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Expanding the Ecological Lens in Child Welfare Practice to Include Other Animals

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Sixty-nine million U.S. households have companion animals and most of these families consider these animals to be family members. Research shows that children have powerful emotional connections with animals that can be both beneficial and harmful. Considerable research findings report that violence against animals often co-occurs with, indicates, or predicts other forms of family violence, including child abuse. A companion animal may be an abused child's confidante, and separation from that animal through foster care may be a source of stress and grief for that child. Child welfare agencies are slowly acknowledging some animal-human relationships, especially in regard to animal abuse and family violence, yet professional acceptance of the significance of animals in the lives of children is often piecemeal. Being a meaningful part of the family system means that including questions and observations about the past and current presence of animals in child welfare households, the meaning those animals have for each family member, their care, and whether any of them have been hurt or killed is important to effective family-centered practice. This article discusses how taking a more ecological approach by consciously integrating animal-human relationships into child welfare practice can help caseworkers make a more accurate and useful assessment of child safety and well-being.

Key words: child welfare, human-animal bond, family violence, animal-assisted interventions

Relationships with animals are especially common among children (Ascione, 2005; Melson, 2001). They may manifest themselves negatively in animal abuse as well as positively in the protective effects of bonding with an animal companion or responding to animal-assisted activities (AAA) and therapy (AAT) (inclusively referred to as animal-assisted interventions, or AAI). A considerable body of research supports the

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powerful relationships between children and animals that are beneficial as well as harmful to both. Companion animals may assist children in feeling a sense of security and unconditional love (Melson, 2001; Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006a). They may also contribute to a child's cognitive and language development (Melson, 2001) as well as have a calming effect and aid in stress reduction (Hart, 2010). Companion animals, however, can also be victims of human cruelty, with evidence of associations between animal abuse, child maltreatment, domestic violence, and/or increased criminality (Ascione, 2005; DeGue & Dillo, 2009). Children who witness animal abuse are more likely to abuse animals, as are children who have been physically or sexually abused (Ascione, 2005). Animal abuse by children is often the first indicator of a diagnosis of conduct disorder (Dadds, 2008).

More than 70% of U.S. households with minor children have companion animals (American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, 2005/2006). Therefore, many of the families that child welfare agencies serve have animals. Research indicates that the vast majority of these families consider their companion animals to be family members (Brookman, 1999; Risley-Curtiss, Holley, & Wolf, 2006b). Since animals are part of most families' ecologies, as social workers it seems appropriate to include them in family-centered practice.

The purpose of this article is to support a more comprehensive integration and application of animal-human relations (AHR) into child welfare practice. I do this by summarizing relevant literature regarding three critical areas of our relationships with animals and providing concrete suggestions for a holistic integration of AHR into child welfare practice.

Theoretical Perspectives

Several theoretical models of practice support the inclusion of AHR in child welfare work. These include ecological-systems theory, family-centered practice, and the strengths perspective (Arkow, 2007; Risley-Curtiss, 2010a).

Ecological-systems and family-centered approaches call for assessing and treating children and families within the context of their own environments. Given that animals are part of many clients' ecologies, asking about the presence of

nurturing or dangerous animals or incidents of animal maltreatment in the course of doing assessments is certainly appropriate.

The strengths perspective encourages us to see our clients as resilient persons with resources to assist them in healing. It is our job to identify these strengths and resources. Positive AHR can be protective factors for children and adults in violent homes, and they also have the potential for helping traumatized children and their families through AAI.

In none of these practice models has acknowledgment of AHR been widely accepted. When abuse of animals in a child's ecosystem, or abuse of animals by the child, have been discovered, it is usually by chance rather than through formal intake or assessment protocols (Montminy-Danna, 2007). For example, in some instances it may be discovered after a foster child has harmed a foster family's companion animal.

Aspects of AHR Critical to Child Welfare

There are three aspects of AHR that, if taken into consideration, can enhance child welfare practice: (1) when kept as pets, companion animals are usually considered to be family members and are thus part of the family system; (2) acts of animal abuse committed by children or adults are deviant behaviors indicating a need for mental health services, as well as being a red flag for the exploration of potential child victimization and violence against other humans; and (3) the protective impact animals can have on the well-being of children means that including animals in some child welfare interventions may be beneficial. These areas are very much intertwined with each other.

