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# Animal Victims of Domestic and Family Violence: Raising Youth Awareness


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## **Abstract**

In the last two decades, there has been a growing interest in connections between animal abuse and intra-familial violence. Research from the United States (US) has promoted awareness around this connection, and the implications, including for household companion and other animals, when identifying, assessing risk and responding to domestic and family violence (DFV). Compared with the US, United Kingdom (UK), New Zealand (NZ) and Canada, Australia's inclusion of animals in its DFV services' responses is minimal. Furthermore, a preventive perspective to minimise adult abuse of both humans and their animals, that highlights animal abuse in domestic violence school awareness programs, appeared absent in Australia at the time of this project. This paper explores the significance of this issue and examines the effectiveness of such a pilot program in one Australian all-boys school. The program aimed to increase young males' level of knowledge of animal welfare and bonds with humans; increase their understanding of the links between animal abuse and domestic and family violence; produce a change in attitudes towards and increase empathy for animals and females; and instil an enhanced sense of responsibility towards nurturing and protection of animals. Additionally, it was hoped the program would increase young males' level of confidence to intervene safely in situations of abuse if witnessed. The program demonstrates how a school education program has potential to heighten young people's awareness of animal abuse and its link with human violence. Findings from the pilot suggest that increases in post-presentation knowledge, attitudes, interest and confidence of young males provide a platform for a significant public education program in agencies and educational institutions. Innovative programs that integrate animal abuse in the context of domestic and family violence, we suggest, provide a foundation for promoting the inclusion of animals in Domestic and Family Violence and Veterinarian policies, service standards, guidelines and practice.

# Animal Victims of Domestic and Family Violence: Raising Youth Awareness

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*'I hold that the more helpless a creature, the more entitled it is to protection by man from the cruelty of humankind.'*

*(Mahatma Gandhi, cited in Prabhu and Rao).*

*Image credit Lyla Coorey.*

**Abstract:** *In the last two decades, there has been a growing interest in connections between animal abuse and intra-familial violence. Research from the United States (US) has promoted awareness around this connection, and the implications, including for household companion and other animals, when identifying, assessing risk and responding to domestic and family violence (DFV). Compared with the US, United Kingdom (UK), New Zealand (NZ) and Canada, Australia's inclusion of animals in its DFV services' responses is minimal. Furthermore, a preventive perspective to minimise adult abuse of both humans and their animals, that highlights animal abuse in domestic violence school awareness programs, appeared absent in Australia at the time of this project.*

*This paper explores the significance of this issue and examines the effectiveness of such a pilot program in one Australian all-boys school. The program aimed to increase young males' level of knowledge of animal welfare and bonds with humans; increase their understanding of the links between animal abuse and domestic and family violence; produce a change in attitudes towards and increase empathy for animals and females; and instil an enhanced sense of responsibility towards nurturing and protection of animals. Additionally, it was hoped the program would increase young males' level of confidence to intervene safely in situations of abuse if witnessed.*

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**Keywords:** *animal abuse; domestic and family violence; secondary school awareness programs.*

## Introduction

Although portrayal of domestic and family violence (DFV) is currently widespread in Australian media, the presence of companion animals in families where violence exists, and the links between animal and human violence are underreported.<sup>1</sup> In addition, animals are notably absent in DFV and child protection (CP) government<sup>2</sup> and non-government policies, procedures,<sup>3</sup> coordinated services and reports.<sup>4</sup> A growing body of literature however demonstrates that animal abuse is linked with child abuse, elder abuse and domestic and family violence (DFV). Children, serial killers and perpetrators of DFV are identified in the literature as those largely responsible for the abuse (Tiplady 'Animal Abuse'; Tiplady et al, 'The Ongoing Impact'; 'Intimate Partner Violence'; McIntosh; People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals PETA).

As members of families where DFV is occurring,<sup>5</sup> animals are at risk of acts of cruelty and of being killed. Perpetrators use threats, assaults, neglect, torture and the killing of animals as strategies of intimidation, coercive control and retaliation within family violence contexts. For many elderly, disabled and chronically ill people, animals are their companion, and may provide aid in relation to their physical and/or psychological needs. As a source of support, practical assistance and comfort, these animals are at risk of being abused by carers and/or family members who exert power and control over the person they are attached to, and who depends on them.

Indeed, it has been argued that abuse of animals should be subsumed under the umbrella of DFV (Reilly, Communication 20 January, 2016; Arkow in Tiplady 'Animal Abuse'), particularly in Australia where it is estimated that companion animals are present in 70% of cases where DFV occurs (Tong in O'Connell).<sup>6</sup> The magnitude of this co-existing problem provides strong justification for piloting a prevention program that targets both animal and human abuse.

The paper presents the following structure:

1. Literature review of animal abuse within domestic and family violence, perpetrated by human males; the impacts and links to each other, to explain the rationale in undertaking this program.

2. A review of two streams of school awareness programs; one focusing on education on inter-personal respectful relationships; the second on animal welfare, an analysis of which revealed a gap in school programs that addressed prevention of human and animal abuse.
3. A report on the design, development, delivery and evaluation of a pilot school awareness program (May 2016, Sydney, Australia), which combined DFV and animal abuse, with the aim that in the future it could be more widely integrated into an existing educational curriculum.

## 1. Literature Review

### *The Nature of Animal Abuse in the Context of Domestic and Family Violence -Gendered Perspectives*

DFV is defined as any behaviour, in an intimate or family relationship,<sup>7</sup> which is violent, threatening, coercive or controlling, causing a person to live in fear, and can include threats of, or actual physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, psychological, coercive abuse/assault. It also includes threats or actions to harm children, and intentionally causing harm, injury or death to an animal (NSW Government).

