

Listening to children's voices in relation to animal cruelty



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH

SCOTTISH SPCA
Scotland's Animal Welfare Charity



THE
RS MACDONALD
CHARITABLE TRUST



Workshop outline



Part 1: Understanding childhood cruelty to animals

Janine Muldoon

University of Edinburgh

- **Why are we interested in cruelty?**
- **What do we mean by cruelty?**
- **Why listen to children's voices & how?**
- **What are the implications for practice?**

Part 2: 'Reversing the cycle of abuse'

Lesley Winton

Fostering Compassion

Short break around 2.50pm, finish at 4pm

Questions & feedback



Why are we interested in cruelty?

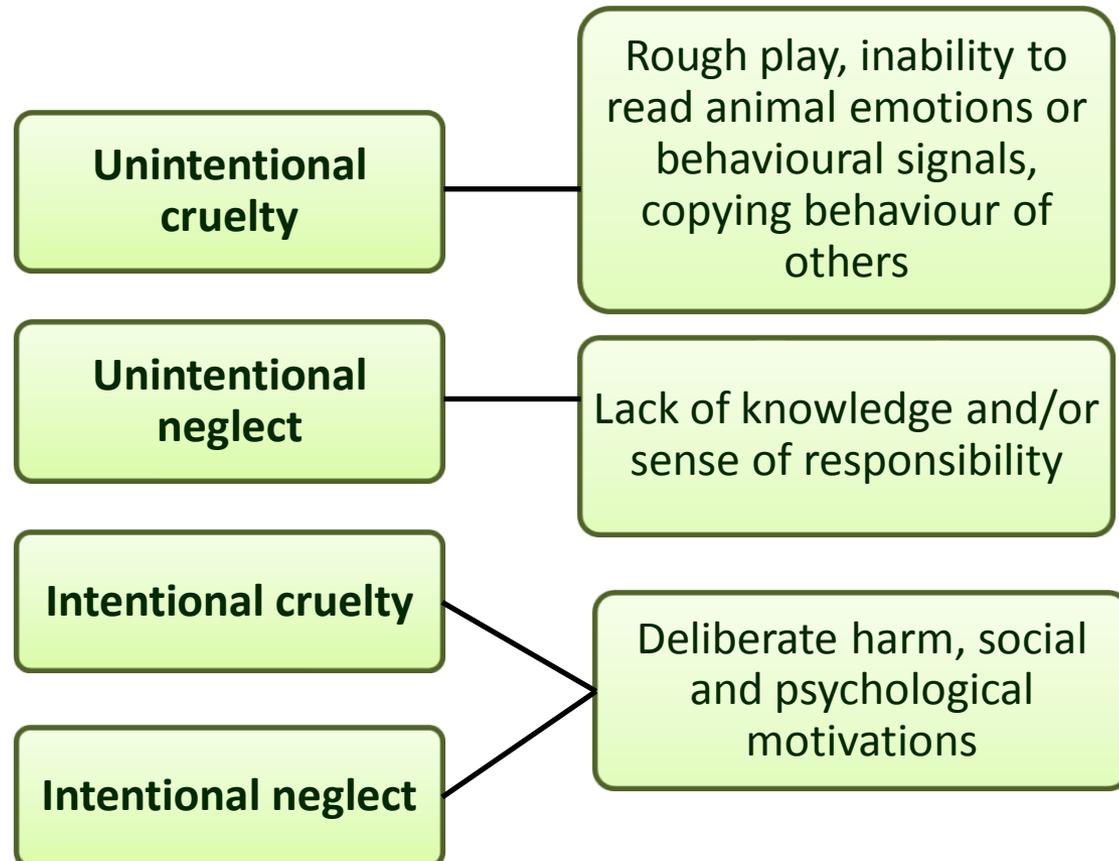


- We believe that harm caused to an animal is detrimental to the person as well as the animal
- We want to find ways of preventing harm and intervening early, to stop problems escalating
- We think it is important for all children to learn what it means to be compassionate/caring towards others
- We are concerned about the impact on children of witnessing cruelty to animals
- Cruelty to animals is now recognised as a form of domestic violence, so is a potential 'red flag' that a child is in a harmful situation
- It is important to challenge the stigma surrounding childhood animal cruelty that has a 'silencing' effect

Understanding childhood cruelty



Different types of cruelty/harm



Intentional cruelty?