Animals as family. Keeping companion animals is a universal phenomenon, and in the United States approximately 69 million households have a companion animal, including 90.5 million cats and 73.9 million dogs (American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, 2005/2006). The majority of those with companion animals consider them family members. Risley-Curtiss et al., in two different studies on ethnicity and companion animals, found that 97% (2006b) and 87% (2006a) of participants agreed that their pets are members of their families. For example, Roz explained the family nature of the relationship in terms of her pet's devotion to people:

She was ...very much so a member of the family, and it was so wonderful. Like when you come home from being tired and so stressed out from work and there would be Sparkles greeting you at the door, smiling and so happy to see you." (Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006a, p. 441)

The Pew Research Center (2006) asked pet owners if they felt close, in-between, or distant to their dog, cat, mother and father; more respondents felt close to their dogs (94%) than felt close to their mothers (87%) or fathers (74%). Dog owners, in an earlier study by Barker & Barker (1988), also reported feeling closer to their dogs than to any human family member. Human family members may talk to, and confide in, their animal family members, seeing them as a source of comfort and constancy: "When I was by myself, he [her cat] always knew when to come and sit on my lap—just sit there while I was watching TV. ... When I was [feeling sad], he was always there, too" (Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006a, p. 438). Another survey found that 52% of those with companion animals felt their pets listened to them better than their spouses or significant others (American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, 2003). "We often overlook the fact that pets are important ... for every member of the family" (Levinson, 1997, p.122).

The consideration of animals as family members has also been evidenced in dangerous environments, such as during natural disasters or family violence. As documented by Lockwood (1997), and more recently witnessed through Hurricane Katrina, many humans risk their lives during disasters (some die) by refusing to evacuate unless they can be assured of their animals' safety. In a different yet similar vein, battered women have delayed leaving domestic violence situations due to concern for their companion animals (e.g., Flynn, 2000). Allen, Gallagher, and Jones (2006), in their study of such women, found that "Fear for my pets caused me to stay for years," and "I delayed leaving for months, until I found a safe home for my dog" (p. 174). Allen et al. also found that the women's consideration of their children's attachment to their pets influenced their staying or returning: one woman stated that "The children wouldn't leave, one child would always

insist on staying behind. I felt pressure to stay to keep my son happy” (p. 174). Thus, the presence of, and attachment to, companion animals can influence staying or not staying in dangerous situations, potentially putting children’s safety at risk.

As a protective factor, companion animals can help mediate factors in families, such as stress, that contribute to the occurrence of child maltreatment. Allen, Blascovich, and Mendes (2002) found that the presence of companion animals often lowered reactivity to stressful situations and that the animals clearly acted as social supports. Albert and Anderson (1997) found that women felt their companion animals raised family morale. In a study of 896 military families, Catanzaro (1984) found companion animals to be of protective value during the temporary absence of a spouse or child, the developmental transitions of childhood and adolescence, lonely or depressed times, crises such as the illness, or relocation and unemployment. Companion animals can act as stabilizers in these situations because they offer love, affection, and unconditional acceptance.

Having companion animals can help children learn about certain family life experiences such as responsibility (e.g., animal husbandry), care giving (nurturing and caring for an animal), and loss and death (the death or disappearance of the animal). The presence of companion animals can also help protect the well-being of children and their families by assisting them in navigating loss and the subsequent mourning process with less pain (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2006; Sable, 1995). Learning how to care for companion animals can be used in interventions as models for parents learning about the needs and responsibilities of caring for their children, and for children learning how to nurture and care for others, despite their own poor parental models.

Companion animals often may function “as sentinels of unsafe environmental conditions” (Jalongo, Stanek, & Fennimore, 2004, p. 54). As family members, companion animals may mirror family tensions and critical situations (Levinson, 1997) and serve as cues in assessment to explore family issues. For example, Cain (1983) found in her study of companion animal relationships in 60 families that 81% felt

their companion animals were sensitive to the moods of other family members and some related that when their family was stressed or in conflict that their companion animal manifested physical symptoms, such as loss of appetite and diarrhea.

