



Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences Section – 2003

I20 Animal Cruelty: A Prodrome of Antisocial and Aggressive Behavior or Not?

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The goal of this presentation is to provide an updated literature review on the relationship between a pattern of serious, recurrent animal cruelty in childhood and other aggressive and antisocial behaviors.

Cruelty to animals during childhood is a behavior that is included in checklists for conduct disorder in childhood and psychopathy in adulthood; it is a diagnostic criterion for conduct disorder and antisocial personality disorder; and it is often viewed as a manifestation of abnormal aggression that may be associated with increasingly serious physical aggression against people at a later age. Yet prospective studies examining the diagnostic and prognostic significance of childhood animal cruelty are essentially nonexistent, and the scientific literature appears to present contradictory results. Here scientific literature pertaining to this behavior is discussed with the goal of understanding discrepant findings and identifying possible significance in terms of risk assessment and diagnosis.

In an earlier review Felthous and Kellert (1987) proffered several sources for inconsistent findings on whether childhood cruelty to animals is associated with serious aggression against people at a later age: 1) Variations in definitions of animal cruelty, 2) Variations in definitions of aggression, 3) Variations in methods of data collection, and 4) Variations in thoroughness of interviews designed to identify animal cruelty. Here the authors briefly review earlier studies and then focus on studies conducted since this early review, examining these potential sources of discrepant results in particular, with the aim of summarizing current understanding of any possible relationship between animal cruelty in childhood and later aggressive or antisocial conduct. The studies are organized into the following groupings: 1) Those that began with a group of subjects having been identified as having been cruel to animals; and 2) Those that assigned subjects to groups based on presence or absence of aggressive or antisocial conduct.

Early Studies: General: In an earlier review Felthous and Kellert (1987) observed that more controlled studies did not support an association between cruelty to animals in childhood and later aggression against people than those that did. However, the studies that supported this association were characterized by animal cruelty that was recurrent, aggression that was serious, diffuse and recurrent, and data collection by a thorough, structured interview of the subjects. The authors cautioned that future studies that attempt to relate a single act of cruelty to a single act of personal aggression, regardless how serious, would be expected to miss this association.

Studies of Subjects Identified as Cruel to Animals: Although numerous studies tested a relationship between cruelty to animals in youth and later physical aggression against people, only a few of these involve subjects already identified and grouped as having been cruel to animals. Here the authors briefly summarize those studies that attempted to examine subjects identified as having been cruel to animals with special attention given to the definition of animal cruelty, the definition of aggressive or antisocial conduct, method of data collection, thoroughness of the probe for cruelty, and findings of special interest.

Studies of Aggressive Subjects: A more common approach has been to identify subjects who are aggressive in some way and then attempt to determine whether cruelty to animals is associated. For purposes of this inquiry review was limited to those studies that controlled for aggression. Here it is found that the definition of aggression and the criteria for assignment to the aggressive group has much to do with whether an association is established. The survey is further limited to studies conducted since the literature review of 1987 (2), remembering that the most salient point of that review was that animal cruelty was associated with recurrent aggression, not a single act regardless how violent.

Conclusions: Firm conclusions must await replication studies, which apply the same definitions for animal cruelty and for aggressive and antisocial behaviors, and which apply comparable methodologies. Today research supports the association between substantial animal cruelty in childhood (severe and recurrent) and personal, physical aggression against people at a later age. Cruelty, thusly defined, may present as one of a constellation of behaviors diagnostic of conduct disorder in childhood or adolescence and a historical sign of antisocial personality disorder or psychopathy in adulthood. Cruelty to animals can represent a manifestation of several psychological deficits implicated in antisocial personality disorder.

Animal Cruelty, Antisocial Personality Disorder, Aggression