



PROTECTING PETS AND HUMANS, TOO

Agencies must understand the connections between domestic violence and animal abuse to ensure safety

By Andrew M. Campbell

To others, he was simply a “mutt”—a mixed-breed terrier of champagne color and medium build. But to me, he was *everything*. For years, Shelby was the only one I ever let see my broken self. I laughed and made jokes at school and tried to make others around me feel that things were OK, but to him, I laid my emotions bare and told the truth. Countless times during my teen years, at 3 or 4 in the morning, I sat outside in our backyard, quietly crying to my best friend.

I had told others that something was very wrong with me. Not only was the exposure to stress and emotional harm taking a serious mental toll, but I was also experiencing chronic headaches and stomachaches. Research has become increasingly clear regarding the physiological effects of toxic stress on the body, and it has helped me gain greater insight as to what I was experiencing at that time and still experience today. Toxic stress steals childhoods and shortens adult lives.

When I wasn't at school or working to help provide for my family starting at age 14, I was walking with Shelby. We walked and walked for hours through the empty fields that surrounded our home. It was my reprieve—my time to step away and clear my head. A time to enjoy a simpler, stress-free life. I remember the last time we took that walk; he had grown old and his legs gave out on the way back. Heartbroken in the most extreme sense of the word, I carefully picked him up and carried him home for the last time, just as he had carried me for so long.

TRUE COMPANIONS

Pets are family. They play an important role in households across the country, but possibly none more important than the critical role they

often play in homes impacted by domestic violence. My own exposure to prolonged toxic stress and emotional harm left me broken and convinced my life was of no worth. Shelby never spoke a word but always provided exactly what I needed. He was able to silence the continual thoughts of depression and suicide that would haunt me for years to come. Others told me I had worth and value, but Shelby helped me believe it.

Many children and adults impacted by physical or emotional violence in the home find the same comfort and hope in their trusted animal companions. Pets shore up critical components of mental health for their humans, including feelings of safety, security, purpose, consistency, love, support, joy, and comfort. For many in homes where domestic violence occurs, pets may be the sole source of these emotions.

Research indicates that pets may provide a more effective barrier to the negative psychological effects of abuse and toxic stress than a child's caregivers. Unfortunately, the long list of benefits pets provide to their humans may be the very reason domestic violence abusers target them. When we neglect to include pets in safety plans and family violence interventions, we not only fail the animals, but also the humans in the home.

There's a good reason animals are being incorporated more and more in classrooms, courtrooms, and clinics to bring calm and comfort to children and adults. Their presence often allows victims of violence or abuse to speak more freely about traumatic and stressful incidents. The animal's calming presence often helps victims/survivors control their breathing, provides a distraction from the painful topic, and mitigates the stress associated with reliving the incident. More victim services agencies should consider incorporating animals into

their interview processes and, when possible, community outreach. The general public may also be more willing to discuss a difficult topic if animals are present to alleviate stress and emotional discomfort.

Domestic violence shelters across the United States are becoming more pet-friendly, and many now allow pets to be sheltered on-site with their humans; others incorporate foster programs to provide safety at a separate location. When shelters don't provide resources for pets, it becomes such a critical barrier for many humans that they will refuse to seek safety without them. Some report choosing to live in their cars or remain in a violent relationship rather than leave a pet behind in a dangerous home.

EXTENSION OF ABUSE

Though the risk is high for everyone living in homes where domestic violence occurs, the risk of prolonged emotional and physical harm is greater when animal abuse is also perpetrated in the home. Abusers often use acts of abuse against animals to exercise control and discourage victims from calling authorities to report the violence and abuse. In fact, there's something so emotionally damaging about animal abuse in homes where domestic violence occurs that many victims may never fully recover from witnessing it. Abusers will often go out of their way to make sure children witness acts of pet abuse in an attempt to inflict as much harm as possible on the household.

Without effective intervention, this can result in the child becoming an abuser of animals and other humans. Whether intended to separate themselves emotionally from the animal, protect other members of the household, or emulate an abuser who appears to be "getting what they want" through these actions, acts of animal abuse perpetrated intentionally by a child are heartbreaking to witness and often set a deadly cycle in motion with consequences for households and communities across the country.

Though not all children who abuse animals go on to become serial killers or mass murderers, many serial killers and mass murderers have histories of abusing animals in their youth. When children abuse animals, we must pay attention. It is often a clear and undeniable cry for help. We must consider the possibility that the child in question has been abused and/or that they have witnessed acts of abuse against humans or animals in their own home.

Children who abuse animals are likely to continue to do so in the future, and are likely to victimize other persons in the home and community, as well. When law enforcement responds to a call in which children witnessed or perpetrated an act of abuse toward an animal or human, they must engage appropriate child welfare agencies not only to ensure the child's safety, but also to provide opportunities to secure additional resources for everyone in the home. These resources may reduce the risk of future incident.

ENDANGERING OFFICERS

National data reveals that one in five domestic violence-related homicide victims is not an intimate partner, but a friend, family member, bystander, or first responder. Data on LEO line-of-duty deaths indicate an alarming number of officers killed each year responding to a domestic disturbance. Research indicates that there is an equally high risk of harm when domestic violence abusers also abuse pets.

When protected, pets can play a critical role for families impacted by domestic violence.



The author as a teen with Shelby, his dog.

When domestic violence abusers also harm pets in the home, they are significantly more likely to have mental illness, abuse substances, have attempted suicide, and have access to a firearm—a deadly combination that puts every responding officer or involved agency at risk.

While many agencies conduct a risk assessment when arriving on the scene of a domestic disturbance, not all include questions about harm to animals in the home. All should, however, since a perpetrator's history of animal abuse is a critical indicator of risk for all. Victims of family violence may be more likely to disclose abuse of animals, though they may not realize its significance. Additionally, if pets provide a source of comfort in the home, talking about them may calm victims (if the pets have not been harmed) and allow them to better describe more accurately the environment of abuse in the home.

When protected, pets can play a critical role for families impacted by domestic violence. Research is clear regarding the links between domestic violence and animal abuse. When people in the home are at risk, animals are at risk, and vice versa. Communities must develop family violence intervention initiatives that account for the animals in the home, and allow them to find safety with the rest of the family whenever possible. First responders must ask about animals in the home and understand that their own risk is likely increased when a domestic violence perpetrator also has a history of abusing animals. When we work to improve our response to reported animal abuse and domestic violence, we not only protect animals in the community better, we protect humans better, too. 🌟

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