I run a program for children who abuse animals [Children and Animals Together (CAT)]. During a recent assessment visit at the home of a six year girl in the program, it was observed that when the child began to scream at the top of her lungs, the household cats and dogs who had been in the room immediately all ran and hid. Observing animal behavior and inquiring about animal health in family homes may help uncover information that suggests the need to probe deeper into family dynamics.

Recognizing the role of animals as family members means understanding that they are one of the sub-systems within the complex family system, and as such, both influence, and are influenced by, every other family system (Melson, 2001). Being a meaningful part of the family system means that including questions and observations about the past and current presence of animals in child welfare households, the meaning those animals have for each family member, their care, and whether any of them have been hurt or killed is important to effective family-centered practice.

Taking this more ecological approach to questioning can help caseworkers make a more accurate and useful assessment of child safety and well-being in the following ways: (1) identifying whether a child has been traumatized by witnessing the abuse of family pets; (2) detecting and supporting findings of child abuse and neglect as well as identifying other violence (Gullone, 2011); (3) establishing whether there are companion animals who are key supports in a child's eco-system (Erzinger, 2004) which may help if the child remains at home or be lost if the child or animal is removed; (4) suggesting the introduction of specific types of animal-assisted interventions (AAI); and (5) identifying whether the child has committed acts of cruelty to animals.

Child welfare workers also need to assess for loss and trauma when children lose their companion animals, whether through animal abuse or other causes, such as being moved to foster care or adoption, moving to residences where companion animals are not allowed, such as public housing or some

apartments, death of a pet, or disappearance of an animal. Not doing so fails to recognize possible additional significant losses experienced by children who already have lost much (Ross & Baron-Sorenson, 2007).

Animal Abuse

For animals, being a member of the family may mean benefits for both humans and animals, but it can also mean animals become victims of dysfunctional family dynamics. So while family AHR can result in such behaviors as family members sleeping with companion animals, sharing tidbits from meals and snacks with them, playing with them and celebrating their animals' birthdays, they can also result in interactions where the animals are kicked, punched, burned, stomped, starved, hung, drowned, tortured and killed. The indicators of physical, emotional and neglectful child maltreatment are actually very similar to those for animals being abused, including: conflicting or inadequate explanations for injuries; self destructive, withdrawn, or aggressive behavior; consistent and/or extreme fear, cowering and anxiety especially in presence of caretaker; running away; avoidance of physical contact; toilet accidents; depression; failure to thrive; apathy; being dirty, too cold, too hot, thirsty and/or hungry as well as having untreated medical issues (Loar, 1999).

In addition to the harm done to the animal, animal abuse can be a form of physical, sexual or emotional abuse to the child. For example, animal abuse can be used as a form of physical abuse where the "pet is disciplined or punished for a child's behavior as well as the reverse—the child being punished via physical abuse for perceived misbehavior of the pet" (Schaefer, 2007, p. 41). Sexual acts with animals are a form of child sexual abuse if a child is forced to participate in or watch such acts. Deliberately putting a child's companion animal in danger to create a climate of terror can be defined as emotional/psychological abuse (Faver & Strand, 2007; Schaefer, 2007).

Besides being a form of abuse itself, experiencing or witnessing animal abuse may suggest the possibility of other problems within a family (Gullone, 2011). The co-occurrence of animal abuse and domestic violence is well established. Quinlisk (1999), in two studies of domestic violence clients, found that of those reporting having companion animals,

79% and 72% said there was animal abuse including kicking, hitting, punching, mutilation, and killing. In a study of 100 battered lesbian women, 38% reported their partners had abused their companion animals (Renzetti, 1992) while over two-thirds of 100 battered women seeking safety in domestic violence shelters reported their companion animals being threatened or killed by their partners (Ascione, 2005). Walton-Moss, Manganello, Frye, and Campbell (2005), in a study of 427 abused women across 11 geographically dispersed U.S. cities, reported threatened or actual abuse of a companion animal to be one of five most statistically significant indicators of men to become batterers.

