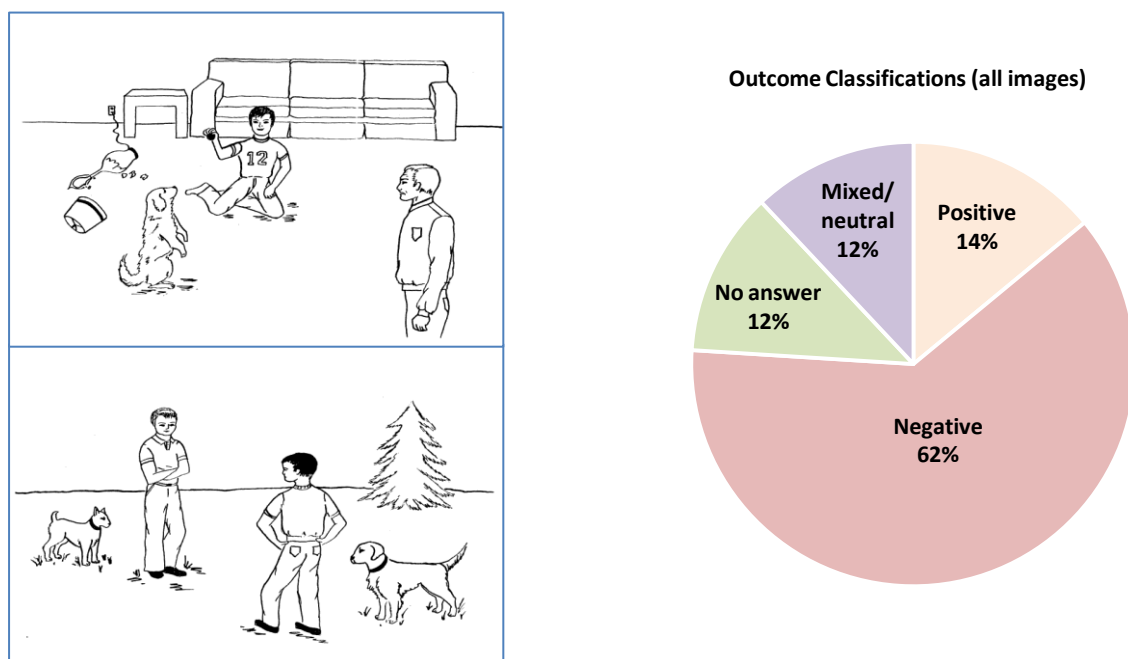
'Animal Guardians' is unique in the UK. Funded by the R S Macdonald Charitable Trust, this programme for children 5-12 years old was developed in collaboration with the Scottish SPCA. Children are referred as a result of causing harm to their pet/s and the programme is designed to nurture the development of children's empathy and compassionate behaviour towards animals. It is organised in four stages. The first three involve one-to-one discussions with children around animal sentience, animal welfare needs, and the child's responsibilities. These are carried out in the child's school by two Youth Engagement Officers from the Scottish SPCA. The fourth and final stages involve a visit to one of the Scottish SPCA's animal re-homing centres. The intervention provides an opportunity to work with children on skills such as empathy, emotional regulation, decision-making, and responsibility, which may have positive long-term impacts into adulthood.



Laura Wauthier, a PhD student at the University of Edinburgh, is currently evaluating the programme, but has also carried out a small scale qualitative study with 10 children (average age= 8.8 years, n=9 males) to explore their perspectives on cruelty and identify associated influences that contributed to the harm caused. The research involved a range of activities, from drawing and crafts, through to exploration of children's interpretations of vignettes or situations presented in picture form. Children were also asked open questions relating to their perceptions of cruelty, and finally some more specific questions relating to harm they had caused (using the Cruelty to Animals Inventory, Dadds et al., 2004).

