

## Narrative for podcast on Family Violence conference

The Safe Passage for Children October 14 2022 conference on Family Violence produced a wealth of information and insights from our four presenters. Andrew Campbell opened the plenary session with a comprehensive overview of the relationships among animal abuse, child maltreatment and domestic violence. Following that there were four breakout sessions that explored these individual topics in more depth. So I wanted today to try to invite you to go to our website to view the opening session and the two breakout sessions that were recorded, and to view the PowerPoint slides by two of our other presenters, and also to highlight some of the major themes from the conference.

One was the positive role that pets can play in situations of family violence. Second was the need to sensitize and train social workers particularly in child protection on the role that pets play in family dynamics. Third was the magnitude of the overlap between domestic violence, child abuse, animal abuse. And finally, ways that abusers use that's to control their victims.

Three of the four breakout session leaders talked about how animals can help children get through the experience of family violence. Our keynote speaker Andrew Campbell in particular talked about this area because of his personal experience as a child. He has recently published a book called "Not Without My Pet" which credits his dog with literally saving his life.

Charles Hempeck from AnnaMarie's Alliance in St. Cloud Minnesota talked about how they renovated their domestic shelter in part to make it possible for victims to bring their pets to the shelter.

Phil Arkow from the National Link Coalition covered several topics. One was the fact that animals can be a unique source of comfort, literally someone for children to talk to and confide in when no one else in their chaotic home is available to them. He pointed out that in Minnesota there are more dogs and cats than there are children, with there being 1 million children and 2 million dogs and cats. He also pointed out that between two thirds and three quarters of households have pets.

Phil and other speakers recommended that social workers be trained to observe pets when they enter a home because there are typical ways that pets present themselves if they are in fear or are threatening. For example pets who are fearful display submissive behavior such as slinking, averting their gaze and hunkering down. Pets that have been abused and are in a fighting mode will have their ears perked up, a raised and stiff tail, and perhaps hackles showing on the backside.

In addition he recommended that workers be trained to ask questions about pets. He quoted Kirby Wyckoff saying that he often learns more about what is going on in the family from asking about pets than he does from any diagnostic instrument. Often children are willing to open up about the abuse of their pets well before they are willing to talk about their own abuse. Also, asking children about their pets can build openness and trust. I have not heard that this kind of training is included in social work courses or other training in Minnesota, but after this conference I intend to find out.

This is especially important because animal abuse is an indicator of child maltreatment as well. One study showed that in 60% of maltreatment cases overall and 88% of physical abuse cases animals were also being abused or neglected. This abuse was conducted two thirds by the father and one third by children, indicating that when children observe animal abuse they are more likely to do it themselves.. In situations of child maltreatment there are 11 times more bites by the household pets, which is a risk factor for first responders. Interestingly, people who abuse their animals use veterinarians at a similar rate than the general population. This creates opportunities for vets to identify child abuse and domestic violence, likely before these situations come to light in other ways.

In another study 68% of domestic violence victims revealed that animal abuse also occurred in their household, and the victims indicated that 75% of the time it was done to intimidate the children.

In his breakout session, Victor Vieth explored the use of controlling behavior by abusers in faith communities. This reflected many of the same controlling behaviors as in domestic abuse situations.

Importantly for domestic violence victims, in a national survey of 2,500 callers to a national domestic violence hotline, 50% said they would not leave their abuser if they were not able to take their pets. All of the responders said that leaving the pets was a factor in deciding to get out of the abusive situation. Perhaps most tellingly, both Andrew Campbell and Phil Arkow reported on studies that show women will on average wait until there have been 10 incidents of physical abuse before they will take action on domestic violence. That might include for example being beaten, pushed down the stairs, or having their children threatened. That number however increases to 50 times on average if there are pets. Since this often also means the children are being abused is has consequences for the severity and the duration of child maltreatment.

In addition, even if children are not directly abused themselves, the trauma of seeing their parent and potentially their pets harmed has a lasting impact on children that is often under appreciated.

Despite this the willingness of domestic violence shelters to accept pets is still limited, although Charles Hempeck from AnnaMarie's Alliance in St. Cloud did a breakout session in which he talked about the fact that they renovated their domestic violence shelter in part so victims could bring their pets when they left their abuser. Overall, an estimated 600 shelters nationwide that offer this resource or have a foster care option available. This includes five shelters in Minnesota that take pets. In addition to AnnaMarie's Alliance in St. Cloud, they are located in Aiken, Brainerd, Duluth, and Rochester.

The use of pets to control domestic violence victims and children was a major topic. Abusers may "disappear" their partners' and children's pets as punishment and intimidation. Or kill or harm the pet in front of the child. One example was the father pulling out the toenails of a pet dog as punishment for the child. As mentioned in one of our recent blogs, abusers often control children by saying that if they review reveal the physical or sexual abuse to others the abuser will kill their pet. They use similar controlling tactics with domestic partners.

In one part of his presentation, Andrew Campbell pointed out that adding the factor of animal abuse increases the likelihood of other types of domestic violence. He illustrates this by taking an overall statistic and comparing it with that same statistic with the additional variable of animal abuse. For example the chances of rapes are 8% of domestic violence situations overall but increase to 26% if there is a history of animal abuse. Similarly, if there is a history of animal abuse, the potential for strangulation increases from 47% to 76%. Similar increases occur regarding the risks for first responders or the use of a weapon on the domestic partner.

One of the persistent difficulties we all face is helping professionals in these related fields make the connection between their specialty and other forms of domestic violence. A good example of an effort to overcome this barrier is a Milwaukee public relations campaign showed an animal being abused, then added a photo of either a woman or a child saying “she’s next”. You can see examples on the Facebook page for [spot abuse.org](http://spotabuse.org).

Overall, our objective for this conference was to start conversations among people in various areas of family violence so that they can help one another identify victims of abuse sooner and more effectively. It is always difficult for professionals to break out of their particular silos and make connections with people in related fields. In my experience this isn’t because they are lazy or lack imagination, it is because each of our individual disciplines are worlds unto themselves. Among other demands each has their own body of knowledge that practitioners must master, their own legislative mandates, legal requirements, and statistical and reporting requirements. However, if people could overcome these barriers and start making connections between disciplines, they would find their own work easier and they would be able to be more effective.

For example, a simple protocol to cross report between animal regulatory and child protection agencies could on average identify serious child maltreatment up to a year earlier. If child protection and domestic violence workers alerted animal regulatory agencies to animal abuse, they would be able to rescue and protect animals sooner. If protocols could be developed that protected the safety of domestic violence victims, the ability of other professionals to alert domestic violence programs about child and adult victims in a household would improve their ability to respond appropriately and in a timely way. Over time family violence would be addressed sooner so that professionals in all of these areas would have fewer situations in which they put themselves at risk by entering a household. As in many situations, and these possible solutions are easy to say and hard to do. But the point of this family violence conference was to get these discussions started so that eventually we may make these important connections among these related fields of advocacy.

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