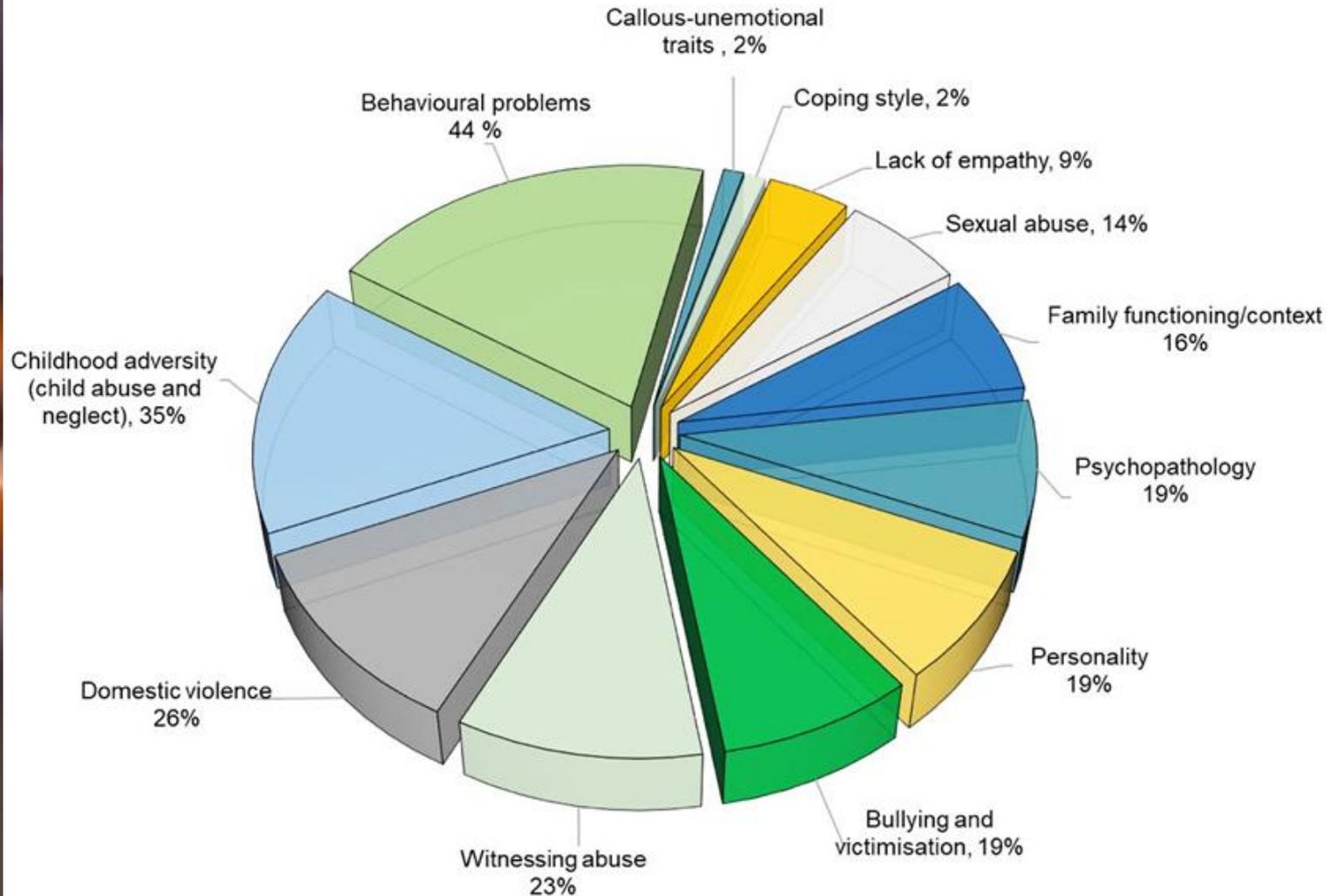


Children harm an animal:

- deliberately because they want to harm the animal (intentional cruelty)
- because the animal hurt them (retaliation)
- because they want to harm the owner or themselves (indirect cruelty)
- because they are protecting other people or their own pet from attack (indirect cruelty)
- because that is the way they see the animal being treated (modelling)
- because they are upset and they lash out (executive function & behavioural control)



What are the psychological risk factors?



