

Children and Animal Cruelty: What Parents Should Know

As natural "explorers," don't all children sometimes harm animals?

Absolutely not. While some children kill insects, few torture pets or other small creatures. If allowed to harm animals, children are more likely to be violent later in life. Animal cruelty, like any other violence, should never be attributed to a stage of development.

What kind of children are cruel to animals?

Serious or repeated animal cruelty is seen more often in boys than in girls. Children as young as four may harm animals, but such behavior is most common during adolescence. Cruelty is often associated with children who do poorly in school and have low self-esteem and few friends. Children who are cruel to animals are often characterized as bullies and may have a history of truancy, vandalism, and other antisocial behaviors.

What does animal cruelty indicate about family dynamics?

Researchers say that a child's violence against animals often represents displaced hostility and aggression stemming from neglect or abuse of the child or of another family member. Animal cruelty committed by any member of a family, whether parent or child, often means child abuse occurs in that family.

What should I do if my child or a neighbor's child has harmed an animal?

If you suspect your child has deliberately harmed an animal, talk to your child. Try to discover what caused the cruelty. Communicate with your child, your child's teachers, and your child's friends. The more you know about your child's activities, the better able you will be to guide your child in making compassionate and humane choices.

Something as serious as animal cruelty, however, should not be handled alone. Seek help from a family counselor, school counselor, pediatrician, or clergy member. If you know another child who has harmed an animal, report what you know immediately to your local animal-welfare organization or police department. Alert the child's school principal or guidance counselor.

What should I tell my child about the other child's behavior?

Explain that animal abuse is often a sign of other serious problems and should be addressed by the proper authorities. Knowing that a friend has serious problems can be quite troubling for a child, as can witnessing animal cruelty. Your child may need to sort out the feelings the incident raises.

What should I do if an otherwise "good" child harms an animal one time?

Though innocent exploration may be corrected simply by talking with the child, any time a child causes an animal pain or suffering you should be concerned.

What is the difference between innocent exploration and calculated animal cruelty?

Innocent exploration may come of simple curiosity, but calculated animal cruelty is motivated by a desire to harm. While even innocent acts of cruelty should be addressed, it is particularly important to intervene when a child is insensitive to the obvious distress of an animal, repeats a harmful behavior, or derives pleasure from causing an animal pain.

How can I teach my child to respect animals?

Teach by example; use real-life situations to instill a sense of respect for all life. Invite your child to help you feed the birds or rescue a bug. With older children, discuss animal-cruelty cases publicized in the news. Encourage children to speak up for animals.

How can my child's school incorporate humane education?

Humane education should be part of every school curriculum. The Youth Education Division of The HSUS publishes materials that help teachers establish a classroom theme of kindness, respect, and tolerance. For subscription information, contact The HSUS's Youth Education Division, the National Association for Humane and Environmental Education (NAHEE), at

67 Norwich Essex Turnpike
East Haddam, CT 06423-1736

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