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Children, adolescents, and animals research

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Childhood cruelty to animals: what does it mean & who is at risk?

This briefing accompanies the third in a series of reflective workshops organised by **caar** at the University of Edinburgh and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). It focuses on findings that emerged from four of our research projects in relation to children's cruelty to animals and cruelty prevention interventions.

Background

Childhood cruelty to animals is an under-researched and highly sensitive topic. It can be divided into *unintentional* and *intentional* cruelty and neglect (Connor, Currie & Lawrence, 2018). Unintentional cruelty and neglect can result from children's exploratory play activities that lead to an animal being injured. Alternatively, lack of knowledge of an animal's welfare needs can mean that children interact in ways that compromise the animal's welfare (Muldoon, Williams & Lawrence, 2016). By contrast, intentional cruelty and neglect refers to deliberate harm. 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). Children can begin cruelty behaviour as early as 3-years-old, but the average age of onset is 6-years-old (Hawkins, Hawkins & Williams, 2017).

Our studies

The studies discussed in this paper were developed within four projects funded by the UK Government Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra), the Scottish SPCA and RS MacDonald Charitable Trust.

Project 1: Duty of Care to Animals among Children (2008-2012)

- ▶ Animal welfare intervention study with children (experimental intervention)

Project 2: Evaluation of the Scottish SPCA's 'Prevention through Education Programme' (2014-2018)

- ▶ Animal welfare intervention study with children (experimental intervention)
- ▶ Children's attitudes to animal cruelty (cross-sectional survey)

Project 3: Cross-national study of personality and self-reported animal cruelty (2016-2018)

- ▶ Associations between animal cruelty, callous unemotional traits and personality (online survey)

Project 4: Evaluation of the Scottish SPCA's 'Animal Guardians' programme (2017-2020)

- ▶ A new intervention targeting children who have been cruel to an animal

Key findings

Unintentional cruelty and knowledge: Knowledge of animal welfare increases with age through the primary school years and is amenable to change with educational intervention (Hawkins, Williams & Scottish SPCA, 2017). In a series of studies, we have tested children's pre- and post-intervention knowledge, delivering an animal welfare education intervention to one group, but not another (a control group). Changes in welfare knowledge among intervention children are consistently found (Figure 1). However, short-term, school-based educational interventions have less impact on empathy, pet attachment and compassion.

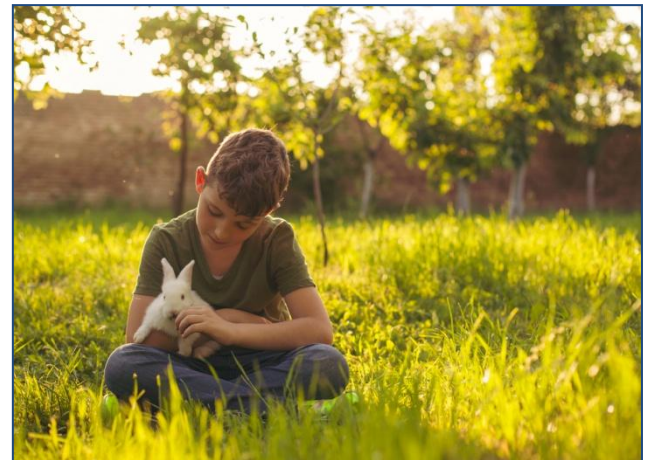
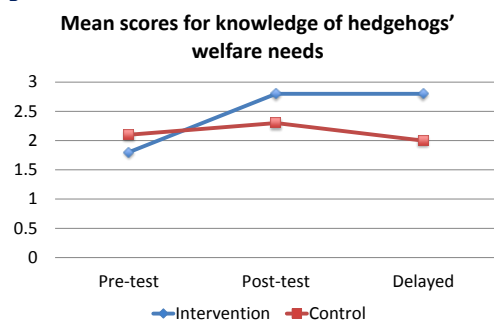