Adams (1995) described companion animal abuse as one unique form of battering. Women, whose companion animals are threatened, harmed, or killed experience fear for themselves and their animals. They may decide they have to give up their companion animals to a shelter (where it may be euthanized) or others to avoid harm. These women can experience tremendous grief over the loss of their companion animal and the relationship with that animal; when they have children, the children also experience this loss. Ascione, Weber, and Wood (1997) interviewed 39 children of battered mothers. Two-thirds (66.7%) had witnessed companion animals being hurt by, among other things, strangulation, poisoning, and being shot. More than half (51.4%) said they had protected a companion animal from a perpetrator. "In front of the children he would talk about giving the dog away, or worse still, about killing him. This made the children very frightened as they loved the dog" (Allen et al., 2006, p. 172). See Faver and Strand (2007) for an excellent review of the current research on the psychological costs of animal abuse for battered women and their children.

Interestingly, while it unknown if any state defines witnessing animal abuse as child abuse, it is noteworthy that at least six states (AZ, CO, IN, NE, NV and TN) have statutory definitions of domestic violence that include abusing or threatening to harm animals in order to control an intimate partner's behavior, and one state (CO) has similar definitions for elder abuse (Arkow, 2013a). More work needs to be done in child welfare.

The abuse of animals by children who have been abused themselves or who have witnessed abuse of others is another

connection increasingly supported by research. Merz-Perez and Heide (2004) suggested that animal abuse by children can be an indicator that those children are at risk themselves of having violence committed against them. Ascione (2005) reported that children who have been physically or sexually abused are more likely than nonabused children to abuse animals. DeViney, Dickert & Lockwood (1983), in a study of 53 families who had maltreated children, found that animal abuse/neglect had occurred in 60% of the families and in 88% of the 19 families where children were physically abused; in 26% of those families, children had abused their companion animals. Friedrich compared 271 cases of substantiated sexual abuse in 2- to 12-year-olds to 879 nonabused children and found that parents reported one in three sexually abused boys and one in four abused girls were cruel to animals. In comparison to nonabused children, the rates were seven times higher for abused boys and eight times higher for abused girls (as reported in Ascione, 2005).

Quinlisk (1999) found in one study that 76% of the battered women who reported abuse towards their companion animals reported their children witnessing the abuse and 54% reported their children also committing animal abuse. Ascione et al. (1997) found in their study of companion animal abuse experiences of abused and nonabused women that over 13% of the children who had witnessed abuse of animals reported that they themselves had hurt a companion animal by doing such things as throwing, hitting or stepping on the animal (see also Faver & Cavazos, 2007; Flynn, 2000; Melson, 2001). Thus, the discovery of animal abuse in a home can signal the need for further safety and/or risk assessment.

Moreover, animal abuse perpetrated by children is itself a very serious behavior that needs intervention (Merz-Perez & Heide, 2004). It is one of the early manifestations of conduct problems associated with “low empathy and callous disregard” (Dadds, Whiting & Hawes, 2006, p. 141) and can be one of the earliest, as well as most severe, signs of conduct disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). While every child who abuses an animal may not be seriously disturbed or go on to commit other crimes, substantial research suggests that a pattern of childhood animal abuse may be one of a cluster of expressions of childhood aggressive or antisocial

behavior (Gullone, 2011). Abused children, in particular, may be vulnerable to such 'generalized deviance.' For example, in CAT (treatment program for children who abuse animals) the vast majority of children assessed have experienced ongoing maltreatment. It is also very common for them to have been aggressive towards siblings, classmates, caregivers, teachers and property.

Positive Impact of Animals on Humans

Animals, either as companions or as part of formal AAI, can be therapeutic for children, especially those who have experienced trauma (Parish-Plass, 2008). The literature, both professional and popular, is replete with evidence of a variety of positive effects that animals can have on humans—more than can be adequately reviewed here. Examples include both long and short-term health and wellness effects, as well as psychosocial benefits. Research has, for instance, demonstrated that companion animals may help lower heart rate and reduce blood pressure for both children (Friedman, Katcher, Thomas, Lynch, & Messent, 1983) and adults (Allen et al., 2002; Katcher, Friedmann, Beck, & Lynch, 1983), and decrease depression (Garrity, Stallones, Marx, & Johnson, 1989; Siegle, Angulo, Detels, Wesch, & Mullen, 1999). Animals draw and hold children's attention, directing their attention outward and thus helping calm them (Hart, 2000; Katcher & Wilkins, 1997) and mediate their emotional crises (Strand, 2004).

