

CHILDHOOD CRUELTY TO ANIMALS: ASSESSING CRUELTY DIMENSIONS AND MOTIVATIONS¹

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OVERVIEW

The relation between childhood cruelty to animals and both concurrent and future violent behavior has received limited but increasing research attention (Ascione, 1993; Feithous & Kellert, 1987). Preventing and treating childhood cruelty to animals will require a) qualitative, as well as quantitative, assessment methods and b) specification of the varied motivations for such behavior. Although some information is available about the prevalence of animal maltreatment in samples of children and adolescents (e.g., Achenbach & Edeibrock, 1981; Achenbach, Howell, Quay, & Conners, 1991), other dimensions of animal maltreatment (e.g., severity, chronicity, involvement in sexual abuse) are only beginning to be explored. The significance of cruelty to animals as a symptom relevant for assessing children's mental health status is formally acknowledged in the last two revisions (1987 DSM-III-R and 1994 DSM-IV) of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

We describe the construction and field-testing of a semi-structured interview, the Children and Animals [Cruelty to Animals] Assessment Instrument (CAAI), for use with children over four years of age and their parents, to obtain information on animal maltreatment. The CAAI was field-tested with a community and clinical sample of twenty children (mean age=10.4 yrs; 85% Caucasian, 10% Spanish surname, 5% African-American). Seventy-five percent of the participants were boys and 65% of the parents reported having a family pet. The clinical sample included children in day treatment and residential programs for emotionally disturbed youth, incarcerated adolescents, and children accompanying their mothers to shelters for battered women.

CAAI CONSTRUCTION AND FIELD-TESTING

The basic format of the CAAI was developed after careful consideration of other assessments of aggression and antisocial behavior in children. One critical consideration was designing an instrument that could be used with adults (specifically, parents/guardians) and with children. Because of this, a format that would list and describe increasingly cruel and destructive acts was judged inappropriate and very likely unethical for use with children from non-clinical samples.

A semi-structured interview format was selected since we would be assessing children with verbal skills who could respond to simply-worded questions about their current and past behavior with animals. Interview questions were organized to assess witnessing and performing cruelty and kindness toward animals in four categories (farm, wild, pet, and stray). Each set of questions was designed to stand alone since other researchers might only wish to use parts of the CAAI (e.g., a study focusing on children's observation of violence to animals; a study of parents' description of their children's kindness

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In our sample, we found total scores ranging from 0 to 27. Most of the ratings fell into the 10-20 range suggesting that future research with larger samples of children examine clinical cut-off scores for separating cruelty into mild, moderate, and severe categories.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

In addition to its potential for quantitative scoring, the CAM yielded rich information for qualitative analysis and raises questions about the reliability of single-item assessments of cruelty to animals.

First, information from the CAM was valuable for exploring the varied motivations children may have for engaging in cruelty to animals. The motivations include curiosity and exploration, especially by younger children, who may not yet have internalized values regarding the kind treatment of animals, peer reinforcement for cruel behavior (for example, in cases where a gang may require animal cruelty as part of its initiation rites), using cruelty to animals (including sexual abuse of animals) as a means of changing one's current mood to a more excited one, imitating, either consciously or not, the witnessed cruelty to animals performed by others, and using cruelty to animals as a means of self-injury (as in the case of one child who agitated the family cat until the cat clawed the child's arms). It should be emphasized that these motivations were derived by focusing on the cruelty dimensions of the CAAI; examining the kindness dimensions, as well, suggests that destructive and gentle behaviors may coexist in children's repertoires, making analysis of the cruelty phenomenon more challenging.

Second, use of the CAAI revealed that checklists including only one brief item on cruelty to animals may sometimes provide misleading information or fail to capture the level of cruelty that some children display toward animals. For example, we found that, in some cases, children failed to mention obvious acts of cruelty their parents noted and, in other cases, the reverse was true. The value of multi-method (checklist and interview) and multiple informant (parent and child) approaches to assessment was reinforced by our experiences. In one case, a parent gave her child a rating of 1 on the cruel to animals CBCL item. The parent then proceeded to describe, during the CAAI interview, a longstanding pattern of vicious, lethal animal cruelty her child engaged in. Parents clearly may differ in the reference point they use for judging their children's behavior toward animals . what is considered "cruel" in one family may be acceptable discipline in another family (Thompson & Ascione, 1995). In another case, the parent was unaware of her child's cruelty since it occurred covertly. Relying solely on parental report would have yielded a distorted picture of this child's behavior with animals.

LIMITATIONS/FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Preliminary analyses of interrater reliability in scoring the cruelty dimensions suggest that agreement ranges from adequate to good. Some dimensions yielded excellent agreement between raters (e.g., for RECENCY, 83% exact agreement) while others were marginal (e.g., ISOLATE, 60% exact agreement). This suggests a need for further elaboration of the scoring criteria and expansion of sections of the CAAI to probe more extensively about certain cruelty dimensions.

- In future research, it would be valuable to obtain information on levels of interpersonal violence that a youth has witnessed and/or engaged in within the family context (e.g., wife battering, sibling