Overwhelmingly, domestic and sexual violence is committed by men against women (Council of Australian Governments; ANROWS; World Health Organisation; Flood), suggesting that gender inequality, male violence-supportive attitudes towards females, and power and coercion play an important part in acts of violence towards females. In New South Wales (NSW), between July 2000 and June 2010, 76% of intimate partner homicide victims were women, all of whom were killed by a former or current male partner (Attorney General and Justice 'Annual Report 2013-2015').<sup>8</sup> Despite the gender disparities in the number of males responsible for such behaviour, traditionally, DFV has focused on female victims,<sup>9</sup> whilst male perpetrators often remain invisible (Katz).<sup>10</sup>

As with DFV, adult males are responsible for almost all acts of cruelty towards animals (Arkow, *A Link Across the Lifespan*; Tiplady, 'Animal Abuse'; Williams et al).<sup>11</sup> In domestic situations, these men are using violence towards animals as a form of control and power to intimidate, retaliate against, and manipulate family members during the relationship, and after

separation as punishment for leaving (National Link Coalition; Tiplady et al., ‘The Ongoing Impact’). It is the animal to which women and children are most emotionally attached, which is purposely targeted (Conroy; Tiplady et al., ‘The Ongoing Impact’). This attachment is driven not only by affection, but a shared sense of mutual suffering and empathy (Upadhya).

Animal abuse is defined as the *deliberate* harm, neglect or misuse of animals by humans resulting in animals suffering physically, mentally and/or emotionally (Tiplady, ‘Animal Abuse’).<sup>12</sup> It can refer to active assault (mutilation, torture, set alight, hanged, drowned, stoned, shot, strangled, thrown, driven over), instilling fear through maltreatment, passive neglect (failing to provide food, shelter, water, affection), and confusion (shown affection, and then assaulted).

Whilst perpetrators of DFV are known to harm or threaten to harm household animals (such as dogs, birds, cats, rabbits, guinea pigs), farm animals can also be their target.<sup>13</sup>

## **The Impact of DFV on Victims**

DFV is considered the greatest preventable cause of illness, disease and death affecting females between the ages of 15 and 44 (Victoria Health). It can severely affect victims’ physical (injuries, pregnancy complications, brain injury etc.) and mental (depression, eating disorders, self-esteem, posttraumatic stress disorder PTSD etc.) health in the short term and result in chronic illnesses, permanent disabilities and death (World Health Organisation).

Children of all ages, including prenatally, are also severely affected mentally and physically by direct abuse and through witnessing it. Impacts are cumulative, can be lifelong and intergenerational (Lucas et al.; Taylor and Signal). Children can suffer high levels of anxiety, poor verbal skills, behavioural disorders, poor academic performance, and increased risks of harmful substance misuse and premature death (Lucas et al.; Taylor and Signal). Many children also fear for their mother’s safety and that of their animals and intervene in violent incidents as an attempt to protect their mother and animals.

Animal victims experience emotional (for example fear of being harmed, anxiety, helplessness), psychological/mental (for example high level of distrust of humans, especially men,<sup>14</sup> panic disorders, depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder) and behavioural changes

(such as aggression, withdrawal, distancing from offender<sup>15</sup>) resulting from direct experience/threats of abuse as well as witnessing abuse of their owner.<sup>16</sup> Some companion animals have bitten or attempted to bite the aggressive partner in defence and protection of victims.<sup>17</sup> There are 11 times more dog bites in homes where there is sexual and physical abuse of children and extremely high rates of animal abuse, compared with homes without any abuse (DeViney et al.).

Impacts on animals as both victims and witnesses of DFV have been found to have lasting traumatic effects months after the abuse, and well beyond their owners leaving violent relationships (Tiplady, 'Animal Abuse'; Day and Day; Tiplady et al., 'The Ongoing Impact'). Day et al stress the importance of early assistance for animals, as their anxiety can progress to a generalised anxiety (an excessive reaction to life events), or PTSD, characterised by such symptoms as intense anxiety or fear, hyper-vigilance, avoidance of any event or person related to the trauma. Development of such conditions makes for a strong argument for keeping companion animals with families when they leave a violent home.<sup>18</sup> Whilst a great source of comfort to family members, the support can be mutual. Unlike humans, animals have great difficulty in self-healing (Day et al.) and are dependent on humans to help them. Day et al outline case studies where companion animals were difficult to rehabilitate following abuse. Regrettably, for some traumatised animal victims of violence that present at the Sydney RSPCA Shelter, rehabilitation is assessed as not possible (French, Communication 19 January 2016), leaving these animals further disadvantaged by being considered as unsuitable for rehoming/fostering out, and subsequently euthanised. There has been much concern expressed about the RSPCA's failure to make greater attempts to rehabilitate these animals or refer them to animal rescue organisations (Hasham), to afford animals the same opportunities for therapeutic intervention, as traumatised human victims of violence seeking shelter in a refuge.

Whilst animals cannot articulate what happened to them, veterinarians can gauge this when speaking with the animals' owners. There is similarity in the way perpetrators of violence minimise their abusive behaviour towards family members and animals. They may provide explanations for the injuries which may not be plausible; suggest they were accidental; delay visits to veterinarian clinics; be reluctant to answer questions; and demonstrate a lack of concern for the animal. One veterinarian interviewed commented on the callousness of one owner who



brought the family pet to the RSPCA requesting that they be ‘put down’, rather than receive treatment for the pet’s injuries.

### *The Link Between Animal Abuse and Domestic and Family Violence*

It is difficult to establish the exact prevalence of animal abuse in the context of DFV as it is largely hidden, and there are many barriers to reporting it and seeking assistance. Among veterinarians and domestic violence service providers, there is a lack of training and awareness about the co-existence of animal and human abuse and about how to respond accordingly. For example, of the 63% of 383 NZ veterinarians who saw deliberately abused animals in their practice, only 4% knew of, and 12% suspected a co-existence of human abuse in these families (Williams et al.). Whilst 96.6% believed they have a moral and/or legal responsibility to intervene when animal abuse is suspected, only 13.1% felt they knew how to offer help and referral when partner or child abuse was suspected (Williams et al.).<sup>19</sup> In NSW, DV service providers and police receive little or no specific formal training in this area, although they use a risk assessment tool, Domestic Violence Safety Assessment Tool (DVSAT) that contains an item relating to ‘pet’ abuse. This is a major concern when the significance of this abuse is not acknowledged as an obstacle to effective safety planning for women, children, and for their companion animals.