Risley-Curtiss et al. (2006a) reported the women in their study identified receiving friendship, fun, love, comfort, constancy, and/or protection for themselves, their children, or both, from their AHR. These women talked about their own childhood experiences with companion animals, relating that their animals provided them with support, friendship, protection, fun, play and love. For example, Felicia described a childhood dog as "always at our side; [he] went everywhere with us. He was real protective over us" (Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006a, p. 438). It is important to note that these cherished relationships were not always with long-term family pets. In the same study Marie shared her experience with a stray cat when she was 5 years old "It was kind of like my only friend that I could talk to ... I didn't have good communication in the family ... so

it was kind of like my friend—my cat, my buddy that I talked to and stuff” (Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006a, p. 438). The cat disappeared after about a year.

Children often report confiding their secrets, fears and angers to their companion animals (Melson, 2003), and abused children may be more likely to do so than nonabused children. Robin, ten Bensel, Quigley, and Anderson (1984) found abused children were three times more likely than nonabused children to identify their companion animals as support for overcoming loneliness and boredom. For 47% of the abused children, companion animals also provided someone to love and be loved by, compared to 29% of nonabused children. As stated by a child in the study, “A pet is important as it gives the child something to hold and love when his parents or one parent doesn’t love him” (Robin et al., 1984, p. 114). Fortunately for such children, holding and confiding in animals does not have to be developmentally outgrown as they age, thus they could be one of the few constants in their fractured lives. This is in contrast to the developmental pattern of children gradually individuating from their parents and siblings (Melson, 2001). Since it is also socially acceptable for boys to show emotions and nurturing behaviors with animals, this gives them a potential confidante and ally in unhealthy families.

In their review of AHR research, Garrity and Stallones (1998) concluded that benefits from companion animal association occur on the psychological, physical, social and behavioral levels, and are probably both a direct benefit to humans as well as a protective or buffering factor when humans face life crises. Strand’s (2004) review of the research also supported the buffering impact of the child-animal bond in families with interparental conflict, and she recommended inclusion of that bond to enhance children’s coping in such families. Melson (2001) wrote, “the ties that children forge with their pets are often among the most significant bonds of childhood, as deeply affecting as those with parents, siblings, and friends” (p. 16). In sum, the research shows that positive interactions with, and attachments to, animals can be good for both children and parents. Having animals in one’s home may help mediate factors that may contribute to child maltreatment, and they may also be able to help buffer against the effects of maltreatment.

Because of the powerful connections that humans can have with animals, animals can also be positive adjuncts in treatment of maltreated children and their caretakers (Fine, 2010; Levinson, 1997). While not all children and parents experience these connections, the potential for this positive impact has been recognized as far back as the middle 18th century, with the planned introduction of companion animals into the care of the mentally ill at "The York Retreat" in England (Levinson, 1997). In 1969, Levinson published his seminal book *Pet-oriented Child Psychotherapy*, in which he documented ways that the inclusion of companion animals can accelerate the development of rapport between practitioners and clients (Levinson, 1997). This can be useful in enhancing client motivation, which then may help provide more effective treatment in the shortened time frames demanded by today's managed care. Levinson also described how the inclusion of animals could be helpful in psychological assessment, in psychotherapy, in pet-oriented therapy in residential settings, in working to motivate the exceptional child for learning, and in family therapy (Levinson, 1997). Reichert (1998) supported Levinson in her work with children who have been sexually abused, stating that "a child often finds it's easier to express herself through physical interaction with the animal rather than verbal communication" (p. 180).

In 1984, Anderson, Hart, and Hart published *The Pet Connection: Its Influence on Our Health and Quality of Life*, which included reports of the positive impact of animals on children, including those who are emotionally disturbed and have language disorders or autism. Cusack (1988) summarized research on the positive connection between mental health and companion animals related to depression, stress and anxiety, and psychiatric patients among children, adolescents, family, those suffering physical challenges, and those in prison (all populations relevant to child welfare work).