Hawkins, Hawkins & Williams (2017)

Significance of adversity



Changes to government policy

- Domestic Abuse Act (Scotland) 2019 - includes harm to property (including pets) and coercive and controlling behaviour (including threats to harm pets) as domestic abuse

Recent research - McDonald et al. (2015)

- > 50% of children living in families with intimate partner violence (IPV) also witness animal cruelty
- Study with 58 children, age 7-12, exposed to IPV & animal cruelty
- Asked to describe their experiences of threats to and harm of their companion animals
 - 38% indicated someone had hurt/killed their pet
 - 27% said someone had threatened to hurt/kill their pet
 - 35% reported both threats to harm and actual harm

Listening to children's accounts



Themes:

- (1) Pet abuse as a power and control tactic against their mother (29)
- (2) Animal maltreatment to punish the pet (14)
- (3) Animal cruelty by a sibling (9)
- (4) Children intervening to prevent the pet being harmed (11)
- (5) Children intervening to protect the pet during a violent episode (9)

“My dad hurt my cat because she latched onto my leg and he tried to pull her off and then she latched onto him and he flung her into the cabinet and she passed out” (Girl, age 8)

“My little brother just got mad and threw the cat down the stairs” (Girl, age 7)

“My brother sometimes tortures our cat. I used to too...I don't now but my brother still does” (Boy, age 7)

“When my dad was trying to hurt my dog, I grabbed my dog and said ‘No, Dad, No’ ” (Boy, age 8)

The positive side of child-animal interactions



Greater recognition of significance of **children's relationships with animals**

- benefits for child development & health
- key to improvements in animal welfare in the future
- source of support during difficult times
- bridge to developing relationships/helping children to reconnect to others



Why listen to children's voices?



Research perspective

- Listening has shown us that animals are significant in children's lives and have informed the development of effective interventions
- Gain insights that could not be obtained through other means/sources - perspectives differ from those who observe/report on children's behaviour
- Cruelty is a hugely complex area – no one method or source is sufficient or perfect
- Not been consulted on this topic
- Don't know the real extent of cruelty – will only know if we ask children
- Want to understand what leads a child to harm an animal? Who else was involved? What effect did it have? What can we do to help?
- To help practitioners intervene successfully/safeguarding
- **The child may want/need someone to listen**

What complicates the process of listening to children?



In relation to animal cruelty:

- Considered a highly sensitive/emotive topic - taboo
- Stigmatized – difficult area to ask children about/covert behaviour
- Our roles and responsibilities
- Our abhorrence of cruelty
- We don't want to upset the child/
make the problem worse
- Safeguarding issues
- Lack of confidence in own skills
- Highly complex – don't want to jump
to conclusions or over-simplify
- Time constraints



Importance of listening to children



How should we listen to children's voices in relation to animal cruelty?

- *What do we mean by 'listening' to children's voices? Is listening different to 'hearing'?*
- *Is it important to talk with children directly about animal mistreatment or are there better methods of understanding their views and experiences?*
- *Which factors are important in deciding how to engage with children?*
 - **Share your thoughts with your group**
 - **If illustrating your points with examples, please ensure you protect the anonymity of those you are talking about**
 - **Please take turns to make notes**



How should we listen to children's voices?

