

To view this article online: <http://web.aces.uiuc.edu/news/list.cfm?NID=2696>

## Animal and Domestic Abuse: A Sobering Connection

Ann Marie Falk  
University of Illinois  
College of Veterinary Medicine

For an archive of pet talk columns see <http://www.cvm.uiuc.edu/petcolumns/>

Interpersonal violence is more pervasive than many people realize. Statistics show that 1 in 4 women will experience domestic violence in her life. In recent years, a strong and surprising connection has been documented linking animal abuse and domestic violence: in 85 percent of homes where women or children are being abused, a pet is also suffering abuse.

This connection is an important one because the repercussions of animal abuse affect humans in a multitude of ways.

"Sixty percent of women who are the victims of domestic violence have had a pet killed by violence. Also startling is the fact that up to 40 percent of battered women delay going to a shelter because they fear what will happen to their pet left behind," states Dr. Rhonda Schulman, a small animal internist at the University of Illinois Teaching Hospital in Urbana.

Dr. Schulman helped organize "Domestic Violence and Animal Abuse: The Cruel Connection," an April 24 conference for veterinarians, law enforcement officers, and domestic violence and social workers. The conference will address topics such as intentional abuse, the perspective of an animal investigations officer, laws against animal violence, and how veterinarians can help in situations of suspected animal or domestic violence.

"Many people have the attitude 'it could never happen to me.' However, domestic violence crosses all socioeconomic boundaries. It is something that can happen to any woman: your mother, sister, friend, or you. Understanding the dynamics of domestic and animal violence can help us recognize a problem situation and intervene," says Dr. Schulman.

Pets may be used as a means to establish dominance. Abusers may send the message "I can do this to the pet and I can do it to you," or "If you don't do as I say, then this will happen to you." Pets are also used as a means of control: "If you don't do this, I'll hurt your animal." Pets are a way of buying silence from children, too: "If you tell anyone, then I'll hurt your dog!"

Animal violence has a very serious negative impact on this nation's children. People who abused pets as children are far more likely to commit murder or other violent crimes as an adult. In fact the most reliable predictors of adult violence is animal abuse as a child, even as young as 6 years old. Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy are infamous examples of this sad statistic.

"Another concern is the impact on children of observing violence," explains Dr. Schulman. "Young children are very impressionable. A child who watches his pet or his mother being abused grows up thinking this is the norm. Unfortunately children are often spectators at dogfights, an illegal practice that is on the rise. Children can become de-sensitized to violence. They learn that you demonstrate that you are more powerful than another creature by hitting and kicking."

The link between animal and domestic violence means that animal cruelty is being taken more seriously. Animal abuse laws are getting stricter. Social workers are learning that women may hesitate to leave an abuser because of concerns about a

pet. Therefore, offering a solution to the pet's endangerment may enable more women to leave abusive homes.

Veterinarians, whose main concern is for animal health, are becoming aware that they are on the front line of defense against domestic violence. More veterinarians are receiving training, such as at the Urbana conference, to deal with suspected cases of domestic violence.

By working together veterinarians, social workers, and law enforcement officers can combat the problems of animal abuse and domestic violence. For more information, see the U.S. Humane Society's Web site: [www.animalcrueltyisfamilyviolence.org](http://www.animalcrueltyisfamilyviolence.org).

For an archive of pet talk columns see <http://www.cvm.uiuc.edu/petcolumns/>

Source: Dr. Rhonda Schulman

---

This news release is a service of the University of Illinois College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences. Releases on other topics can be found on the ACES News Web site <http://web.aces.uiuc.edu/news>