Krienert et al.’s 2012 study suggests that where animal abuse occurs in the context of DFV, women are even less likely to seek help.<sup>20</sup> However, it is estimated that 300,000 companion animals are abused in Australian homes each year (Tong in O’Connell). Being closely linked to domestic violence, Australian (Volant et al.; Tiplady et al., ‘Intimate Partner Violence’, ‘The Ongoing Impact’; Arkow; Reilly Communication 20 January, 2016) and overseas studies (Krienert et al.; McIntosh; Battle) suggest that animal abuse occurs in up to 70% of DFV cases, though an early study by Ascione in 1998 indicated that 71-83% of female victims have reported either abuse or killing of their pet by their partner.<sup>21</sup>

All experts interviewed referred to the co-existence of animal and human violence, a fact well-established through empirical evidence (Krienert et al.; McIntosh; Battle). A New Jersey study by DeViney et al. in 1983 revealed that in 88% of families where children were being physically abused, animals were also being abused, and in 60% of homes where children

were neglected, animals were abused or neglected (cited in Williams et al.)<sup>22</sup>. Tong (Communication 20 January, 2016) advised, 'Where you have mistreatment of animals, you have mistreatment of other vulnerable groups in the household such as children and elders'. Early identification of animal abuse may be the first step in stopping the cycle of violence, thereby protecting the integrity of families, and helping save lives (Arkow, 'A Link Across the Lifespan').

Animal abuse is a strong indicator of potentially high levels of DFV lethality, and child sexual and physical abuse, and is a 'red flag' and 'tip of the iceberg' (Arkow in Tiplady, 'Animal Abuse'; DeGue and DiLillo; National Link Coalition; Conroy). According to a study of Helpline calls in the US, the three strongest risk factors for lethality were weapon access, suicide threats and threats to kill or mutilate the family pet (Arkow, 'Form of Emotional Blackmail'). It has been established that perpetrators who abuse animals use controlling behaviours and forms of violence towards their partners that are significantly more dangerous, of greater severity and more varied in nature compared with those DFV perpetrators who do not abuse animals (Taylor et al.). They are more prone to marital rape, sexual violence, stalking and emotional violence, than those who do not abuse animals (Simmons and Lehmann in Tiplady, 'The Ongoing Impact'; Arkow, 'Form of Emotional Blackmail'; Simmons and Lehmann in Creevy et al.). Conroy states they are five times more likely to physically or sexually abuse their partners. As Taylor et al. ('Domestic Violence and Companion Animals') acknowledge, despite these alarming findings, animal abuse continues to be of lesser importance than that perpetrated against humans.

Perpetrators of DFV and child sexual assault have deliberately harmed and threatened to harm, their victim's animals as a way of exploiting the emotional bonds/attachments between victims and their animals, to silence them from disclosing the abuse, to instil fear, and exert additional power, control and authority over them (Creevy et al.; Tiplady, 'Animal Abuse'; Arkow; Tong; Verco, Communication 22 February 2016). Harsh discipline of animals, especially in retaliation to their attempts to protect women and children is not uncommon.<sup>23</sup> Abusers have been known to kill their children's and partner's companion animals to remove their source of support and comfort (Tong, 'Fracture Characteristics').<sup>24</sup>

Women often remain in abusive relationships for the sake of their companion animals, leaving them vulnerable to long periods of abuse.<sup>25</sup> A review of 12 separate studies found that between 18 and 48% of women experiencing intimate partner violence failed to leave or delayed leaving their partner because of their fear of leaving companion animals with them (Ascione; Ascione et al.) whilst a higher figure of 68% delayed leaving where the family animal had already

been abused (Carlisle-Frank et al). Abused women have returned to the violent relationship to protect the animals they have left behind. A NZ Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals study identified offenders who continued to use threats and widespread animal abuse after their partner left, to punish them, and as a deliberate attempt to raise their anxiety to the point where they returned (Arkow, 'Form of Emotional Blackmail').

## 2. Two Streams of School Awareness Programs

### *A. Interpersonal Respectful Relationship Programs*

Generally, school intervention programs around DFV in Australia, exclusive of animal abuse, are new and relatively rare but government funding has been ear-marked for wide-scale primary prevention programs in schools to educate children and young people about gender inequality and respectful relationships, with a view to reducing future DFV and sexual assault (Ireland, 'Turnbull Calls out Disrespect'; Government of Western Australia, Department for Child Protection and Family Support; Turai). These programs commenced in 2016 and are mandated to be provided to all students from Kindergarten to Year 10. Existing school awareness programs include Respectful Relationships in Australian Schools Programs (nationally), Love Bites, and the Sex and Ethics Education Groups in Queensland. None of these education programs addresses animals as victims of DFV.

Only a few of these Australian programs have been evaluated, and those that have are limited in methodological and conceptual terms (Flood et al., 'Respectful Relationships').<sup>26</sup> However, the evidence suggests that violence prevention programs for young people are most successful in achieving lasting positive attitudinal and behavioural change when they are intensive, integrated into school curriculum, of substantive duration to reinforce messages and monitor/evaluate impact, and are culturally sensitive, relevant and inclusive (Flood et al., 'Respectful Relationships'). Another important factor for success is engaging in partnerships with other relevant agencies to help design and deliver school programs, as well as provide support/resources to teachers and students.<sup>27</sup> These programs are one of many prevention and early intervention strategies proposed by government (State and National) to reduce domestic and family violence and create safer communities.<sup>28</sup>

### *B. Animal Welfare Programs*

Even rarer are programs designed to address violence to animals (with or without links to violence towards humans). On a small scale in Australia, school animal welfare programs, such as those run by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) and Arbour, Signal and Taylor have targeted mainly primary school aged children and are not mandated to be delivered in all schools. Aims of these programs have been to increase young children's empathy towards, and understanding of the needs of animals, and to treat them with kindness and respect (Nancarrow; RSPCA South Australia). RSPCA School Programs typically provide face to face education of children and young people about animal rights (Five Freedoms for Animals<sup>29</sup>), and the need to take positive protective action to intervene on their behalf, if suffering cruelty and/or neglect. Arbour et al's education strategy involved the piloting of an eight-session literature-only humane education program (HEP)<sup>30</sup> over four weeks to fourth grade school students. An RSPCA education officer was involved in developing the program where the subject of 'animals' was used as a tool to help increase human empathy. With both types of programs, education is regarded as critical in reducing animal cruelty cases through increased empathy, and acknowledgement and understanding of a responsibility to care for and respect animals (RSPCA South Australia; Arbour et al.).