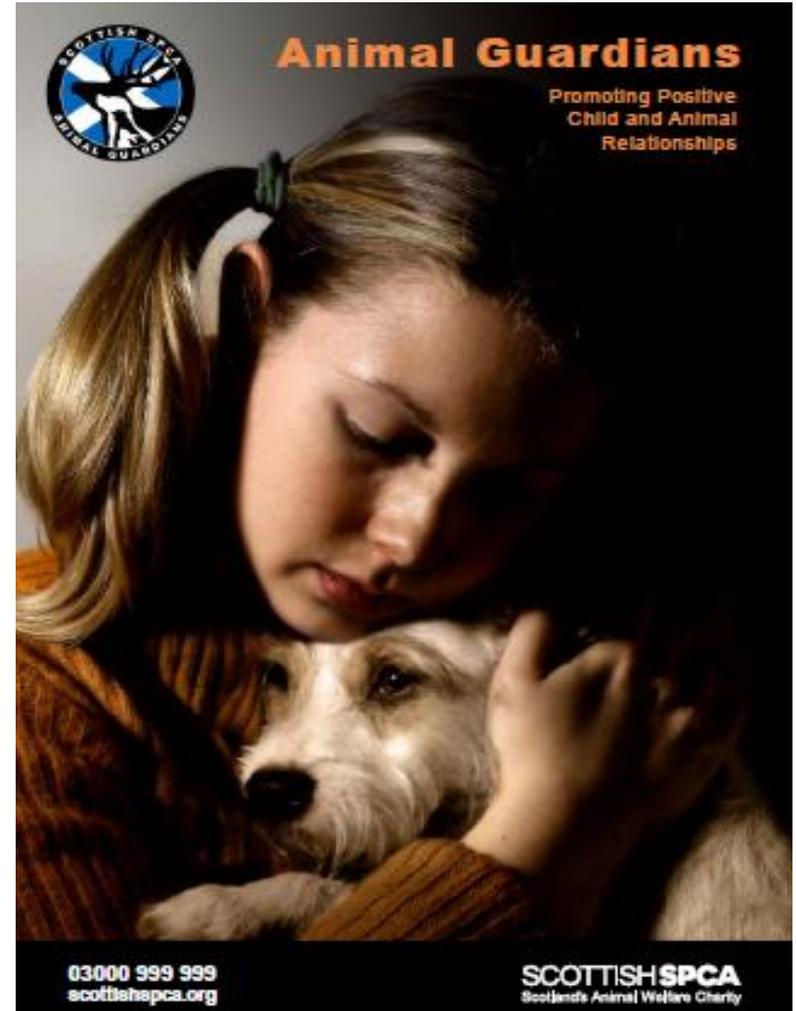


- Good listening is an active process, 'tuning in' to different forms of communication - behaviours, body language, drawings, play
- "Listening is an active verb, which involves giving an interpretation, giving meaning to the message, and value to those who are being listened to" (Rinaldi, 2001, cited by Clark, McQuail & Moss, 2003).
- Be clear on process to manage children's expectations and build trust
- Rapport & trust building requires time
- Indirect (open) or direct lines of questioning?
- Individually or in groups?
- Everyday listening or a one-off consultation about a particular issue, or event?
- How we engage & what methods we choose depends on a range of factors (e.g., child's age, gender, preferences, topic of interest, context, sensitivity of topic, our role or expertise)

Animal Guardians



- For children who have been referred as a result of harming an animal or behaviours that suggest they may do so
- Designed to nurture children's empathy and compassionate behaviour towards animals
- 6-12 visits, plus final trip to rescue & re-homing centre



Animal Guardians



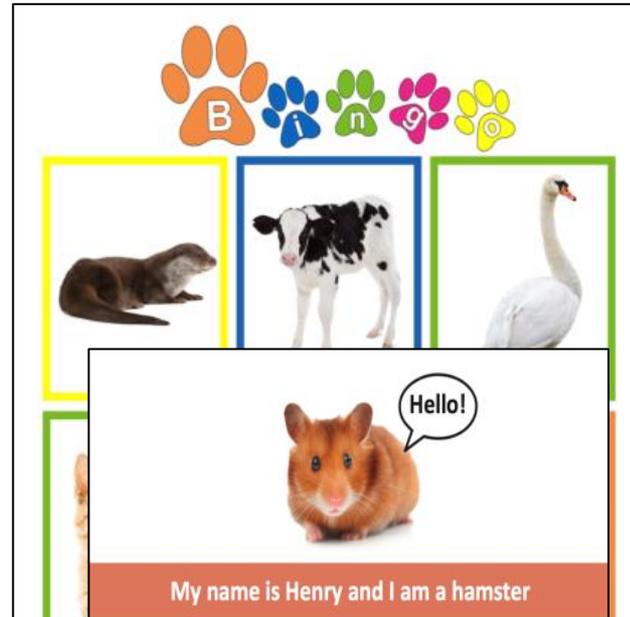
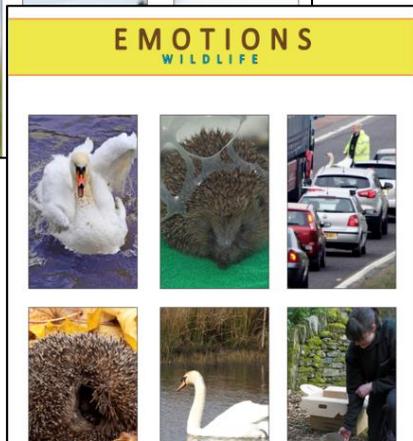
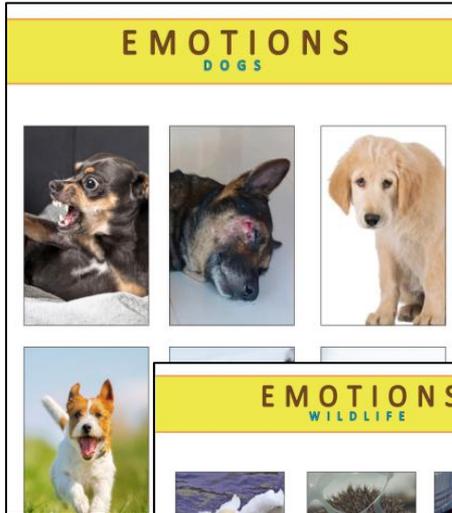
Recognising animal emotion and sentience