The study found that all the children were very fond of animals (some appeared very strongly attached to their pet/s). Without exception, they viewed animals as sentient (capable of feelings) and described cruelty as wrong/bad, which perhaps explains why they struggled to admit to the harm they had personally caused. They often evidenced negative self-perceptions and had limited attachment networks. Pets often featured in their descriptions of people who were important to them, and sometimes only pets featured in their drawing. It was clear that most of the children were from troubled backgrounds and they often experienced difficulties regulating their own emotions and behaviours. In the exercise where they had to describe what was happening in a drawing (see Figure 2), they tended to interpret ambiguous situations in a negative way (e.g., they were more likely to describe the adults (portrayed neutrally) being very angry with the child and/or animal). The data suggest that some degree of violence was commonplace in the children's families, and there was evidence of emotional trauma associated with poor attachment to caregivers and the harm they had caused to their pet (Wauthier, Scottish SPCA & Williams, under review).

Figure 2: Examples of Thematic Apperception Test images & findings on children's interpretations



Children affected by trauma are likely to be "resistant to opening up to others and this has to be noticed, understood and respected" (Education Scotland, Compassionate and Connected Classroom resource, 2019: p.5). The same may apply with regard to disclosing any harm they have caused to an animal, especially given the stigma associated with animal cruelty. In this respect, it is interesting to consider recent research with young adults (aged 18-24) who were abused as children. They were asked whether they had tried to tell anyone about what was happening to them, and what had happened as a result of their disclosures. The authors (Allnock & Miller, 2013) reported that, contrary to previous research suggesting that few children disclose sexual abuse, in their study 80% (48 of the 60 participants) had tried to tell someone. However, their disclosures were often not recognised or understood, or were dismissed, played down or ignored, meaning no action was taken to protect or support them. Importantly, the young people said they had wanted someone to notice that something was wrong and ask direct questions. They also wanted professionals to investigate sensitively but thoroughly, and to be kept informed about what was happening.

What do these findings mean?

- (1) Findings from our qualitative research with children who have harmed an animal show how important it is for us to listen to their voices. At present, animal cruelty prevention interventions that are offered widely are targeted to improve understanding of animal needs, sentience and welfare, helping to prevent harm caused to animals accidentally. However, where more severe forms of harm or deliberate cruelty are concerned, interventions need to be tailored specifically to the needs of these children. While the broad distinction between unintentional and intentional cruelty and neglect is useful, our research has shown that children's apparently 'cruel' behaviours are likely to occur when the intent is not to harm the animal per se, but is the likely result of a child's emotional distress. Children may even harm an animal they are really close to. Those working with children and facilitators

of interventions need to take into account these complexities in children's emotional, psychological, and behavioural responses.

- (2) Finding ways to provide comfortable safe places and offer children time and focused attention is imperative if we want children to share their concerns so that we can support them effectively. Talking openly with children in educational settings about adversity and difficulties that people experience in life, as well as equipping them with skills and an understanding that they have the right to be protected and supported by the adults in their lives, is an important way forward in establishing a nurturing, compassionate climate that encourages children to develop trust, recognise need, and seek support. Listening is a critical component of such an approach. 'The Compassionate and Connected Classroom' is a curricular resource to help teachers and schools and is part of a wider resource for use in community settings.
- (3) Recent research and new legislation on domestic violence suggests that child welfare professionals should pay attention to the welfare and behaviour of animals in any household they visit, register a high turnover of pets, routinely include discussion about pets with women and children, and explore the significance of attachment to animals as part of assessments of family dynamics and relationships. Any incidents of harm caused to animals need to be viewed in the wider context of their other behaviour, and their immediate family, peer and neighbourhood environment.
- (4) Children's reluctance to admit to harming animals needs to be treated extremely sensitively. However, we can learn much about the process of disclosure from research with people who were abused as children.
- (5) Future research needs to focus on the identification of factors that 'at risk' children have in common and on understanding the experiences that led to harm being caused. This will enable animal welfare charities and educators to feel better equipped to intervene to promote empathy and compassionate behaviour towards animals, and allow all of those working with children to provide them with the best kind of support.

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'Animal Guardians' documentation: <https://www.ed.ac.uk/health/research/centres/cadp/child-animal-research/research-and-knowledge-exchange/childhood-cruelty/animal-guardians>

'Fostering Compassion' website: <https://www.fosteringcompassion.org>

The Compassionate and Connected Classroom Curricular Resource:
<https://education.gov.scot/improvement/learning-resources/compassionate-and-connected-classroom>

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