Children, adolescents, and animals research

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New advances in animal cruelty prevention

This briefing accompanies the sixth in a series of reflective workshops organised by caar at the University of Edinburgh. It focuses on emerging findings from recent qualitative research with children who have harmed animals. These children are participating in ‘Animal Guardians’, a one-to-one targeted programme developed with the Scottish SPCA. We also highlight findings from our evaluations of other animal welfare education programmes that have involved whole classes of children in primary schools.

Background

Prevention of cruelty is the ultimate aim of animal welfare organisations, and many intervention programmes are currently being developed and delivered around the world. Children are a particular focus for these interventions, with the aim of countering negative attitudes and behaviours or misunderstanding that stem from their observations of adults or wider cultural influences. The majority of interventions are ‘universal’, providing general education on the welfare needs of different types of animal. There are very few programmes that work with those who have observed animal cruelty or harmed an animal themselves. Caar has begun to address this deficit in collaboration with the Scottish SPCA.

Children’s perspectives on animal abuse

A recent qualitative research study, carried out by Laura Wauthier (University of Edinburgh), has investigated children’s experiences of animal abuse and identified associated influences that contribute to cruelty occurring. The research has involved children who were referred to ‘Animal Guardians’, a programme that targets those who have been cruel to animals or are deemed at risk (see next page). Research consent was sought for children referred during the first five months of the programme (May to October 2018), and was obtained for 10 children (average age= 8.8 years, n=9 males). All children were referred as a result of cruel or ‘at risk’ behaviour towards their pets. Interviews comprised crafts, vignettes and open questions, and were qualitatively analysed using content analysis to provide a descriptive overview of children’s perspectives. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) provided deeper insight into associated psychological and contextual influences.

The study found that children expressed a fondness for animals and viewed them as sentient (capable of feelings), but they struggled admitting to cruelty. These children had small attachment networks, but they often included pets in their descriptions of people who were important to them. It was clear that most of the children were from vulnerable backgrounds and often experienced difficulties regulating their own emotions and behaviours. In an exercise where they had to describe what was happening in a drawing they were presented with, they tended to interpret ambiguous situations in a negative way (e.g., they were more likely to describe the adults (portrayed neutrally) being angry with the child or animal). The data suggest that children had been exposed to violence and it was relatively ‘normal’, and there was evidence of emotional trauma. Hawkins, Hawkins & Williams’ (2017) review of existing research investigated the potential psychological and behavioural predictors of childhood cruelty to animals, finding a myriad of associated psychological and behavioural difficulties. At present, these are not well understood.
'Animal Guardians': a new focus for intervention

‘Animal Guardians’ is unique in the UK. Funded by the R S Macdonald Charitable Trust, it is designed to support the development of children’s empathy towards animals, specifically targeting children 5-12 years old. It was piloted in the Edinburgh area for its first year, and has now been extended to Glasgow and other areas. The programme is organised in four stages. The first three involve one-to-one discussions with children around animal sentience, animal welfare needs, and the child’s responsibilities. These are carried out by two Youth Engagement Officers from the Scottish SPCA in the child’s school. The fourth and final stages involve a visit to one of the Scottish SPCA’s animal re-homing centres. The intervention provides an opportunity to work with children on skills such as empathy, emotional regulation, decision-making, and responsibility, which may have positive long-term impacts into adulthood. Animal cruelty has been linked to domestic abuse and other forms of interpersonal violence, and addressing early antisocial behaviours in children may help reduce their incidence.

Laura Wauthier will be assessing the effectiveness of the intervention (a PhD studentship), as well as developing a better understanding of the factors associated with childhood animal cruelty. This is the first systematic assessment of an intervention programme for childhood animal cruelty. Although programmes have been set up in the United States, none have been systematically studied for their effectiveness.

Animal welfare education

Caar has carried out many evaluations of animal welfare education programmes. This began with our work funded by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), where we identified how best to encourage children to develop a ‘duty of care’ towards animals (Muldoon et al., 2009; Muldoon, Williams & Lawrence, 2015; 2016). We have subsequently evaluated the Scottish SPCA’s far reaching ‘Prevention through Education’ programme (Hawkins, Williams & Scottish SPCA, 2017). This programme, that involves Education Officers visiting primary school classes, reached over 245,000 children in 2018. Our evaluations have shown that it is relatively easy to enhance children’s knowledge of animal welfare needs and sense of responsibility. It is also possible to help children to identify when welfare is compromised and act on this safely by reporting to a trusted adult. It is more difficult to enhance attitudes and emotional connection to animals, especially those with whom they are unfamiliar.

More recently, our intervention work has evolved to look more closely at the welfare of different animal types and new methods of teaching, including the use of digital technologies. These include an intervention to promote understanding of farm animal welfare, using a digital game (Hawkins, Mendes Ferreira & Williams, 2019) and ‘Rabbit Rescuers’, introducing children to a robotic or a fluffy rabbit to reinforce key rabbit welfare messages. This programme was successful in improving 5 and 6-year-old children’s understanding of rabbit welfare needs, sentience, and attitudes about cruelty towards rabbits. The intervention with the mechanical rabbit was most effective, but the fluffy toy rabbit led to stronger attachment to pets scores. ‘Rabbit Rescuers’ is now part of the Scottish SPCA’s ‘Prevention through Education’ programme.

What do these findings mean?

(1) Findings from our qualitative research with children who have harmed an animal show how important it is for welfare interventions to be tailored specifically to the needs of these children. Educators and facilitators of interventions need to take into account the complexity of children’s emotional, psychological, and behavioural responses. Time to develop trusting relationships with these children is crucial, and children’s reluctance to admit to harming animals needs to be treated extremely sensitively.

(2) Future research needs to focus on the identification of factors that ‘at risk’ children have in common, so that animal welfare charities and educators are better equipped to intervene and promote empathy and compassionate behaviour toward animals.

(3) Our animal welfare education programme evaluations have shown that it is relatively easy to enhance children’s knowledge about animals and their understanding of animals as sentient beings. It is more difficult to increase children’s empathy and emotional connection to an animal. Educators and charities should aim to identify ways of helping children develop this capacity.
It is important that animal welfare education programmes are carefully designed and age-appropriate. They also need to be continually updated to meet the changing needs of participants. It is essential that programmes remain interesting and engaging to children and young people. Evaluation of programmes is also vital to discern what is working well and what could be improved upon to enhance effectiveness.

References


Link to ‘Animal Guardians’ documentation: https://www.ed.ac.uk/health/research/centres/cadp/child-animal-research/projects/scottish-spca-collaboration/animal-guardians

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Please contact Dr Janine Muldoon janine.muldoon@ed.ac.uk for further information about this briefing paper or our series of reflective workshops.

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