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Full length article

# The role of callous/unemotional traits in mediating the association between animal abuse exposure and behavior problems among children exposed to intimate partner violence<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Children exposed to intimate partner violence are at increased risk for concomitant exposure to maltreatment of companion animals. There is emerging evidence that childhood exposure to maltreatment of companion animals is associated with psychopathology in childhood and adulthood. However, few studies have explored developmental factors that might help to explain pathways from animal maltreatment exposure to children's maladjustment. The present study addresses this gap in the literature by examining relations between children's exposure to animal maltreatment, callous/unemotional traits (i.e., callousness, uncaring traits, and unemotional traits), and externalizing and internalizing behavior problems. A sample of 291 ethnically diverse children (55% Latino or Hispanic) between the ages of 7 and 12 was recruited from community-based domestic violence services. A mediational path model indicated that child exposure to animal maltreatment was associated with callousness ( $\beta = 0.14$ ), which in turn was associated with greater internalizing ( $\beta = 0.32$ ) and externalizing problems ( $\beta = 0.47$ ). The effect of animal maltreatment exposure on externalizing problems was mediated through callousness. Results suggest that callous/unemotional traits are a potential mechanism through which childhood exposure to animal maltreatment influences subsequent behavior problems. Future research is needed to evaluate the extent to which exposure to animal maltreatment affects children's adjustment over time in the context of other co-occurring adverse childhood experiences.

## 1. Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) exposure remains a major public health problem affecting a large number of US children.

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According to a recent national study of children aged 17 years or younger, 16% reported being exposed to physical IPV during their lifetime (Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2015). Moreover, given that different forms of family violence often co-occur, numerous studies report that children living in homes with IPV often experience other types of co-occurring victimizations, such as child abuse and neglect (Turner, Shattuck, Finkelhor, & Hamby, 2016). Due to the heightened vulnerability associated with children's polyvictimization, there has been increased scholarly attention focused on understanding the impact of co-occurring forms of violence exposure in relation to child exposure to IPV and developmental outcomes (e.g., Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007; Margolin et al., 2009). The majority of studies in this area have focused on the overlap between IPV and children's direct victimization (e.g., physical or verbal abuse) and/or exposure to community violence (Finkelhor et al., 2015; Turner et al., 2016).

An emerging body of research documents the importance of examining concomitant exposure to animal maltreatment (AM) among children living in households where IPV occurs (Collins et al., 2017; McDonald et al., 2015, 2017). Indeed, research documents that children exposed to IPV witness significantly more AM than children from nonviolent families (Ascione et al., 2007; Volant, Johnson, Gullone, & Coleman, 2008). In a study examining IPV perpetrators' use of threats and violence against animals, Ascione et al. (2007) found that 61.5% of IPV victims residing at a domestic violence (DV) shelter reported that their child(ren) had been exposed to AM in the home, whereas only 2.9% of women in a non-victimized comparison group reported this exposure among their children. Recent qualitative studies employing samples of women and children recruited from IPV services suggest that children's exposure to AM is multifaceted, often involves direct exposure to severe violence tactics, and leads to extreme emotional and behavioral responses that may exacerbate children's risk for negative psychosocial outcomes, over and above the potentially deleterious impact of IPV exposure (Collins et al., 2017; McDonald et al., 2015, 2017).

Considering evidence that the majority (75%) of U.S. households with children over the age of 6 years contain a family pet (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2007), and that children and adolescents often value their relationships with pets over adult (i.e., aunts, uncles) and child (i.e., siblings) family members, it is surprising that only a few studies have quantitatively examined associations between childhood AM exposure, IPV, and behavior problems among school-age children (Cassels, White, Gee, & Hughes, 2017; Kosonen, 1996; McDonald, Graham-Bermann, Maternick, Ascione, & Williams, 2016). Children often turn to their pets for comfort and affection during times of stress (Melson, Schwartz, & Beck, 1997). Therefore, in households where IPV occurs, exposure to AM may be especially traumatic for children for whose pets serve as emotional and social supports (McDonald et al., 2017). McDonald et al. (2016) reported that among children recruited from community-based DV services, being exposed to AM was associated with increased odds of being classified as moderately (borderline clinical levels of symptoms) and severely (clinical levels) maladjusted (3.26 and 5.72 respectively), using latent profile analysis of 6 indicators of psychosocial functioning. To the authors' knowledge, no published work has explored developmental processes through which childhood exposure to AM may lead to maladjustment. As such, this study addresses a major gap in the literature and examines associations between childhood AM exposure and internalizing and externalizing behavior problems among children with a history of IPV exposure, as well as the mediating role of callous/unemotional traits in the path from AM exposure to behavior problems.

## 2. Exposure to IPV, concomitant animal maltreatment, and child adjustment

A large body of literature links IPV exposure to mental health and behavioral problems in children (e.g., Jouriles, Rosenfield, McDonald, & Mueller, 2014; Levendosky, Bogat, & Martinez-Torteya, 2013; Taylor, Steward-Tufescu, & Piotrowski, 2015). For example, exposure to IPV has been linked to decreased psychological and physical health, social and academic competency, and a diminished sense of self-worth and autonomy (Graham-Bermann, Howell, Lilly, & Devoe, 2010; Graham-Bermann, Lynch, Banyard, Devoe, & Halabu, 2007). Among the potentially deleterious effects of IPV-exposure on child outcomes, internalizing (e.g., anxiety, depression) and externalizing behavior (e.g., oppositional defiant and conduct disorder) problems have received increasing attention. In particular, Grych, Jouriles, Swank, McDonald and Norwood (2000) estimate that nearly 40% to 60% of IPV-exposed children are in the clinical range of externalizing and internalizing behavioral problems. Although empirical research on the effects of childhood exposure to AM is not as extensive as the accumulated research on the adverse effects of IPV exposure, recent studies have reported that childhood exposure to animal cruelty is associated with psychopathology in childhood (McDonald et al., 2016) and adulthood (Girardi & Pozzulo, 2015). Specifically, a small body of research supports the notion that children living in families where AM is present are more likely to engage in externalizing behaviors such as delinquent behavior, bullying, and animal cruelty than children from non-violent homes (e.g., Becker, Stuewig, Herrera, & McCloskey, 2004; Currie, 2006; Henry, 2004).

For example, Gullone and Robertson (2008) examined the relation between self-reported bullying and AM in a sample of 249 Australian adolescents aged 12–16. Their findings indicated that witnessing AM was a significant predictor of both perpetrating AM and bullying others, regardless of IPV histories. Similarly, Henry (2004) explored the adverse effects of exposure to AM before the age of 13 in a sample of 206 college students. Results suggest that participants who witnessed animal cruelty during childhood were more likely to perpetrate animal abuse and have higher self-reported delinquency scores than participants who did not witness animal cruelty. Further, while women who witnessed animal cruelty exhibited increased sensitivity/concern regarding the maltreatment of animals, men who observed animal cruelty demonstrated more callous attitudes toward the treatment of animals, as measured by the Attitudes Toward the Treatment of Animals Scale (ATTAS; Henry, 2004). In summary, while empirical evidence supporting the relationship between exposure to AM and psychopathological problems, such as internalizing and externalizing problems, is emerging, few studies have examined the mechanisms that explain the associations.

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