Nevertheless, there is a dearth of evaluations of these school programs to demonstrate their effectiveness in changing attitudes and behaviours towards animals. The methodological limitations are similar to those evaluations of programs that address interpersonal human relationships. Arbour et al.'s evaluation on the efficacy of their humane education programs is possibly one of the most rigorous in methodology. Comparing an experimental group of twenty-three nine year old boys and girls who engaged in the HEP, with a control group of fourteen boys and girls who did not receive this program, they were able to demonstrate a significant increase in boys' empathy for animals through their eight-session HEP. There was also an increase in measures for humane treatment of animals, but this was not at a significant level. These findings were evident from a post-test questionnaire for both groups administered by the researcher, on return to the school after completion of the four-week program. The measurement of long-term benefits of HEP was out of scope of this study.<sup>31</sup> Whilst explanations for the gender differences in outcomes are unclear, the fact that males are responsible for most

acts of violence towards animals and humans suggests value in targeting male students for these sorts of programs.

In July 2016, New Zealand launched animal welfare education programs for primary and intermediate school students (7-12 year olds), following a two-year pilot in 22 schools initiated by Arnja Dale, Chief Scientific Officer, Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA). The programs are seamlessly integrated into several areas of the existing school curriculum, as is the intention of the Australian Respectful Relationships Programs (Western Australia, Department for Child Protection and Family Support). Being well-resourced, especially with lesson plans that offer real-life meaningful experiences,<sup>32</sup> delivering programs is not considered additional or onerous to already-burdened teachers. The NZ Council for Educational Research (NZCER) has reviewed the piloted programs and determined the content to be evidence-based in its alignment with various curriculum achievement objectives. They focus on the development of emotional health and social competency through empathy and compassion towards animals and responsible pet ownership that can enhance positive relationships with animals and humans (Nicole Peddie, SPCA, Communication 20 July 2017; Lynn; SPCA; The Café). A further aspect of the SPCA project is the intention to develop a toolbox of resources and strategies to support professionals such as school counsellors, to work with vulnerable children and young people who are more at risk than others from having been exposed to animal abuse or are engaging in intentional harm to animals (Peddie, Communication 20 July 2017). Although not focussing explicitly on violence and abuse perpetrated on humans, the underlying intention of these various animal welfare school education programs is to reduce a culture of animal abuse and human abuse. As per these above studies, it is apparent that what is missing from these programs is a direct focus on young males and animal abuse in the context of DFV. This paper demonstrates how a school education program has the potential to heighten young people's awareness of animal abuse<sup>33</sup> and unambiguously includes the element of its link with human violence.<sup>34</sup>

### *3. Delivery and Evaluation of a Pilot School Awareness Program*

As the first of its kind in Australia and possibly worldwide,<sup>35</sup> the program described in this paper is a pilot prevention strategy targeting young males that utilises the power of peer education to influence young male's attitudes and behaviours towards females and animals.<sup>36</sup>

## **Methodology**

This methodology section covers both the design of the program and its execution by co-author Carl Coorey-Ewings who piloted the program at his school, specifically targeting young males (15-18 years old). There were several steps involved in designing this program. Firstly, Coorey-Ewings conducted a literature review on topics of DFV, animal welfare and abuse, specialist services for animal and human victims, veterinarians' roles in animal and human abuse,<sup>37</sup> animal protection legislation, and school domestic violence and other awareness programs.

Secondly, he conducted in-depth interviews with key informants either by telephone or in person for their knowledge on the subject, and views on delivering a pilot school awareness program.<sup>38</sup> Key informants were drawn from police, veterinarians, domestic violence educators, RSPCA managers and animal advocates. They were asked about their experience and contact with animal abuse, and their knowledge of its nature in the context of DFV, especially with respect to its prevalence at the hands of adults and children, detection, reporting and referral to relevant services. They were also asked about the effectiveness of Apprehensive Violence Orders (AVOs) in protecting animals, and what resources were needed for animals. Adequacy of professional training to identify and respond was explored, along with the challenges these experts faced seeing the consequences of deliberate cruelty and neglect of animals and the limited support available to them.

It was noted that literature was sparse around school awareness programs that combined animal abuse with domestic and family violence in the content. There was no evidence in this review of programs targeting adolescents with this combined focus, and key informants expressed strong support for piloting a program of this nature. A decision was therefore made to proceed with designing and piloting a one-off, two-hour program that would specifically raise awareness of the link between animal and human abuse, and target prevention of both.<sup>39</sup> Material collated from literature review and consultations allowed thematic data to be identified

and analysed, to inform Coorey-Ewings' program objectives, design, development and content.

Coorey-Ewings had the following expected key outcomes in mind:

- An increase in knowledge of target audience about animal welfare and bonds with humans
- An increase in understanding of the links between animal abuse and domestic and family violence
- A change in attitudes towards, and increased empathy for, animals and females
- An enhanced sense of responsibility towards nurturing and protection of animals
- An increased level of confidence to intervene safely in situations of abuse when witnessed.<sup>40</sup>

Coorey-Ewings approached three selected key informants who could collaboratively work in partnership with him to achieve the proposed outcomes. Given their varied expertise around the thematic areas chosen for the program, they could help develop and deliver relevant content. They were a senior representative from the RSPCA with experience in delivering school awareness programs on animal well-being, needs and rights; a specialist Police Domestic Violence Liaison Officer (DVLO) with a strong commitment to including the welfare of animals when responding to DFV situations; and an academic/forensic veterinarian proficient in identifying non-accidental injuries of animals in the context of family violence.

