



Research article

Children's experiences of companion animal maltreatment in households characterized by intimate partner violence[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Cruelty toward companion animals is a well-documented, coercive tactic used by abusive partners to intimidate and control their intimate partners. Experiences of co-occurring violence are common for children living in families with intimate partner violence (IPV) and surveys show that more than half are also exposed to abuse of their pets. Given children's relationships with their pets, witnessing such abuse may be traumatic for them. Yet little is known about the prevalence and significance of this issue for children. The present study examines the experiences of children in families with co-occurring pet abuse and IPV. Using qualitative methods, 58 children ages 7–12 who were exposed to IPV were asked to describe their experiences of threats to and harm of their companion animals. Following the interviews, template analysis was employed to systematically develop codes and themes. Coding reliability was assessed using Randolph's free-marginal multirater kappa ($k_{\text{free}} = .90$). Five themes emerged from the qualitative data, the most common being children's exposure to pet abuse as a power and control tactic against their mother in the context of IPV. Other themes were animal maltreatment to discipline or punish the pet, animal cruelty by a sibling, children intervening to prevent pet abuse, and children intervening to protect the pet during a violent episode. Results indicate that children's experiences of pet abuse are multifaceted, potentially traumatic, and may involve multiple family members with diverse motives.

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Introduction

The majority of children in the United States experience myriad forms of direct and indirect violence exposure in their daily lives (Hamby, Finkelhor, Turner, & Ormrod, 2011; McDonald, Jouriles, Ramisetty-Mikler, Casetano, & Green, 2006).

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Estimates of children's exposure to intimate partner violence (IPV) range extensively (Carlson, 2000; Edleson et al., 2007). Among recent nationally representative surveys, Hamby et al. (2011) report that approximately 17.9% of children age 17 years or younger are exposed to physical IPV during their lifetime. Estimates generated from large-scale studies point to the widespread prevalence of the issue in society, yet our knowledge of children's exposure to IPV continues to be limited. For example, there is a paucity of empirical knowledge on the types of IPV-related violence to which children are exposed as well as the frequency and proximity of their exposure and involvement in IPV-related events (Edleson et al., 2007; Edleson, Shin, & Armendariz, 2008). Moreover, the majority of empirical work in this area of study has been quantitative, contributing to a scarcity of research that considers children's subjective experiences of IPV and the context of their exposure (Cunningham & Baker, 2004; Överlien & Hydén, 2009).

Children living in homes where IPV is present frequently experience co-occurring maltreatment (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormond, & Hamby, 2009). They are also more likely to witness violence across multiple contexts such as school and their community than children living in non-violent homes (Finkelhor et al., 2007; Hamby et al., 2011; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1998; McCabe, Hough, Yeh, Lucchini, & Hazen, 2005). Among overlapping forms of violence exposure associated with IPV, the link between family violence and animal abuse has garnered increased scholarly attention in the social sciences literature in the past two decades (e.g., Ascione et al., 2007; Volant, Johnson, Gullone, & Coleman, 2008). Cruelty toward pets is a well-documented, coercive tactic used by abusive partners to intimidate and control their victim (Faver & Strand, 2007). Despite scholarly recognition of the importance of assessing overlapping and interconnected forms of violence exposure among children (Finkelhor et al., 2007; Margolin et al., 2009), there has been a dearth of empirical attention to the prevalence and significance of children's concomitant exposure to abuse of animals in IPV-affected homes.

The limited body of published research in this area suggests that between one-half and three-fourths of abused women with companion animals report that their pets have been threatened and/or harmed by an intimate partner (Ascione, 1998; Ascione et al., 2007; Faver & Strand, 2003, 2007; Flynn, 2000a, 2000b; Flynn, 2009; Volant et al., 2008). Concurrently, research has indicated that children from homes characterized by IPV witness significantly more cruelty toward animals than children from nonviolent families (Ascione et al., 2007; Volant et al., 2008). Ascione et al. (2007) noted that 61.5% of women with children who were residing at a domestic violence shelter reported that their children had heard or seen pet abuse in contrast to only 2.9% of women reporting no IPV victimization. Moreover, 67% of children residing in shelter with their mother indicated they had seen or heard one of their pets being hurt; approximately 93% of these children said they were "very upset" or "sort of upset" as a result of the maltreatment of their companion animal (Ascione et al., 2007).

To date, studies specifically examining children's exposure to the maltreatment of companion animals have relied on dichotomous assessments of animal abuse exposure (exposed vs. non-exposed). Among published research, only Edleson et al. (2008) have reported on frequency and proximity of exposure to animal abuse among children of mothers receiving residential or non-residential domestic violence services. In a psychometric evaluation of the Child Exposure to Domestic Violence (CEDV) Scale, the authors reported that 14.3% of children in their study responded affirmatively to an item asking if their mother's partner had hurt a pet on purpose (Edleson et al., 2008). Qualitative information collected as part of this measure suggested that the majority of children exposed to this form of violence were in close proximity during the time it occurred. Results of this study highlight that children's exposure to harm of companion animals in families experiencing IPV may involve multiple types of exposure (e.g., seeing, hearing) that may be both severe and frequent.

Children's Reactions When Experiencing Intimate Partner Violence

Recently, scholars such as Överlien and Hydén (2009) have argued for the importance and need for more holistic qualitative investigations of children's experiences and involvement in violent events independent of mothers' experiences of IPV. A small number of studies have attended to children's strategies for coping with and behavioral responses to interparental violence. As a whole, the literature documents a variety of responses such as children removing themselves from the conflict, distracting themselves or caregivers, and/or becoming verbally and/or physically involved in the conflict (Adamson & Thompson, 1998; Hester, Kelly, & Radford, 1996; Jaffe, Hurley, & Wolfe, 1990; Joseph, Govender, & Bhagwanjee, 2006; Margolin, 1998; McGee, 2000; Överlien & Hydén, 2009; Solberg, 2004). Edleson et al. (2007) suggest that, "the degree to which a child intervenes in adult domestic violence clearly varies from child to child and is likely related to the impact of exposure" (p. 964).

Children with strong attachments or emotional bonds to their pet may be more likely to engage verbally or physically in incidents of family violence involving animals (Melson, 2003), potentially increasing their risk of physical injury and heightening risk for subsequent adjustment problems. Given empirical studies documenting that youth often turn to pets as confidantes (Katcher & Beck, 1986, 1987), rely on animals as a way of managing stress (Melson, Schwartz, & Beck, 1997), and list companion animals as important social relationships in their lives (Kosonen, 1996), we suggest that exposure to animal abuse may be particularly traumatic to children living in IPV-affected households (Melson, 2003; Yorke, 2010).

Current Study. In light of the reviewed literature, the experiences of children dually exposed to IPV and animal abuse warrant increased scholarly attention with specific consideration of how children living in these households experience threats and violence toward animals, how they are involved in incidents of companion animal-directed threats and harm, and

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