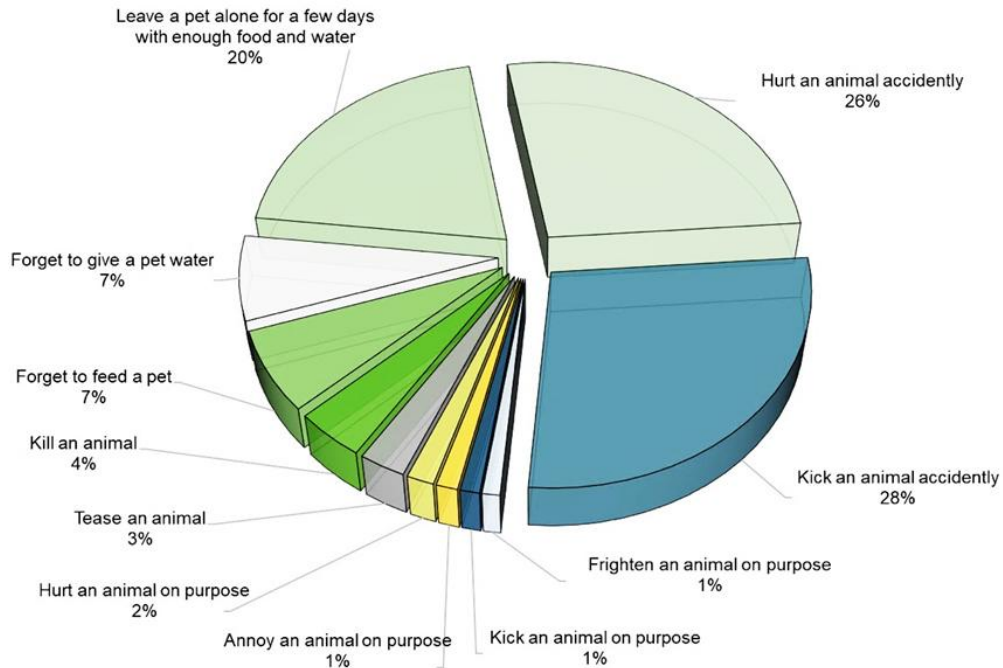
Figure 1:



Psychological risk factors for animal cruelty

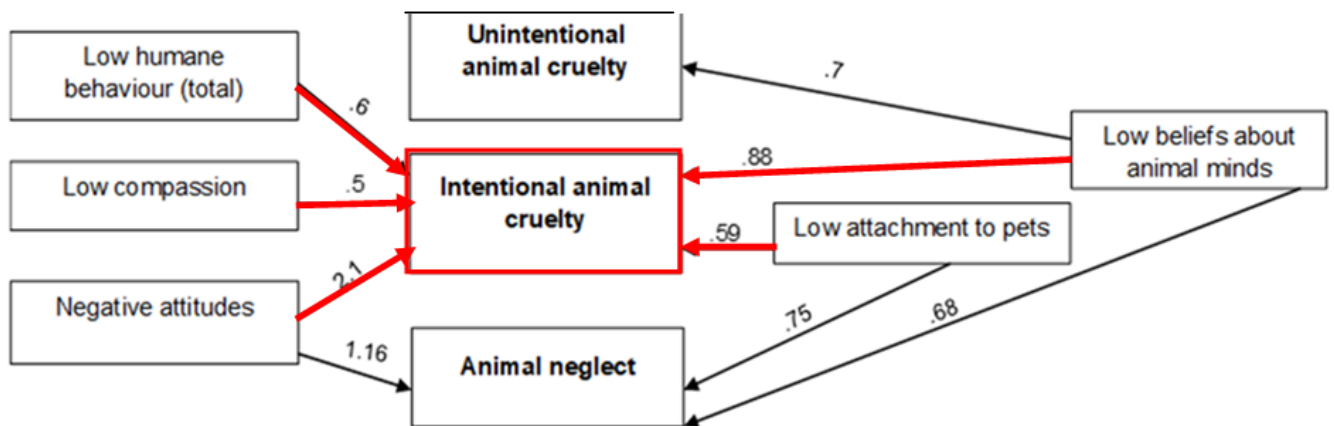
- Children’s attitudes towards animal cruelty are a risk factor for cruelty behaviour (Figure 2). We explored children’s attitudes towards intentional cruelty and neglect, as well as accidental cruelty and neglect (Hawkins, Williams & Scottish SPCA, under review). Research with adolescents has also shown that attitudes to cruelty are associated with self-reports of engaging in animal cruelty (Connor, Currie & Lawrence, 2018).