The prevention of animal abuse would be framed within the context of positive relationships that young people can have with animals, which are nurturing, empathic and protective in nature. It was assumed that a positive focus would be more effective in making a difference in the lives of animals (and humans) thereby building on ethical practices that support animal rights and help prevent animal cruelty. It was also hoped that the program would work towards development of a positive cultural change in the way people perceive animals, whereas a focus on abusive acts that young people do to animals would not necessarily improve such behaviour on the part of some individuals.<sup>41</sup>

### *Consent for Delivery of the Program*

Coorey-Ewings submitted an outline of the proposed program and its evaluation in a letter to the school principal seeking his and parents' permission as customary of school protocol, for student and staff participation in the program. Coorey-Ewings was advised that Human Research Ethics Committee approval was not required. The proposal acknowledged that the subject of DFV as well as animal abuse may be sensitive for some, and/or a part of their own experience, or of people they know.<sup>42</sup> It indicated that student attendance would be voluntary, and their responses to a survey would be anonymous. Students would be provided with information to assist them, their families and their animals. Because of the sensitive nature of the subject matter, the school counsellor and secondary school teachers were to be invited to attend. Official authorisation and approval were granted.

The program was promoted to all teachers by Coorey-Ewings' supervisor at a staff meeting, and via emails sent to students in Years 10-12 (15-18 year olds) by teachers and Coorey-Ewings. In addition to school students, teachers and school counsellors/chaplains, others were invited to attend by Coorey-Ewings and the three presenters. These comprised veterinarian students, animal advocates, a police officer and DFV educators.

### **Program Evaluation**

Coorey-Ewings developed a pre-and post-survey questionnaire that incorporated the aims of the program and its content.<sup>43</sup> It was distributed to all members of the audience at the start of the program, to reflect on whether the program had had an impact on them, by numerically rating responses to 14 statements on a scale of 1 to 5, before coming, and after attending the program.



*Knowledge*

Students were asked to estimate their level of knowledge before the program and after attending, rating their responses (1 = low and 5 = high) to six statements. These statements were about animals' basic rights/needs for ensuring their well-being (Five Freedoms for Animals); animals as sentient beings capable of feeling fear, happiness and anxiety; the link between animal cruelty and DFV; perpetrators of DFV abusing animals as a form of control over their partners and their children; and who to contact for families and their animals experiencing DFV.

*Attitudes*

Students were required to think about their attitudes before and after the program, rating any changes in attitudes towards three statements where 1 = indifferent and 5 = feel strongly. Statements were about appreciating the important part animals play in society and the powerful bonds that can exist between humans and their companion animals; respecting the need and right for animals to feel safe at all times and live a life free of fear; and getting help for animals and/or people they witness or know of, experiencing an act of cruelty or violence.

*Interest*

Thinking about possible changes in their levels of interest in the topic of animal and human abuse before and after the program, students were asked to rate themselves (1 = low and 5 = high) on two statements: their desire to learn more about helping to prevent violence in society, against animals and people; and their desire to encourage others to feel compassion for animals to prevent animal neglect and cruelty.

*Confidence*

To measure any changes in their level of confidence before the program and after, students were asked to consider their capacity in three areas, rating themselves on a scale where 1 = low and 5 = high: they could talk to other kids about animal welfare and cruelty; they feel more confident about how to intervene safely, if witnessing or knowing about an act of cruelty towards an animal; and similarly about how to intervene safely if witnessing or knowing about an act of violence towards a friend or other person.

*Demographic Data*

This data was requested at the end of the questionnaire with participants being given the option of providing their name. They were asked for their age, occupation (school/university student, teacher, other), and their rating of how much of an animal lover they considered themselves against three statements ('I really love animals'; 'I'm mildly interested'; 'I don't care one way or the other'). They were also invited to make additional comments about the program/presenters.

**The Program**

The three speakers drawn from the key informants and Coorey-Ewings, presented on different aspects of the topic. Themes across all presentations related to animal welfare, animals as sentient beings, animal/human bonds, the links between abuses of both, and prevention of male violence towards animals and women and children. This was followed by a panel discussion with opportunity for student questions, facilitated by Coorey-Ewings.<sup>44</sup>

Coorey-Ewings presented the topic from a gendered perspective, giving an overview of the nature of animal abuse in the context of violence against women and children. The veterinarian spoke of animal/human bonds and outlined research, including her own on the deliberate abuse of animals as a tool of violence and way of exerting power and control over women and children, and the impacts of domestic violence on animals. The RSPCA representative explained the legal definition of animal cruelty. He provided case studies of

sheltered animals to demonstrate that ‘every animal has a human story’, and that humans’ empathy and humane attitudes towards animals, can significantly ameliorate some of the harm done to animals. RSPCA’s *Safe Beds for Pets Program* which began in 2004 was explained in terms of availability of temporary accommodation for companion animals of families trying to escape violence in their home. Finally, the police DVLO outlined the role of Police as Inspectors under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979 (POCTAA) and provided insights into how to report animal abuse and domestic and family violence to Police, and how to safely intervene if witnessing such acts.

Following other speakers’ delivery, Coorey-Ewings provided guidance for young males on strategies to prevent animal and human violence, and information to assist them, their families and their companion animals. Thoughtful questions were proffered from the audience to the panel. At the end of the session, students were asked to complete the evaluation questionnaire.

## Findings

Only the responses of the male students to the questionnaire were analysed for this study. In all, thirty-nine school students between ages of 15 and 18 participated in the school awareness program. A quantitative analysis was the method of analysis used. Tallies of each student’s pre- and post-program ratings between one and five were recorded manually for each of the 14 statements. A simple calculation of the mean was then made for the pre- and post-program ratings against each statement and the percentage difference calculated.

Analysis of written questionnaires indicated that students’ levels of knowledge rose higher on every variable, with the least change being a 17% increase and the highest change being 139%. The lowest level refers to students’ pre-existing knowledge of animals experiencing emotions. The most dramatic increases in knowledge were of the link between animal cruelty and DFV (139% increase) and of perpetrators’ abuse of animals being a form of control over their partners or family (137% increase). These findings reflect a shift: for most students, the program offered a new way of thinking about animal abuse.

Students became more aware of relevant services and who to contact for family support (89% increase). They were educated that both police and RSPCA could assist both people and animals when there is violence in the home (51% increase).

