

# **FIRST STRIKE<sup>®</sup>**

## **ANIMAL CRUELTY / HUMAN VIOLENCE**

### **Information for Veterinary Professionals**

#### **What is animal cruelty?**

Animal cruelty encompasses a range of behaviors harmful to animals, from neglect to malicious killing. Most cruelty investigated by humane officers is unintentional neglect that can be resolved through education. Intentional cruelty, or abuse, is knowingly depriving an animal of food, water, shelter, socialization, or veterinary care or maliciously torturing, maiming, mutilating, or killing an animal.

#### **Why is it a concern?**

All animal cruelty is a concern because of its effect on both animals and humans. While most unintentional cruelty can be resolved through education, some individuals neglect animals because they don't realize they can no longer properly care for them. *Intentional cruelty* is a particular concern because it is a sign of psychological distress and often indicates that an individual either has already experienced abuse or violence or may be predisposed to committing acts of abuse or violence. Intentional cruelty can be an indicator that an individual is developing a pattern of seeking power and control by inflicting suffering on others.

#### **Is there any evidence of a connection between animal cruelty and human violence?**

Absolutely. During the last 25 years, many studies in psychology, sociology, and criminology have demonstrated that violent offenders frequently have childhood and adolescent histories of serious and repeated animal cruelty. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has recognized the connection since the 1970s, when bureau analysis of the lives of serial killers suggested that most had killed or tortured animals as children. Other research has shown consistent patterns of animal cruelty among perpetrators of more common forms of violence, including child abuse, spouse abuse, and elder abuse.

#### **Is animal cruelty a crime?**

Yes. Animal cruelty is a misdemeanor offense in all 50 states, and at least one form of animal cruelty is considered a felony offense in more than 40 states. Each state defines for itself what acts are considered animal cruelty and the degree of offense they entail. Penalties range from fines and probation to imprisonment and psychiatric counseling.

#### **Would veterinary clients present victims of animal cruelty for care and treatment?**

While it seems hard to believe that a client would present an animal who has been abused, consider the following scenarios.

A woman who is frequently abused by her spouse brings in the family pet with a broken rib after the abuser kicked the pet to demonstrate control over the entire family.

A young man who owns a pit bull often enters his dog in neighborhood "street fights". When the dog's bleeding is uncontrollable after a Saturday afternoon skirmish, the owner brings him to your emergency animal clinic.

Mrs. Smith frequently calls your staff about care for her many small dogs, and occasionally even presents one for treatment. Her "pets" are always suffering from severe skin disease, parasitism, malnutrition, and other management-related diseases. She's evasive when asked about the number of dogs she owns, saying "I just love all of my animals!" Your nearest colleague has mentioned that she and her staff also are familiar with Mrs. Smith.

One of your best clients rushes in with his family's cat. The cat was sunning himself in the backyard garden when a neighborhood teenager decided she'd make excellent target practice for his new high-powered pellet gun.

A man brings in a young puppy who is limping from what is determined to be a fractured femur. He admits that he had disciplined the dog for soiling the carpet and "may have hit him too hard."

As the previous scenarios illustrate, stray and abandoned animals are not the only victims of animal cruelty. Most veterinarians will see evidence of intentional animal cruelty in their practice at some time and should be knowledgeable about how to handle such cases.

### **What should I do if I suspect an animal has been abused?**

A law enforcement agency is charged with upholding the animal cruelty laws that exist in your state or community. This may be a municipal animal care and control agency, a sheriff's department, or other entity. Before you encounter a case of animal neglect or abuse, it is wise to become familiar with the laws that address animal cruelty and the agency charged with enforcing these laws. When you suspect or have confirmed that an animal has been neglected or abused, file a formal written report with the agency.

### **Am I required to report animal cruelty?**

Although requirements vary from state to state, in several states, veterinarians are legally mandated to report incidents of animal cruelty, particularly in cases of organized or staged animal fights (dog fighting or cock fighting). Several other states have instituted or are considering provisions that hold veterinarians harmless from criminal or civil liability for reporting in good faith suspected animal cruelty.

### **Am I required to report suspected abuse of people?**

In a small number of states, veterinarians are specifically included among professionals mandated to report suspected child or elder abuse. However, in more than 20 states, all individuals are required to report suspected child abuse and are granted the same protections as mandated professionals.

### **What about veterinarian-client confidentiality?**

The confidential relationship that exists between physicians and their patients does not necessarily exist between veterinarians and their clients. In fact, courts in some states have refused to recognize a veterinarian-client privilege. However, other states do uphold veterinarian-client confidentiality. Veterinarians should become familiar with current laws in their own states.

### **What should I do if I suspect a child has abused an animal?**

Children who harm animals may be reacting to family violence they have witnessed or experienced. Children who are allowed or encouraged to harm animals may be more likely to be violent later in life. Animal cruelty, like other violence, should never be attributed to a stage of development. Research indicates that a child's violence against animals often represents displaced hostility and aggression stemming from neglect or abuse of the child or another family member. If you suspect a child has deliberately harmed an animal, contact your community's law enforcement authorities for animal cruelty crimes, as well as child welfare authorities.

### **What can I do to prevent acts of animal cruelty from occurring in my community and address those that do?**

Veterinary professionals are in a unique position to identify potential problems and provide education on humane animal care and the problem of animal cruelty for both children and adults in their community.

Consider forming a community antiviolence coalition with representatives from agencies involved in violence intervention or by working within coalitions that already exist. Interagency coalitions that recognize the connection between animal cruelty and human violence can coordinate antiviolence efforts to better protect the victims of violence, prosecute and punish those who commit violent acts, and prevent future violence and through early identification of people with violent tendencies.

In every community, humane education, introduced by either classroom teachers, concerned parents, local animal welfare agencies or other professionals, should be an integral part of elementary school curriculum. Effective humane education programs include lessons in peer mediation and conflict resolution and have a long-term objective of encouraging empathetic responses and ensuring the safety of children and animals.

The National Association for Humane and Environmental Education (NAHEE), the youth education division of The HSUS produces and distributes a variety of humane education materials for children and adults including *KIND (Kids in Nature's Defense) News*, a four-page newspaper for elementary school students. *KIND News* helps teachers establish a classroom theme of kindness, respect, and tolerance. For more information, contact NAHEE, P.O. Box 362, East Haddam, CT 06423 or visit their website: [www.nahee.org](http://www.nahee.org).

### **First Strike Workshops**

Many forms of family and community violence are interrelated, including child abuse, domestic violence, elder abuse, teen violence, and animal cruelty. Through the First Strike campaign's training outreach to key members of the animal protection community and their counterparts in human service fields, we encourage and support the development of innovative interagency programs and collaborations. These partnerships between local agencies aid in early detection and prevention of violence toward humans and animals.

First Strike workshops are designed to train professionals such as educators, humane investigators, veterinarians, law enforcement officers, prosecutors, judges, domestic violence and child welfare advocates, adult protective service professionals, and other anti-violence advocates to recognize the connection between animal cruelty and human violence, and to intervene effectively before violence occurs.

The First Strike campaign was developed by The Humane Society of the United States to increase public awareness of the connection between animal cruelty and humane violence.

For more information contact:

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