The evidence supports inclusion of AHR in the treatment of many children, and perhaps parents, in abusive families. The form this treatment takes can vary in multiple ways, including: (1) child welfare practitioners placing troubled children and youth in residential centers that include AAI such as Green Chimneys, in Brewster, N.Y.; (2) requesting AAI

programs be included in crisis or transitional settings for maltreated children who are going into foster care; (3) encouraging foster caretakers to get companion animals so that foster children may have the possibility of immediate nonthreatening allies; (4) advocating for children going into foster care to be able to take a treasured companion animal with them (Ross & Baron-Sorenson, 2007); and (5) referring children and parents to therapists who use AAI programs designed specifically for treatment of abusive families (e.g., equine psychotherapeutic programs) (Fine, 2010; Parish-Plass, 2008).

Treatment can also include educational, concrete and referral services, such as helping a family keep a child's beloved companion animal by linking them to low cost veterinary services and food banks providing animal food. Through budgeting and casework, case managers can even assist individuals and families who may benefit from having a companion animal in deciding what kind of companion animal would be appropriate, what their care entails, and if they can afford such an animal. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many children aging out of the substitute care system who often live alone are getting companion animals. Unfortunately, they are usually unprepared for this responsibility and the animals may end up being abandoned. For example, one young woman who got herself a ferret did not realize that ferrets can smell quite bad. She told her caseworker she didn't want the ferret any longer and was going to turn it loose in a park where it would have died. She erroneously believed that domestic ferrets come from the wild. Child welfare practitioners can help keep such situations from happening. Caseworkers can also validate the importance of animal family members to their client families, especially children, and maximize their work with those families by drawing on the positive impact such animals can have for family members.

Child welfare practitioners do not need to be able to do AAI. However, they should understand the potential benefits and pitfalls, the differences between animal-assisted activities and therapy, and consider referrals to quality programs that do include animals (e.g., hippo therapy, equine-assisted psychotherapy, and humane education).

Integration of AHR into Child Welfare

It is not the purpose of this article to outline a complete detailed protocol directing integration of AHR into child welfare agencies; that is the role of individual agencies themselves. It is our purpose, however, to facilitate that integration by revisiting and reinforcing the need for it, providing information and resources, and making practical recommendations.

There is more than enough documentation of connections between humans and animals to consider expanding the ecological lens to include animals in child welfare work as an important way to enhance practice. Efforts to encourage agencies to do so have been under way for several years (Arkow, 2007; Loar, 1999; Randour & Davidson, 2008). Nonetheless, the most current research suggests this inclusion has been slow and piecemeal. In a study by Risley-Curtiss, Zilney, & Hornung (2010), 46 state child welfare agencies responded to a survey on inclusion of animal-human related material in their CPS trainings, assessments, and interventions. Most states included no material on AHR, and for others it was variable. For example, twelve states provided training on asking about the presence of animals in families and eight included information on recognizing and assessing animal abuse. Seventeen states included information on the co-occurrence of animal and child abuse and domestic violence in their training, but only three states included information on AAI. The same study also found only 10 states reported cross reporting between child animal welfare agencies, only 3 states had any formal policies regarding such cross reporting, and only 6 states included the issue of cross reporting in training.

So what is holding child welfare agencies back from including animals in their work? Respondents in the Risley-Curtiss et al. study reported barriers which included lack of knowledge, lack of staff and time, and a lack of administration-initiated direction. Other barriers may include speciesism, computerized case management, and issues of confidentiality.

Speciesism

One barrier to expanding the ecological lens in child welfare is the issue of speciesism (Wolf, 2000) or humancentric bias in human service fields (Ascione, 2005; Melson, 2001;

Risley-Curtiss 2010a, 2010b). This usually manifests in the form of dismissing animals and the importance they have in the lives of humans, despite a significant body of research to the contrary. While the journal *Social Work* published a review in 1987 of the growing area of human–animal bonding and its implications for social work practice (Netting, Wilson, & New, 1987), a study of cross-reporting between child welfare workers and humane society workers in Canada found that a number of child welfare workers thought cross-reporting was unimportant and were resistant to including animal welfare in their assessments (Zilney & Zilney, 2005). Moreover, a public child welfare expert recently told the author that a discussion of the inclusion of animals in public child welfare was “unconventional.”