There were improvements in students' attitudes towards appreciating the importance animals play in people's lives, and the powerful bonds between them (24% increase post presentation). There was a 27% increase in understanding animals' needs and rights to feel safe and free of fear, though a less than significant gain in knowledge. 19% of students showed a positive increase in attitudes towards seeking help for animals and/or people they witnessed or knew of, experiencing acts of cruelty/violence.

The School Awareness Program stimulated for 49% of students, a strong interest in learning more about preventing violence against animals and humans. There was a 63% increase in students' willingness to take an active role in encouraging others to feel compassion for animals to prevent animal neglect and cruelty.

Confidence to talk to other children about and intervene safely in situations of animal cruelty increased significantly by 112% and 153% respectively, whilst the increase in confidence to safely intervene in human abuse though less, was still high at 70%. The strong increase in confidence suggests the program had a marked effect on students and their sense of efficacy. In the words of two participants:

'I had never really considered the relationship between domestic violence and animal abuse, but this presentation really exposed it to me and made me feel strongly about it.'  
(Mildly interested animal lover, aged 16)

'I have been inspired by this program to become more pro-active if I see children and adults mistreating animals.' (Mildly interested animal lover, aged 17)

## **Discussion**

Our pilot supports the view that such school awareness programs have a part to play in changing attitudes required to prevent future DFV and preventing it before it occurs (Campo; Flood). There is more evidence to support successful change in attitudes and an increase in knowledge about DFV through such programs, than for reducing future violence (changing behaviour), and

Campo (2015) drawing on the work of Stanley et al argues strongly for DFV awareness programs that address these two outcomes.

The program reported in this paper focussed on attitudes and knowledge, and potentially an increase in confidence to intervene safely if witnessing cruelty to animals. As mentioned earlier, testing for the outcome of reducing future violence is not within the scope of this project. Further longitudinal research is needed to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of this program in reducing future abuse of animals/humans in the context of DFV.<sup>45</sup> Quantitative research established a link (though not categorically a causal link) between negative attitudes towards animals and aggression towards humans (Taylor and Signal), thereby supporting the inclusion of (developing positive) attitudes towards animals into early intervention and prevention measures, such as this sort of school awareness program.

Our program appears to be the first of its kind in Australia and could be incorporated into a school's existing school awareness program as part of an ongoing curriculum, for example Personal Development, Health, Physical Education (PDHPE), targeting a cultural shift in norms and attitudes around gender and violence. There is potential for targeting school-based bullying as well as animal abuse,<sup>46</sup> given the high correlation between witnessing animal abuse and direct engagement in animal abuse and bullying, and associated needs for egoistic power (Parkes and Signal).<sup>47</sup>

Current DFV awareness programs in schools focus on building respectful relationships with humans and this could be extended to all living creatures. Children and young people, we suggest, need to be encouraged to be critical of practices that deny animals their rights, and of attitudes that are disrespectful to animals and humans. Young people can be taught skills to safely intervene in situations of animal cruelty, school-based bullying, and of disrespectful discourses about/behaviour towards females that they witness. Whilst a limitation of this research lies in the selection of the site of the study, an all boys' school, piloting further awareness programs that include animal abuse in co-educational schools may provide an opportunity to assess its effectiveness in improving relations and attitudes between young male and female students as well as towards animals.<sup>48</sup>

For those children exposed to DFV, attending an awareness program can offer an opportunity to learn different strategies to deal with conflict, and 'unlearn' problematic or

‘undesirable’ behaviours (Ellis et al. in Campo), that put them at further risk of harm. The author’s school awareness program extended this opportunity to learn strategies that relate to both animals and females. When schools offer DFV awareness programs, they give messages that it is okay/safe to seek help that those affected by violence in their homes are not alone, and that assistance is available. School communities are in a powerful position of influence.<sup>49</sup> They can promote animal welfare and wellbeing, and simultaneously promote gender equitable attitudes and challenges to gender stereotyping. School programs that include animal abuse have potential to have far-reaching benefits to society (Gullone; Dale, The Café Interview).

## **Conclusion**

The findings show that there is a platform for a significant school education program, based on the high level of increase in post-presentation knowledge, attitudes, interest and confidence of the boys in our pilot. This program is not only relevant for educating young students, but also has implications to other demographics in society, for example health and specialist domestic violence workers, police, legal profession and veterinarians. There is potential for it to be effective across a wide range of agencies and in many educational venues, for example schools, RSPCA animal shelters, zoos, community centres, local government councils and university veterinarian schools.

In building our knowledge around animal abuse by integrating it in the context of DFV, the program provides a foundation for promoting the inclusion of animals in Domestic and Family Violence policies and service standards.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It has been heartening to see reports of animal abuse exposed such as the recent inquiries into greyhound training for racing purposes, inhumane killing of livestock exported to countries such as Indonesia, and the graphic online *Sydney Morning Herald* screening of a University of Wollongong Engineering student charged for beating his dog. Despite evidence of the dog's painful reactions and attempts to resist the abuse, injuries were 'played down' by the student's lawyer claiming there was no visible bodily harm to the dog. Clearly any psychological or emotional injuries were ignored. The magistrate has banned the student from owning animals for (only) 5 years (Tonkin). Recent exposure of students from the private all-boys' Sydney Kings School's abuse of sheep is another example (Knowles).

<sup>2</sup> Cruelty to companion animals is mentioned once in the Queensland Government Department of Communities, *Child Safety and Disabilities (2012) Practice Paper*.

<sup>3</sup> Animal cruelty is not mentioned at all in the Government of Western Australia, Department for Child Protection Practice Framework (2011) document; or the Council of Australian Governments (2011)

<sup>4</sup> Companion animals are not mentioned in a National Survey on young Australian's attitudes to DFV in Harris et al's 2015 report.

<sup>5</sup> Historically animals were excluded from a traditional view of what constitutes 'family' members. Nowadays, it is more the norm to include animals as part of the family as they are often housed indoors with the family and included in family activities.