Animal welfare needs



Child's responsibilities & appropriate behaviour

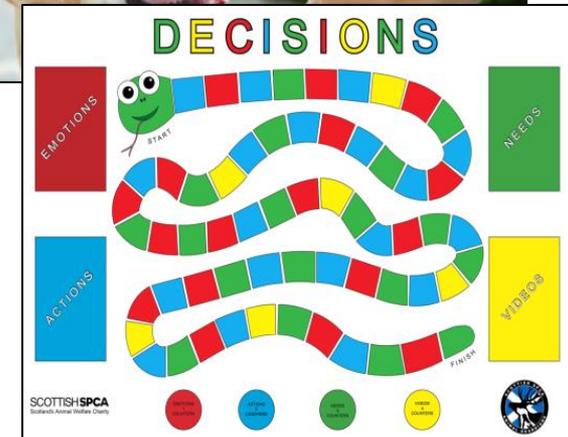


My name is Henry and I am a hamster

In my home I need...

I like to eat...

I need to visit the vet when...



Source: Scottish SPCA

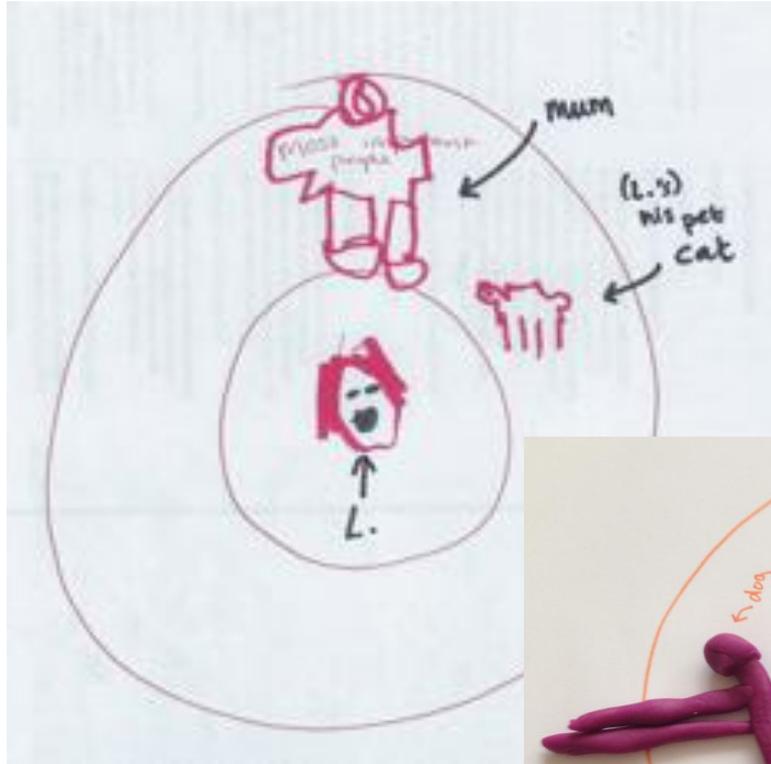
Qualitative research



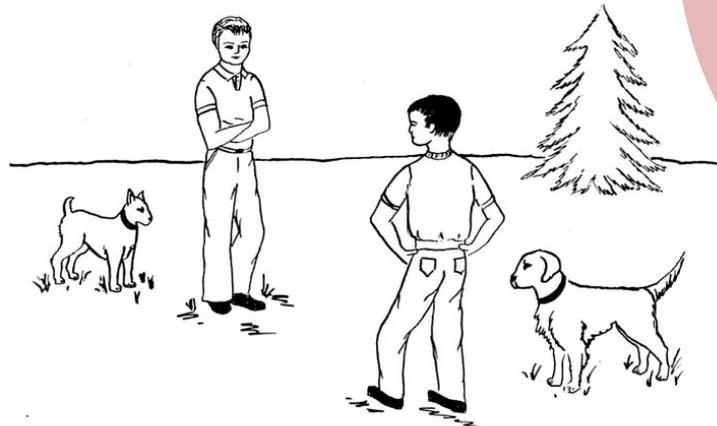
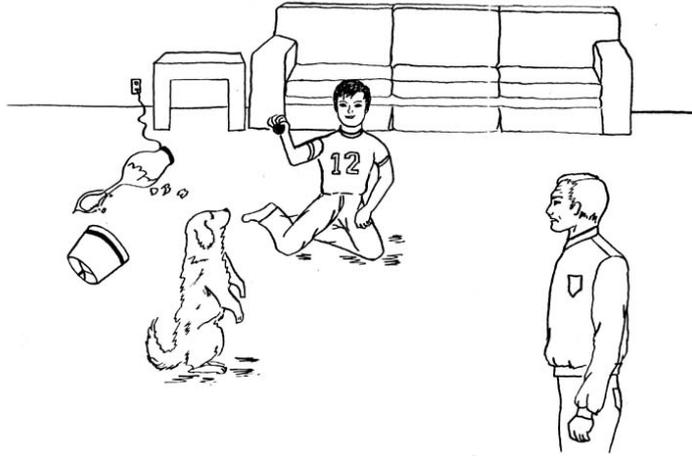
10 children, age 5-11, mean age 8.8 years, 9 boys