Interestingly, several states or U.S. territories (e.g., Arkansas, Oregon, New York, Puerto Rico) have included penalties in their animal cruelty laws for those who abuse animals in front of children (Animal Defense Fund, n.d.; Arkow, 2013b). For example, in 2011 Oregon’s revised ORS 167.320 animal abuse law included animal abuse in the first degree as a Class C felony if “the person knowingly commits animal abuse in the immediate presence of a minor child” (OregonLaws.org, 2011). They increased the penalty July 15, 2013 for that crime (Arkow, 2013b), yet no state statutes could be found that include animal abuse in their definitions of child abuse. It appears that child welfare is lagging behind those in animal welfare.

Administration

Unfortunately, if this specieiism is found in child welfare administration, then it is unlikely that animals will be integrated into child welfare work in any comprehensive manner. This bias usually takes the form of rejecting animals and the large amount of interdisciplinary research that has demonstrated their importance to humans. Alternately, it may take the form of simply refusing to become informed (i.e., lack of knowledge). Comprehensive integration of AHR into child welfare work begins with administrators understanding that it does not matter what they think of animals—whether they have them, like them, or not. It is the place that animals may have in the ecologies of the families (e.g., the interconnectedness of animals and humans) they serve and therefore how

that may impact the 'life of the case' that is important. The previous discussion of animals as family, animal abuse, and AAI begins that undertaking. Once this understanding is achieved, it would seem reasonable to incorporate observations and questions about the presence of animals in/at homes and the meaning those animals have for the family members into investigations and any other assessments.

Computerized Case Management

The computerized case management assessment systems now in use also present additional barriers. For example, many safety and risk assessments are copyrighted and change in these standardized instruments comes extremely slowly, therefore lagging behind in the incorporation of new knowledge. Nonetheless, questions could be added independently to the recording system, perhaps beginning with paper and pencil and then adding computer case records as case notes.

Confidentiality

Once questions and observations of AHR are added to assessments and case records, the information obtained needs to be communicated to relevant parties including ongoing case managers, therapists, substitute caregivers, prospective adoptive parents and, potentially, animal welfare investigators. This reveals another potential barrier, namely the issue of protecting client confidentiality. This barrier can be overcome, however, where the willingness to do so is present. Of all fifty states, 11 already have cross reporting laws that allow sharing of information about animal abuse by CPS workers, and six require that CPS workers report animal abuse (Animal Law Coalition, 2009). In addition, in my CAT program we have the reporting of child or animal abuse and sharing of information with casemanagers and therapists built into our informed consent for intervention.

Lack of Knowledge

While these challenges appear to be daunting, there are resources available to help. American Humane's publication of guidelines in *A Common Bond* (2008) by Randour and Davidson provides specific recommendations for child welfare agencies regarding asking questions about the care and treatment

of animals, treating children who themselves have abused animals or who witnessed animal abuse, including AAI in the treatment of maltreated children, and modifying laws and policy to include the co-occurrence of animal abuse and other forms of family violence.

Training on the co-occurrence of animal abuse and other forms of family violence is available free of charge in many states through what are commonly called ‘Link Coalitions’ (e.g., The Arizona Humane LINK as well as The National Link Coalition). Training is also available for therapists conducting court-ordered assessment and treatment of juvenile animal cruelty offenders through such programs as the Animals and Society Institute’s AniCare Child program (Animals and Society Institute, n.d.). Management can also support attendance at outside training that is available on such topics as children and animals, treatment of animal abuse and AAI, as well as contracting with agencies that provide AAI.