<sup>6</sup> Tiplady et al. ('The Ongoing Impact') state 63% of Australian households live with companion animals according to the Animal Health Alliance 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Whilst there are genuine male victims of violence, it is recognised that male relatives/male partners are responsible for the majority of these acts (ANROWS 2015)

<sup>8</sup> Globally one in seven homicides is committed by an intimate partner, with this proportion being six times higher for female homicides than for male homicides.

<sup>9</sup> The focus is on the services women need and how they can keep themselves, their children and their companion animals safe. Women are traditionally the ones expected to do something about the violence, fix/stop it from happening, presumably by not doing anything to trigger their partner's vitriol or violent attacks on them.

<sup>10</sup> However, many corporate and public organisations are seeking White Ribbon Accreditation pledging men to take a stand against violence towards women. Increasingly, in Australia, government initiatives are aimed at bringing offenders to account by strengthening the legal response, piloting more effective men's behaviour change programs, and supporting workforce development to enhance skills/competencies of professionals working directly with men who use violence (for example the training offered by the NSW Health Education Centre Against Violence).

<sup>11</sup> According to Green and Gullone, 90% of animal abusers are reported to be adult males (cited in Tong, 'Identifying Non-Accidental Injury').

<sup>12</sup> The Animal Welfare Act 2006 in the UK does not make a distinction as to whether the abuse is intentional or unintentional (Tong, 'Identifying Non-Accidental Injury'), so a failure to provide an animal with the care they need can be considered an act of abuse. Tong points out that it is not up to a veterinarian to determine whether intent was present, but to report suspicion of abuse to legal authorities for investigation.

<sup>13</sup> Williams et al. noted cattle were ranked as the third highest species of animals to be abused, after dogs and cats.

<sup>14</sup> As Tiplady et al. note, 'A fear of men may have implications for the animal's ability to settle into a foster home that includes men, to cope with male veterinary staff and animal attendants, or to feel comfortable with any male relatives, friends or future male intimate partners of the abused woman or her children' ('The Ongoing Impact', 132).

<sup>15</sup> Jussey Verco (Communication, 22 February, 2016) described how the family dog would race out to the back yard whenever the abusive father arrived home from work.

<sup>16</sup> According to Williams et al., New Zealand veterinarians identified that dogs and cats were the species that most commonly suffered emotional and psychological abuse (as well as physical



abuse) compared with other animals, ‘presumably because of their closer association with humans’ – their fear evident in cowering and trembling behaviours (27).

<sup>17</sup> Animals who have been known to bite can be hard to place in a foster home, when the victim has not been able to take them with her when escaping the violence.

<sup>18</sup> Tiplady et al. (‘The Ongoing Impact’) acknowledge the importance of animals in the lives of women (and children) recovering from DV and recommend keeping them together following separation from the abusive partner and offering behavioural and veterinary care and rehabilitation to improve wellbeing outcomes for animals and humans. This requires a workforce development plan to consider strategies for educating veterinary and DV workers on how to collaboratively support human and animal victims.

<sup>19</sup> There is much debate about the unique position veterinarians are in, to meaningfully contribute to a reduction of violence in society, but this would require not only training and a sense of moral responsibility to report abuse, but the existence of services and resources to effectively support those animals and humans being abused (Williams et al.; Arkow et al.).

<sup>20</sup> Taylor et al. (‘Domestic Violence and Companion Animals’) suggest that many LGBT people are often trapped in abusive relations because they fear a negative response from police, threats of outing from the abusive partner, tend to be isolated from family, depend more on their companion animal for support, and find it harder to access emergency accommodation because of a perception that refuges are unwelcoming, do not recognise the needs of gender diverse individuals, and cater more for heterosexual women.

<sup>21</sup> Arbour, Signal and Taylor cite an even earlier survey of Ascione et al.’s of 38 women entering a refuge to escape DV. They found that of the 74% who had companion animals, 71% had experienced their partner actually harming their animal or threatening to do so.

<sup>22</sup> With figures such as these, there is a strong call for veterinarians to report suspected family violence and suspected child abuse (Arkow; Reisman and Adams, both cited in Williams et al.).

<sup>23</sup> Collins et al. provide examples of this form of exploitation of bonds between companion animals and women and children.

<sup>24</sup> Lynda Andrews (Communication, 17 February, 2016) maintains this is often the case with aged people whose companion animals are removed, killed or threatened harm by family members, as a way of exploiting these emotional bonds to instil fear and exert control, often for financial gains or to force them into residential institutions. 70% of perpetrators of abuse of aged persons are adult children, primarily sons.

<sup>25</sup> Homelessness is a reality for those unable to find rental accommodation or refuges that will accept animals. Taylor et al.'s 2006 survey of service providers highlighted their recognition of the extent of victims' consideration for companion animals in their decision to leave a violent relationship. The need for crisis accommodation that can keep both animals and victims safe from further abuse and lessen the trauma of loss when having to leave companion animals with perpetrators who might abuse or neglect them is paramount. They reported on the RSPCA and DVConnect (DV helpline)'s collaborative program to arrange crisis accommodation for animal victims of violence.

<sup>26</sup> Limitations to effective evaluation include such things as the lack of a control group, appropriate evaluation tools, long-term follow up studies to determine the impact of programs, and/or restrictive conceptualisation that excludes extraneous variables that could impact on efficacy.

<sup>27</sup> Flood et al. ('Respectful Relationships') provide a checklist to guide good practice when establishing school violence prevention education and respectful relationships programs.

<sup>28</sup> These include legal and policy reforms, social media and marketing campaigns, community development, bystander education programs and organisational change, especially with respect to dealing with domestic violence in the workplace.

<sup>29</sup> International Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals refer to animal rights as the Five Freedoms: freedom from hunger and thirst; discomfort; pain, injury or disease; fear and distress; and to express normal behaviour.

<sup>30</sup> HEP are courses that teach caring, empathy and compassion for all beings – human and animals.

<sup>31</sup> The researchers recommend that future studies explore the potential for different ways of conducting this program in achieving lasting impacts on behaviour and attitudes, such as allowing contact with live animals and setting home exercises.