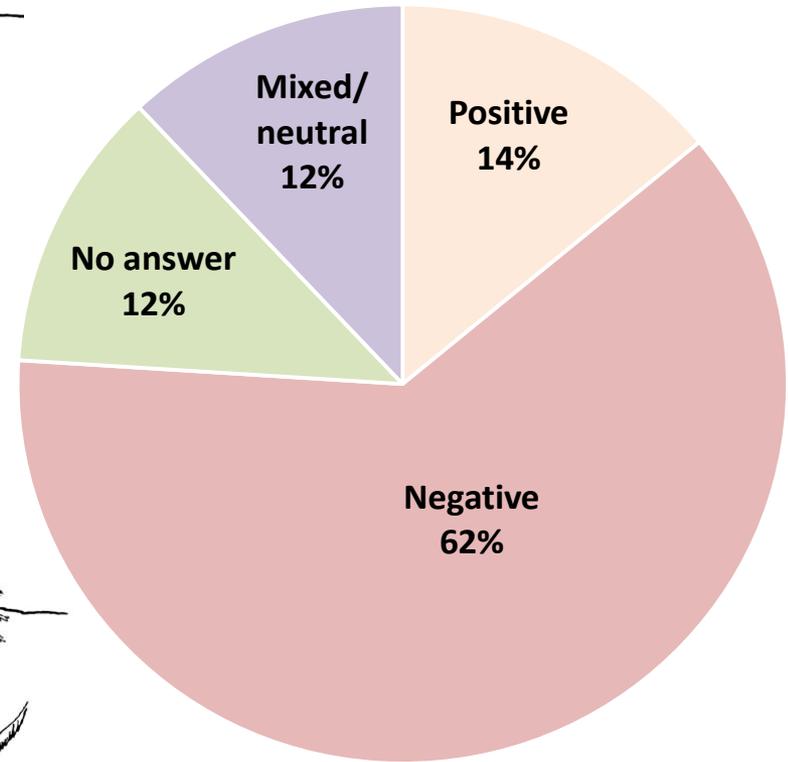
Rapport building – children's relationships