Finally, to further advance practice it is suggested that social work education, including Title IV-E programs, integrate AHR into their BSW, MSW and PhD curriculums. Many child welfare professionals, and much child welfare research, come from the ranks of social work students and professionals. It is incumbent upon social work education to join other professions and disciplines in efforts to delve into, and build on, animal–human relationships as well as integrate such relationships into social work curriculums. Currently, at least three schools of social work (University of Denver, University of Tennessee, and Arizona State University) have substantial programs addressing areas of AHR. Faver and Strand (2003, 2004) provided examples of including animal abuse and domestic violence linkages in social work foundation courses. DeMello’s (2010) recently published *Teaching the Animal: The Social Sciences* contained a chapter with specific suggestions for integrating AHR into standard social work courses as well as examples of syllabi for stand-alone courses (Risley-Curtiss, 2010a).

Lack of Staff and Time

It is well known that most child welfare workers are overworked, and thus some argue they have no time to include more in what they are already doing. Risley-Curtiss et al.

(2010), however, did find in their study of the AHR in public child welfare that some states: (1) include information on AHR in their core CPS training; (2) cross-report animal abuse; and (3) provide AAI to CPS children. Child welfare agencies in a few states in particular have integrated all the areas of AHR discussed here into policies, procedures and practice. Thus, there are models for guidance in how such integration can be done within the current work environment, especially if resources already available are used.

Conclusion

Given the research on the effects of animal abuse, child welfare case practitioners should be asking about the presence, meaning and treatment of companion animals, and to a lesser degree, farm animals and wildlife, as part of child abuse investigations, as well as in on-going case management. Doing so has many benefits for child welfare practice. Identification of animal abuse by adults in a family is important since it can be considered a form of child maltreatment. Furthermore, the frequent co-occurrence of animal abuse with child maltreatment and/or domestic violence makes it a red flag, suggesting the need to explore the existence of other forms of family violence (DeGue & DiLillo, 2009). For example, identifying animal abuse committed by children may help uncover child abuse, since children who are physically or sexually abused may react to their abuse by hurting animals. Identification of recurrent animal abuse by children is also useful for identifying those who may exhibit the potential for developing ongoing problematic trajectories, identifying children as victims, and in signaling the need for prevention treatment efforts for said children. If children have witnessed their animals being hurt or killed, it can also help highlight a need to assist them grieve the harm done to their animals and/or the loss of those companion animals. "Early intervention is the gateway to violence prevention" (Ortega, 2006, p. 932). It is also important to notify substitute caregivers with animals who may care for such children so that they can protect their animals, support the children developing positive ways of interacting with animals, and protect the children from possible animal bites due to

abuse of the animal. For similar reasons, staff of AAI programs should be notified if children who have abused animals are being referred.

Along with asking questions about AHR, observation of animal-human interactions can be extremely helpful in supporting or challenging other information obtained. Home-based services are the core of child welfare service provision, including during investigation. This affords child welfare practitioners an opportunity to repeatedly interact with families and their animals in a non-threatening manner and thus be able to observe animal-human relationships. In DeViney et al.'s (1983) investigation of animal abuse and maltreating families, caseworkers actually observed animal abuse/neglect first hand in 38% of the families. In all of the cases that Zilney and Zilney (2005) examined in-depth, the type of child abuse/neglect mirrored the type of animal abuse/neglect or vice versa. While observations of these interactions are already being done when caseworkers observe home interactions, their meaning is mostly subconscious. We are asking that child welfare workers consciously make these observations and include them in their investigations and assessments, as they may provide a window into underlying dynamics in a family, both protective and harmful (DeGue & Dillo, 2009; Gullone, 2011; Hutton, 1998; Loar, 1999; Rosen, 1998).

A serious consequence of disregarding AHR in child welfare is that it can shortchange our abilities to help clients by failing to: (1) include comprehensive family-centered assessments; (2) recognize serious problem behaviors (e.g., animal abuse, domestic violence); and hence (3) facilitate early intervention; (4) recognize the potential for supporting resiliency through the powerful healing potential of animal-human interactions; and (5) validate important members of many families. These failures can challenge the effectiveness of child welfare practice.

The overarching mission of child welfare work is to protect children and ensure their well-being. Regardless of our views on AHR, we can help maximize our ability to do so by building a more comprehensive appreciation and application of animal-human connections into practice.

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