



## Is childhood cruelty to animals a marker for physical maltreatment in a prospective cohort study of children? ☆



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### ABSTRACT

Childhood cruelty to animals is thought to indicate that a child may have been maltreated. This study examined: (a) prevalence of cruelty to animals among 5- to 12-year-old children; (b) the association between cruelty to animals, child physical maltreatment, and adult domestic violence; and (c) whether cruelty to animals is a marker of maltreatment taking into account age, persistence of cruelty, and socioeconomic disadvantage. Data were from the Environmental Risk (E-Risk) Longitudinal Twin Study, an epidemiological representative cohort of 2,232 children living in the United Kingdom. Mothers reported on cruelty to animals when children were 5, 7, 10, and 12 years, on child maltreatment up to age 12, and adult domestic violence. Nine percent of children were cruel to animals during the study and 2.6% persistently ( $\geq 2$  time-points). Children cruel to animals were more likely to have been maltreated than other children ( $OR = 3.32$ ) although the majority (56.4%) had not been maltreated. Animal cruelty was not associated with domestic violence when maltreatment was controlled for. In disadvantaged families, 6 in 10 children cruel to animals had been maltreated. In other families, the likelihood of maltreatment increased with age (from 3 in 10 5-year-olds to 4.5 in 10 12-year-olds) and persistence (4.5 in 10 of those persistently cruel). Although childhood cruelty to animals is associated with maltreatment, not every child showing cruelty had been maltreated. The usefulness of cruelty to animals as a marker for maltreatment increases with the child's age, persistence of behavior, and poorer social background.

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### Introduction

In recent years there has been increasing interest in the phenomenon of children being cruel to animals. This has been driven, in part, by a number of organizations, such as the American Humane Association and the Links Group in the United Kingdom, who highlight the possible links between cruelty to animals and child abuse, elder abuse, and domestic violence. Childhood cruelty to animals has been described as “an indicator of child abuse” (Becker & French, 2004, p. 403) on the basis

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that it was more prevalent among seriously mentally ill youth who had been sexually abused than among those who had not been abused (McClellan, Adams, Douglas, McCurry, & Storck, 1995). Among adolescent boys in residential treatment for conduct disorder, physical and sexual abuse occurred in the histories of those cruel to animals 1.5 times as often as those who were not cruel (Duncan, Thomas, & Miller, 2005). Similarly, children noted to be cruel to animals during psychiatric intake assessments were found to have a history of sexual abuse 2.3 times as often as other children from a matched control sample (Boat et al., 2011).

Childhood cruelty to animals also seems to occur more often in homes with domestic violence than in other homes, suggesting that cruelty to animals may take place in response to witnessing violence as well as being a direct victim of abuse. Duncan et al. (2005) found that boys who had conduct disorder and who were cruel to animals had been exposed to domestic violence 1.5 times as often as boys with conduct disorder but who were not cruel to animals. In a general population sample, Baldry (2003) found that children who reported being exposed to domestic violence were cruel to animals 1.4 times as often as children not exposed to domestic violence. Similarly, college students who reported being exposed to family violence (child abuse and/or domestic violence) also reported being cruel to animals 1.7 times as often as those not exposed to family violence (DeGue & DiLillo, 2009). In community samples of families that had experienced domestic violence, children were reported to be cruel to animals more than twice as frequently as children from homes with no domestic violence (Becker, Stuewig, Herrera, & McCloskey, 2004; Currie, 2006). Finally, in samples of women in domestic violence shelters there is evidence that a significant minority of their children have perpetrated animal cruelty (see Ascione, 2007, for review).

Although there is suggestion that childhood cruelty to animals could be an indicator of child maltreatment and other forms of family violence, this has yet to be demonstrated empirically. A statistically significant association between two variables does not necessarily mean that one is a reliable marker for the other. For example, there is a significant association between gender and committing a crime: Over 80% of people convicted or cautioned for indictable offenses in the United Kingdom are males (Clarke, 2011). However, being a male is not a good marker of criminality as most men have not committed a crime in their lifetime. Commonly used statistics, such as odds ratios, must be interpreted in the context of the prevalence of the behavior in the population under study. Before advocating for the use of childhood cruelty to animals as a marker for child maltreatment or other family violence it is important to test, not just if there is a statistical association between them, but if one is actually a reliable marker for the other. To do this, it is necessary to use statistical tests designed specifically for this purpose, such as the positive predictive value (PPV). The PPV gives the proportion of those identified using a putative marker who are true positives; for example, the proportion of children who are cruel to animals who have been maltreated. Conversely, it indicates the proportion who are false positives; those who are cruel to animals but who have *not* been maltreated.

The aims of this study were to (a) establish the prevalence of children who were cruel to animals between the ages of 5 and 12 years; (b) test the association between childhood cruelty to animals, child physical maltreatment, and adult domestic violence; (c) test the credentials of childhood cruelty to animals as a marker of child maltreatment using the positive predictive value (PPV); and (d) investigate whether the PPV varies according to age, persistence of cruel behavior, and family socioeconomic disadvantage.

## Methods

### Participants

Participants were members of the Environmental Risk (E-Risk) Longitudinal Twin Study, which tracks the development of a nationally representative birth cohort of 2,232 British children. The sample was drawn from a larger birth registry of twins born in England and Wales from 1994 through 1995 (Trouton, Spinath, & Plomin, 2002). Details about the sample have been reported previously (Moffitt & the E-Risk Study Team, 2002). Briefly, the E-Risk sample was constructed from 1999 through 2000, when 1,116 families with same-sex 5-year-old twins (93% of those eligible) participated in home-visit assessments. Families were recruited to represent the United Kingdom population of families with newborns in the 1990s, based on residential location throughout England and Wales and mother's age (i.e. older mothers having twins via assisted reproduction were under selected and teenaged mothers with twins were over selected). Follow-up home visits were conducted when the children were aged 7 years (98% participation), 10 years (96%), and 12 years (96%). Sex is evenly distributed (49% were boys). Parents gave informed consent and children gave assent. Ethical approval was granted by the Joint South London and Maudsley and the Institute of Psychiatry NHS Ethics Committee.

### Measures

*Childhood cruelty to animals.* This was assessed using the item Cruel to Animals in the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991). Mothers were given the instrument as a face to face interview and the reporting period was 6 months prior to the interview. Each item was rated as being *not true* (0), *somewhat or sometimes true* (1), or *very true or often true* (2); children who scored 1 or 2 were combined to create a group of children who have been cruel to animals.

*Child physical maltreatment.* We assessed physical maltreatment by an adult (Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1990; Jaffee et al., 2005; Lansford et al., 2002) using a standardized clinical interview protocol designed to enhance mothers' comfort with

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