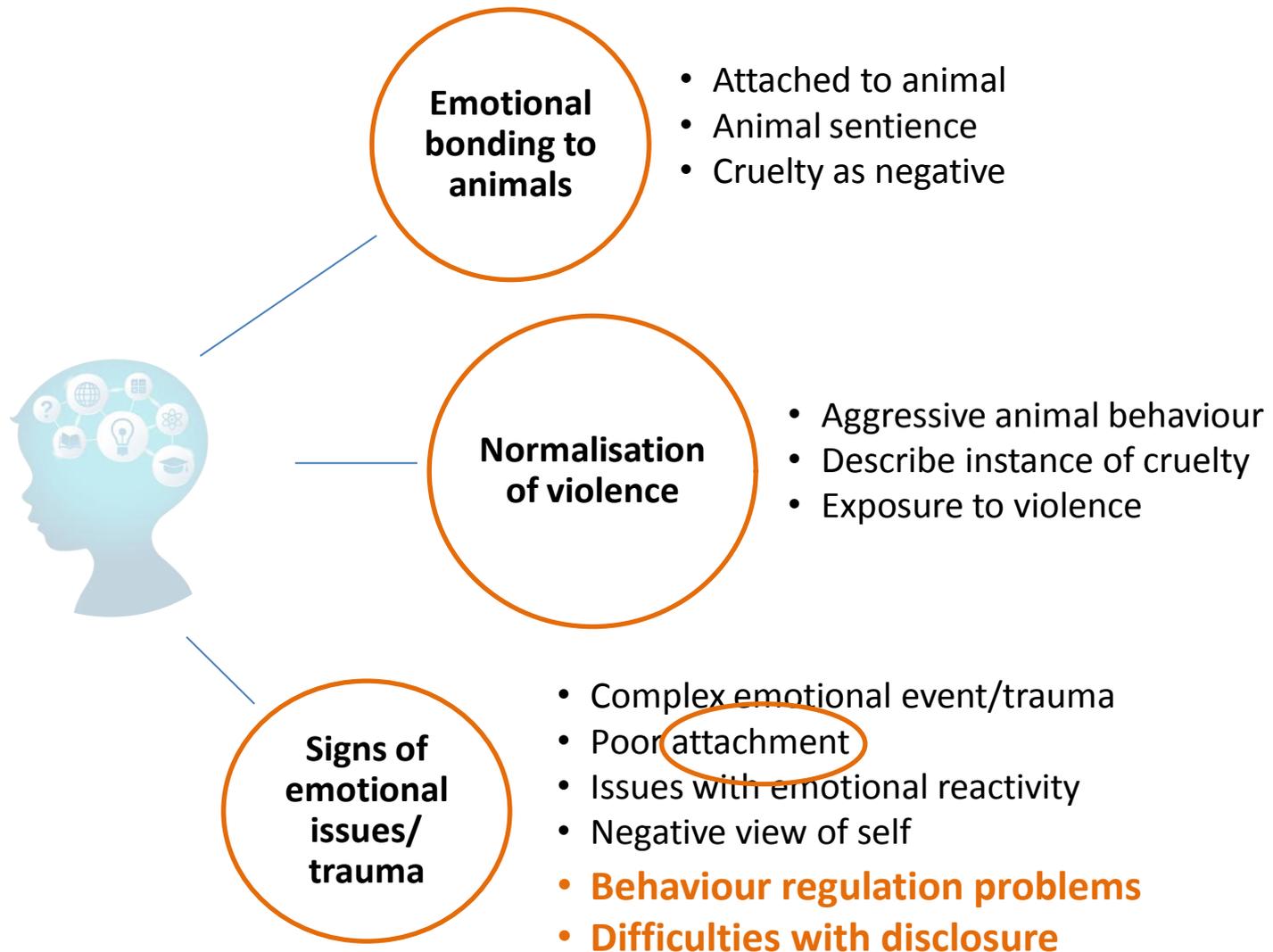
Animals at risk



Outcome Classifications (all images)



Key findings



“No one noticed, no one heard”



Learning about disclosure from those who experienced abuse as a child (Allnock & Miller, 2013, key findings):

- 80% of the children tried to tell someone about the abuse
- Disclosure is rarely a straightforward process of just saying they have been abused
- Many disclosures were either not recognised or understood, or they were dismissed, played down or ignored; this meant that no action was taken to protect or support the young person
- Reasons for not disclosing included: having no one to turn to; not understanding they were being abused; being ashamed or embarrassed; being afraid of the consequences of speaking out
- 90% of the young people had negative experiences with disclosure, mostly where people they told had responded poorly
- Positive experiences of disclosures were when: the child was believed, some action was taken to protect the child, and emotional support was provided
- The young people said they wanted: someone to notice that something was wrong; to be asked direct questions; for professionals to investigate sensitively but thoroughly; and to be kept informed about what was happening



What are children likely to share with you?



How might your role in relation to children encourage or discourage them to engage with you?

- *Think perhaps about how children might view you, any constraints on your practice, or any concerns you have*
 - **Share your thoughts with your group**
 - **If illustrating your points with examples, please ensure you protect the anonymity of those you are talking about**
 - **Please take turns to make notes**



Recommendations for practice



- Always enquire about pets as part of the family environment
- Recognise the significance of pets for children, especially those experiencing difficulties
- Recognise that children may have witnessed animal cruelty even if they have not harmed an animal themselves (common in domestic violence cases)
- Try not to assume too much or be too critical about apparent cruelty -occurs for many different reasons & causing harm is likely to have been traumatic
- Work on fostering trust & creating the conditions where children feel comfortable to share concerns (time/attention)
- Design activities that are engaging & varied
- Hone listening techniques
- Be clear and precise when talking with children about the reasons for discussing a potentially sensitive topic and how they can expect the discussion to progress, including when you may have to share information with others
- Children are unlikely to admit openly to harming an animal, but they may want to tell someone about it



Recommendations for child welfare professionals

- drawn from Hackett & Uprichard, NSPCC report (2007)

- pay attention to animal welfare/behaviour in the household, and turnover of pets

“Reports by children or adults of a regular turnover of pets in the family may constitute a “red-flag” risk indicator of a chaotic family in which the wellbeing of children, as well as that of animals, may be compromised” (p.8)