Figure 2: Responses to the ‘Children’s Attitudes to Animal Cruelty’ (CAAC) scale



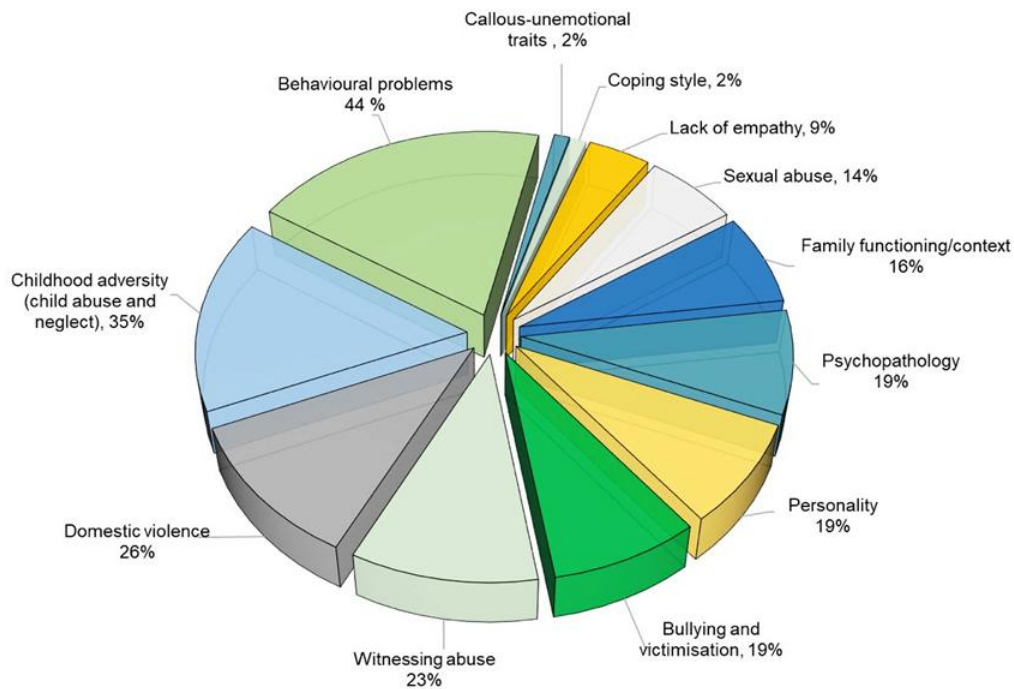
- We have also found that negative attitudes in relation to animal cruelty, low compassion, low self-reported humane behaviour, poor attachment to pets, and a lack of belief that animals have minds and are sentient beings are all associated with intentional cruelty attitudes (Figure 3) (Hawkins, Williams & Scottish SPCA, under review).

Figure 3: Associations between social cognitive factors and childhood animal cruelty



- Our systematic literature review of psychological risk factors for animal cruelty revealed a range of factors, from behavioural problems, to experiences of childhood adversity and abuse (Figure 4) (Hawkins, Hawkins & Williams, 2017). The review also revealed the lack of evidence internationally on childhood animal cruelty and the need for further research.

Figure 4: Psychological risk factors for animal cruelty in terms of percentage of studies reporting the risks



Targeted interventions for children who have been cruel to animals

- 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, thereby decreasing risk of unintentional cruelty and neglect (Hawkins, Williams & Scottish SPCA, 2017).
- However, universal education programmes may not reduce the risk of intentional cruelty to animals among children who have already engaged in cruelty behaviour.
- While there are some cruelty prevention programmes in the USA that offer therapeutic interventions for children who have been cruel to animals (e.g., AniCare Child; Shapiro, Randour, Krinsk & Wolf, 2014), there have been no systematic scientific evaluations of these programmes.

The ‘Animal Guardians’ programme

- A collaboration between the Scottish SPCA and the University of Edinburgh, funded by RS MacDonald Charitable Trust
- Targeted intervention for children who have been cruel to animals
- Initially based in the Edinburgh area, but will be extended to Glasgow and across Scotland
- Referral process through social care, health, and education
- One-to-one intervention based on enhancing knowledge and understanding, empathy and responsibility
- Toolkit of structured activities includes emotion recognition and sentience, animals’ welfare needs knowledge, responsibility, and positive behaviour towards animals
- Bespoke delivery based on child’s needs and cruelty incidence
- Launched in April 2018 and evaluated over three years



Summary and conclusions

- Animal cruelty during childhood is often accidental due to lack of knowledge of welfare needs or belief in sentience, or inappropriate behaviour and play with animals:
 - Animal welfare education with carefully designed engaging and child-appropriate activities can increase children's knowledge of sentience, animal welfare needs and appropriate behaviour towards animals.
 - The Scottish Animal Welfare Education Forum can share resources/advise on educational materials/interventions.
- A range of psychological risk factors is associated with intentional cruelty, including: adverse childhood experiences; experiences of abuse and violence; conduct disorder, and other mental health and personality factors.
- Children who have been cruel to animals, or are at risk of cruelty, might need targeted interventions:
 - Targeted interventions focus on intentional cruelty and factors associated with it.
 - Most programmes are based in the USA and have not been fully evaluated.
- 'Animal Guardians' is a programme delivered by the Scottish SPCA and evaluated by the University of Edinburgh:
 - It is designed for children who are at high risk of cruelty and is unique in the UK.
 - More information can be found @ <https://www.scottishspca.org/education/animal-guardians/>

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Contact

Please contact Dr Janine Muldoon janine.muldoon@ed.ac.uk for further information about this briefing paper or our series of reflective workshops taking place in 2018.

We are currently updating our website. Do let us know if there is anything you would like to access there. <https://www.ed.ac.uk/health/research/cadp/child-animal-research>

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