<sup>32</sup> The SPCA education programs have been informed by a Scottish project, Janine Muldoon et al., ‘Promoting a “Duty of Care” towards Animals among Young People: A Literature Review and Findings from Initial Research to Inform the Development of Interventions.’ Child and Adolescent Health Research Unit, University of Edinburgh, Defra, 2009.

<http://www.cahru.org/research/duty-of-care;>

[http://www.research.ed.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/promoting-a-duty-of-care-towards-animals-among-children-and-young-people\(bf1bd958-ae2f-47db-aaa2-ff90d8fe3446\)/export.html.](http://www.research.ed.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/promoting-a-duty-of-care-towards-animals-among-children-and-young-people(bf1bd958-ae2f-47db-aaa2-ff90d8fe3446)/export.html)

A related Scottish project following the ‘Duty of Care’ project is, ‘An Investigation of 13-17 Year Olds’ Attitudes and Behaviour towards Animals and the Development and Testing of Interventions to Promote the Concept of Duty of Care’ is being undertaken by Lawrence et al from the Child and Adolescent Health Research Unit. It is aimed at exploring how animals are a part of adolescents’ lives within the broader context of their lifestyle, empathy, and physical and mental health. It is envisaged that the findings will inform the design of evidence-based education materials to improve attitudes and behavior towards animals. See

<http://www.cahru.org/research/duty-of-care-2>

<sup>33</sup> ‘Abuse’ and ‘cruelty’ are used interchangeably in this paper.

<sup>34</sup> Release of the findings from ‘Young Australians’ Attitudes to Violence Against Women’ in 2013 where these attitudes were described as ‘worrying’, gave further impetus for the focus specifically on a prevention strategy that could ultimately help reduce violence into the future (Perkins, M. 2015; Harris et al. 2015)

<sup>35</sup> Professor Phil Arkow, Coordinator, National Link Coalition supports this opinion (Communication, 20 January, 2016).

<sup>36</sup> Males constitute the vast majority of abusers of both animals and humans (Tiplady, ‘Animal Abuse’).

<sup>37</sup> The author recognises that a school awareness program of this kind is one of many avenues to potentially reduce violence towards animals and towards humans. Collaboration between veterinary, child protection and domestic violence services that included cross-sharing of information regarding potential risks and/or actual threats of harm to either animals or humans is another important strategy.

<sup>38</sup> Key informants were asked for their views on a proposed alternative focus should ethical approval from parents and the school where the study was conducted, not be forthcoming. This alternative focus would essentially entail an in-depth write-up of their interviews as well as the literature review.

<sup>39</sup> A history of abusing animals is considered one of the four most significant indicators of greatest risk of becoming an offender of intimate partner violence (Arkow, 'Form of Emotional Blackmail'). Arkow ('A Link Across the Lifespan') cites research to support the notion that there is a correlation between cruelty to animals by children and future interpersonal violence, for example that of Becker and French, 2004; Merz-Perez, Heide and Silverman 2001; Ascione (2001; 2005); and Kellert and Felthous (1985). Kellert and Felthous found that a significantly greater history of childhood cruelty to animals was found amongst adult aggressive criminals compared with non-criminals and non-aggressive criminals (cited in Williams et al.). However, a study by Boyd suggests that more than 70% of children who experience DFV do not become adult perpetrators or victims of violence.

<sup>40</sup> As Pennay and Powell note, bystander action can stop an incident of violence thereby reducing its escalation and prevent harms such acts cause.

<sup>41</sup> Whilst low empathy for animals and humans may account in part, for abuse of both (Taylor and Signal 2005, cited in Arbour, Signal and Taylor), children can abuse animals for complex and varied reasons: peer pressure, venting frustration at being powerless to exert control over their own experiences of sexual and/or physical abuse, revenge, lack of appropriate modelling, or to gain a sense of power. Arbour, Signal and Taylor regard abusive parental practices and 'maladaptive family environments' as possible additional factors to low empathy, that contribute to violence and aggression towards humans and animals (138). Some of these reasons might explain the relatively high incidence of children's abuse of animals reported by more than 43% of shelter victims in Krienert et al's study.

<sup>42</sup> Mitchell states that in every classroom, 4 to 5 children have experienced or witnessed DFV.

<sup>43</sup> The project proposal, consent, key informant interview schedule and evaluation form are available from the authors: l.coorey@optusnet.com.au

<sup>44</sup> Anna Ludvik, from Lucy's Project which supports research and projects to address the problem of animal abuse and DFV, including promoting joint refuges for victims and their companion animals, and Lisa Craig, Community Legal Officer from the My Saving Grace Project, Western Australia, participated in the panel discussion in addition to the presenters.

<sup>45</sup> Similar limitations were noted by Arbour, Signal and Taylor, who were able to significantly increase boys' empathy for animals through their eight-session Humane Education Program (HEP) administered to fourth-grade students over 4 weeks. However, they suggested that more empirically sound research was needed to determine the longer-term effectiveness of HEP and those variables that impact efficacy, with respect to changing behaviour and attitudes towards animals and humans, such as family members.

<sup>46</sup> However, further research is needed to determine the impact of including empathy development/humane education into existing anti-bullying programs (Parkes and Signal).

<sup>47</sup> Parkes and Signal's research on 15 male and 47 female adolescents (ages 14-18) found a high correlation between young males witnessing animal abuse and directly engaging in acts of animal abuse and bullying and having a strong need for egoistic power. Males also had a lower level of cognitive and affective empathy, compared with female adolescents. It is not clear whether these factors are predictive of male adult violence. This would require further longitudinal research to determine. Parkes and Signal noticed a high correlation between females witnessing animal abuse and experiencing bullying as a victim, and between a need for power and perpetrating bullying. Whilst they found that males were more likely to abuse animals than females, more research is needed to explore female deliberate abuse of animals, and to determine the long-term impact of this.

<sup>48</sup> Gender and age differences are noted in Pennay and Powell's report on bystander action, finding that females were 'far less confident' than male employees in intervening in incidents of workplace violence, and that younger persons were (18-34) were less likely to intervene in incidents of sexist behaviour, whilst women and older persons (35-54) were those most likely to intervene.

<sup>49</sup> Community groups and sport clubs are also in powerful positions to influence attitudinal change.

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