- explore the significance of attachment to animals as part of assessments of family dynamics and relationships
- routinely include discussion regarding concerns about pets with women or children facing domestic violence
- recognise that the presence of pets can represent a powerful opportunity for children who are subject to psychosocial risk

Child welfare implications



Recommendations for child welfare professionals **where harm has been caused to an animal by a child**

- drawn from Hackett & Uprichard, NSPCC report (2007)
- adopt sensitive and careful approaches, especially where more extreme acts of animal cruelty have been observed or perpetrated –likely to represent unresolved trauma
- consider animal cruelty in the presence of other significant psychosocial risk factors

“It is important that childhood cruelty to animals is not treated as evidence of child maltreatment in-and-of-itself. Instead, professionals should seek to understand the significance of the child's cruelty in the context of their other behavior, family and neighborhood environment”

(McEwen, Terrie, Moffitt & Arseneault, 2014: p. 11)

The Compassionate & Connected Classroom



A curricular resource to build teacher confidence and support children's emotional and mental wellbeing

It aims to support children:

- to understand that experiencing adversity and trauma can happen to anyone;
- to understand the possible impact of adversity and trauma on their wellbeing;
- to develop compassion, empathy and tolerance in their relationships with others;
- to understand that they have the right to be protected and supported by the adults in their lives; and
- to provide them with strategies and personal coping skills to help them deal with challenge and develop resilience

It will also support adults to:

- recognise the importance of positive, nurturing relationships in protecting children from the impact of adversity and trauma



Listening and responding to children



Key messages

- Adults who are good at listening can support children to feel safe about feeling and thinking about emotions.
- Helping children to talk about their emotions encourages them to be aware of, acknowledge and reflect on their feelings rather than act them out in behaviour. It will also help them manage stress throughout their lives.
- Listening is different from hearing. It is an active process in which a conscious decision is made to listen to and understand the messages of the speaker.
- Listeners should remain neutral and non-judgmental; this means trying not to take sides or form opinions, especially early in the conversation. Active listening is also about patience - pauses and short periods of silence should be accepted.
- Being willing to listen and demonstrating empathy and compassion is more important than any specific techniques.
- Creating a climate in the class in where all children feel it is okay to share their emotions and experiences is crucial. It is important that children know that their experiences are accepted and respected and not judged.
- Children should have a choice regarding what and how much they share. It can take time to build trust.
- **Remember to make clear to children that information they share would only ever be shared with other people if they were at risk of harm or were in danger.**

Active listening tips



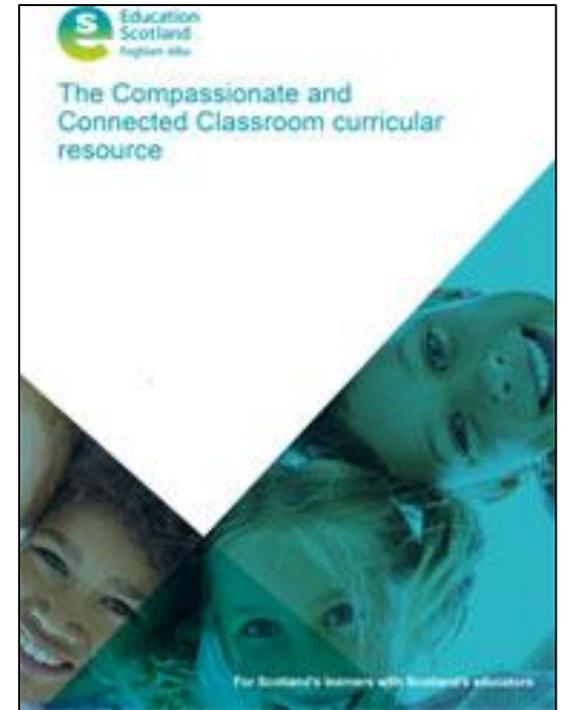
Show you care

Have patience

Use open ended questions

Say it back – check you have understood,
but don't interrupt or offer solutions

Have courage – don't be put off by a
negative response and don't feel you
need to fill a silence or deal with big
issues on your own



<https://education.gov.scot/improvement/learning-resources/compassionate-and-connected-classroom>

Our next workshop



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH
School of Health in
Social Science

Tuesday 28th April 2020

Vets' perspectives on animal cruelty and
domestic violence



THE CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS & ANIMALS RESEARCH GROUP

is hosting a series of free
workshops on animal
cruelty and children's
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*Thank you for
coming!*



caar

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<https://www.ed.ac.uk/health/research/centres/cadp/child-animal-research>



ChildAnimalResearch



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